

ORAL MEMOIRS
OF
DYLAN BENAVIDEZ
An interview conducted on
March 21, 2017

Interviewer: Jacqueline Palmer

Angelo State University
West Texas Collection
“War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War, World War I to the Present”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Dylan Benavidez are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 21, 2017.

This interview was conducted as a course assignment for a class in the Department of History at Angelo State University in collaboration with the *War Stories* Project.

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PALMER: What is your name?

BENAVIDEZ: Dylan Benavidez.

PALMER: When and where were you born?

BENAVIDEZ: Toco, Texas in March 1991.

PALMER: Where did you grow up?

BENAVIDEZ: Omaha, Texas up until the fifth grade, then I moved to Kerrville, Texas where I finished school.

PALMER: How do you define West Texas?

BENAVIDEZ: Shoot, I don't know. That's a rough question. Whenever I think of West Texas, I think of farmers. I think of hard work, high school football. Just real blue collar and down to earth is what I would say.

PALMER: What do you think the difference between West Texans and Texans from other regions of the state?

BENAVIDEZ: West Texans . . . I don't know. I think the biggest difference is that I think, because West Texas is such a large area, it's hard to identify, unlike East Texas. East Texas, everyone knows Dallas, South Texas, San Antonio. The biggest problem being West Texan is that it can be far north as Lubbock and go all the way to Sul Ross. So, I think that's the biggest thing about West Texas is we don't have like a definite definition of exactly what West Texas is.

PALMER: How would you characterize west Texans' relationship to the military?

BENAVIDEZ: I know that whenever I was in the military, a lot of us were from Texas. It is . . . was an overwhelmingly high number of us that were from Texas. So, a lot of those rural areas that grew up with FFA don't do a whole lot. You don't see a lot. So, it's really a chance to go out and see the world and come back with your experiences. It makes you a better person. So, just a surprising number of people that—not necessary from where I was from specifically but a lot of people from the areas from around me—who I went to basic training with—we all ended up in Georgia—we were all from the same area. So, I think its got a real strong background and not just West Texas but Texas in general.

PALMER: When and where did enter in the armed forces?

BENAVIDEZ: March 12, 2008 in Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas.

PALMER: Which branch did you serve in?

BENAVIDEZ: The army.

PALMER: What were your years of service?

BENAVIDEZ: It was from 2008 to 2014.

PALMER: During your years of service were you primarily enlisted ranks, non-commissioned officer, and officer, or a warrant officer?

BENAVIDEZ: I spent most of my time as a non-commissioned officer. That's 5 and above sergeants or non-commissioned officers.

PALMER: In which military conflict did you take part in?

BENAVIDEZ: Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn.

PALMER: Why did you enlist in the armed forces? What motivated you?

BENAVIDEZ: As cheesy as it sounds, it was the right thing to do, because I'm a patriot and I love my country.

PALMER: What was your training like?

BENAVIDEZ: Actually, I really liked my training. What I liked about the Army is that we had the newest technology. So, especially in the unit I was in, we would always have the newest gear. We always learned something new every day. I currently believe that we are the best-trained military in the world.

PALMER: What were race relations like when you were enlisted?

BENAVIDEZ: There weren't really race relations because, whenever you join the military, you stop being white, you stop being brown, you stop being black, and everyone is green. That's the only thing that matters, is the color green, because everybody is a soldier. We're lean, mean, tall, and green.

PALMER: Did you find your service challenging?

BENAVIDEZ: At times it could be. It just depended on what we were doing.

PALMER: What conception did you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment?

BENAVIDEZ: I love the United States. There was no misconceptions about it. That's why I joined. For me, at 16-years-old, I already had "USA" and a flag tattooed on my arm.

PALMER: What did America symbolize to you?

BENAVIDEZ: To me, it's an opportunity. In America we have lot of opportunities that other people don't. That's what I always thought, was opportunity.

PALMER: What do you think it should stand for?

BENAVIDEZ: Hope.

PALMER: Were you deployed overseas? If so, what did you understand about the mission you were being asked to complete?

BENAVIDEZ: Yes. The mission that we were asked to complete was . . . I'm trying to think back of how much I really can talk about. Well, they kind of ended it. I'm not exactly sure how much we're allowed to divulge. I was part of a group that lived underneath the Iraqi Supreme Court and we ran the prison systems. We tried terrorists and war criminals. So, our job, in the beginning, was to capture terrorists. Towards the end, it was to make sure they got tried and they saw justice for all the injustices that happened during Saddam's regime.

PALMER: What unit(s) did you serve in during your deployment?

BENAVIDEZ: I was part of the "Big Red One," First Infantry Division, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and the 36th Infantry Division.

PALMER: Did you serve in direct combat during your deployment?

BENAVIDEZ: Yes.

PALMER: Were you wounded in action?

BENAVIDEZ: No.

PALMER: Did you become a prisoner of war?

BENAVIDEZ: No.

PALMER: What did you think of the local inhabitants that you encountered?

BENAVIDEZ: At first I didn't have a high . . . I did not like them to be completely honest. At first I was, "I don't want to get to know the Hajis. I don't care about the Hajis." But, as you get there, and you get to know some of the people, it's different because I remember that there was a lot of instances where they were good people. A lot of them are good people. A lot of them are real nice. I remember one of the Iraqis we worked with threw a huge banquet not only for the Iraqis there but for us as well. We were invited because he was having a child. I thought that was kind of cool, that he specifically asked for us to come, because it was right there at the facility. It was in a little area where the populous couldn't see us, because the Iraqis that worked with us were already deemed traitors. They weren't really liked too much by their own people, so it was a little thing that we all did. The fact that he specifically wanted us to come was pretty cool. I started to really warm up to some of the people around there.

PALMER: When you interacted with the local inhabitants, what do you think their conceptions were of the United States?

BENAVIDEZ: It was very mixed. Some of them liked us and some of them hated us. I can remember being spit on and being told that they were Al-Shaddadi, which is a smaller group. A lot of people had heard about Al-Qaeda and ISIS but there are smaller groups inside of them. The one we had a lot of conflict with was the Al-Shaddadi. But there was some of us . . . I remember when we were leaving and Operation Iraqi Freedom was ending—it would later become Operation New Dawn, the

rebuild of Iraq. But when Operation Iraqi Freedom was ending, I can remember getting ready to go and the Iraqis holding on to our Jeeps and our Humvees, begging us not to go because, when we would leave, the terrorists would come back and kill them for helping us. That was something. It was very big. They were either for us or against us. There was no gray. It was either black or white.

PALMER: Did you ever engage them in a conversation about what America meant to you?

BENAVIDEZ: Not what it meant to me. They told me what America meant to them though and that's why I say hope. Because they told us that the American GI—that's what they called us, "the America GI"—is a beacon of hope.

PALMER: How did your service influence or affect your family at home?

BENAVIDEZ: It was tough. It was real tough. I wasn't the only that joined, I have a brother that joined with me. We joined at the same time and, knowing that we could be deployed together—we were both infantry men—that we could die together was scary for especially my mom.

PALMER: What are your most vivid memories of your time in service?

BENAVIDEZ: Probably just the down time with the guys. Whenever it wasn't training, whenever it wasn't missions, and we were goofing around having good times and shenanigans, we would pull on each other. I really miss the camaraderie and I really miss my brothers.

PALMER: What sorts of technology did you use in the service?

BENAVIDEZ: We used all kinds of stuff. We had night vision, infrared lasers on the rifles. We had night vision infrared, we had a brand new style of GPS, the Blue Force Trackers that were crazy accurate. It was interesting some of the cool stuff we got to play with.

PALMER: Did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to civilian life?

BENAVIDEZ: Not at first. I thought when I came back home I was going to pick up right where I left off.

PALMER: Did you face any challenges when you returned to civilian life?

BENAVIDEZ: Yeah, there were a lot of challenges. When you come back and you realize that it's not going to be like when you left. People change, they're not the same. But people should always change. If you're the same person today—if I was the same person today ten years from now then I would have wasted ten years—but it didn't stay the same. It was really hard to accept the fact I had to rebuild everything. I came home and people who were friends before may not like each other now. It was pretty rough coming home.

PALMER: Did being from Texas shape your years in service in any way?

BENAVIDEZ: Yeah, it made me really appreciate Texas. Every time I left and came back home I got another Texas tattoo. The first one was on my stomach, then I got one on my calf, then another on my arm. Every time I came home to Texas it showed me, even though I been all around the world, every time I came home to Texas I got another Texas tattoo because Texas is God's country. I love

Texas. Out of everywhere in the world, this is where I would be, right here, and I've been all over the world.

PALMER: After your time in the military has your conception of Texas changed?

BENAVIDEZ: I would say so. I think have a greater appreciation for Texas, especially now that I understand the way the government and economics of Texas work, and how good of a state it actually is.

PALMER: How do you feel about your military service looking back?

BENAVIDEZ: I think it was great. I went through a lot of crappy stuff but it definitely made me stronger. It gave me a good foundation to build on because I didn't have the best upbringing. It definitely made me into a man.

PALMER: Do you have any advice for the young men and women who are just entering the service?

BENAVIDEZ: Take full advantage of everything. Take care of themselves, because I didn't take care of myself. I thought I was a hotshot being an airborne ranger. If I was hurt, they asked me to do something and I did it anyway, and I'm regretting it now. So, that would be my biggest thing, is just because someone has a ton of medals on their chest or a ton of tabs on their arm that doesn't automatically . . . You should respect what they have done but it doesn't automatically make them a super great person either too. You have to look at them and see what their character merits because the most important thing is courage, candor, and commitment. And that's the people that you should look up to. I knew tons of NCOs who hadn't been near as many schools as some of the others but those other NCOs that had been to every school and got all these ribbons and they never been deployed, they dodged it. There are people that have never been to any schools and were not scared to be deployed. So, you have to look at the character and not just what he wears on his uniform.

PALMER: Would you like to share anything else about your service?

BENAVIDEZ: Just that if anyone is ever on the fence about it, that they should . . . I mean it's not for everybody and it's definitely a big commitment but it's not a bad commitment. I feel like everybody can get a little bit out of service if they decided to join. Like I said, it's not for everybody but even if they're teetering on the fence and they've been thinking about it for a while, you might as well pull the trigger. It's not a bad time and you can get a lot of good experience out of it and it could really help towards your life later on. If you pick the right thing. Not all MOSs transfer out to the civilian world as well as others. So, that's another thing, be smart with your MOS.