ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

PAT BLAKELY

An interview conducted on

February 20, 2016

Interviewer: Heather Raico

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 Pat Blakely are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on February 20, 2016.

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Interviewer: Heather Raico

Transcriber: Heather Raico

Editor: Alyse O'Hara

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RAICO: What is your name?

BLAKELY: Pat Blakely.

RAICO: When were you born? And where did you grow up?

BLAKELY: September 23, 1940. Born in Lubbock, Texas. Grew up, went to first grade right outside of Lubbock in Idalou. Graduated from high school in Seagraves Texas, which is about 60 miles south of Lubbock.

RAICO: How do you define West Texas, and where does it begin?

BLAKELY: Well, West Texas is like the frontier of Texas. West Texas is what the movies usually think of when they have movies about Texas. They don't have movies about the Gulf Coast or the forest down in East Texas. They show up on the high plains. It's the land of the Comanches, and the buffalo, the Texas Rangers, and usually you talk about the beginning in the Cap Rock, but it really goes down farther south than that. The "Llano Estacado" is the word the Comanches use in the state plains. It's all that grasslands that is now mostly farmland. All that Northwest plains—it starts somewhere in that area north of San Angelo and Abilene there, goes all the way up the Panhandle to Oklahoma.

RAICO: Okay. What do you think the difference between West Texans and Texans from other regions of the state? What are the differences?

BLAKELY: Well, that's the same thing I was talking about because what people don't realize is East Texas—and particularly Southeast Texas—but East Texas is like the Old South. I mean they had tons of slaves back in the old days, and they raised cotton, and it was really a part of the Old South. Once you got into Central Texas, it started to change. And when you got to West Texas, that was more of the West rather than the South. It was, like I said, it was the land of buffalo and Comanches, and you raised cattle out there. You didn't have farmers; they didn't raise cotton. Lubbock now is a, you know, one of the cotton capitals of the world, but back then without irrigation you couldn't raise anything out there. You ran one cattle out every twenty acres, and you had a huge amount of cows in South Texas and West Texas. West Texas is, like I said, it is the last frontier and the Gulf Coast is more like the coast of Alabama or Georgia. Galveston was the biggest city in the states at one time, and it was because it was a port. But West Texas is as removed from that as Santa Fe, New Mexico is removed from Los Angeles. It was totally different.

RAICO: How would you characterize West Texans' relationship to the military?

BLAKELY: Well, once again all these things kind of tie together. West Texas, because it was the frontier, has always kind of had a close correlation to the military. That's where Mackenzie defeated Quanah Parker at Palo Duro Canyon in a day when the Yankees were not necessarily popular but Mackenzie was. I say, "Born in West Texas . . ." the West Texans have always had a strong tie to the military, have been a kind of conservative area, and needed the protection of the

military—like the Texas Ranger to protect them from Mexican bandits, Comanches, whatever. But yeah, there's a strong correlation between the viewpoints of West Texans and the military.

RAICO: Okay. When and where did you enter in the armed forces?

BLAKELY: I entered actually in Austin. I had gone to school, played football in college, and I was finishing up supposedly in Austin. I had plenty of hours, but all the hours didn't transfer, so I still had to take what amounted to a year and half of courses in Austin. And at that time, the draft was being talked about, but it hadn't started, but they were talking about starting the draft probably in '63,'64. That spring they started getting real serious, and we started sending troops over there. We'd already had troops over there after the French got defeated in Bien Phu, and we started helping the South Vietnamese in their civil war against the North Vietnamese. But we really started sending troops over, and people started talking about Vietnam, and they were talking about the draft. The draft was all based on . . . if you were in college you got deferred, but if you had your grades at a certain peak, and so forth and so on. So anyway, to make a long story short I ended up joining the Army Reserves knowing that I wouldn't have to go immediately. I probably would still be eligible for the draft later on, but it would give me time to graduate from college. So, I joined in the spring of '64 if I recall correctly.

RAICO: What years were you in the reserves?

BLAKELY: Okay. I was on active duty from spring of '64 for six months—the fall of '64. I went to basic training that summer. Actually, I didn't go in; that's a lie. I joined, but I didn't go to active duty until about the first of June or so, and I was in there until almost the end of the year till the end of November. Active duty, I went to basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and then I was there ten weeks—if I remember right—and then we separated some, went to AIT, Advanced Infantry Training, at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Some of us went to a personnel school in—of all places—Austin, Texas, and that's what I tried to get into because I was from Austin, Texas. My folks lived there, and I was going to school there. So anyway, I went ahead I spent actually the last six weeks of active duty working in a personnel office in downtown Austin. It was a pretty soft duty.

RAICO: So, when you enlisted in the military, you enlisted right in the heat of the Vietnam conflict?

BLAKELY: Just as it was getting started good. I mean just as it was picking up. I think summer was when the Gulf of Tonkin . . . and we really started . . . Johnson really started sending us because that was all when I was going through basic training. That was when it was getting worse and worse and more and more people, everybody getting out was going. I mean everybody was going. You know, they were drafting people. They started the draft I think that last spring before I went the early summer, and we all thought that probably all of us were going to have to go. We were all lined up from reserves and this and that, but we all thought we are all going to end up in Vietnam.

RAICO: Were you scared you were going to get drafted?

BLAKELY: Yeah. Well, not the draft so much as we were all scared to go into Vietnam in a funny way. I mean it would be macho to say you weren't scared, and we never acted like we were scared, but we were all scared to go to Vietnam, scared of dying—everybody is. But you don't show it; that's not what West Texas boys do. But we were all looking down the barrel of going to Vietnam, and that was always emphasized with you in basic training: everything, every class we went to, every course we took, every training we went to. I'll never forget I had a sergeant tell me—we were at some stage of basic training—he says, "You know, they're going tell you when you get over there," because we all assumed at some point in time we were going to go, "when you get over there, you know you need to have one company to win this battle." He said, "To hell with that. You need two companies. You need one platoon, send three platoons. You need one squad, send four squads. You need one gun, send six guns." Overkill, overkill, overkill, which is not exactly what the Army taught, but that's what these individuals were saying: "Hey, protect yourself; send in more than needed every chance you get. Make sure you protect and take care of your friends." And everybody kind of developed a rapport.

I'll tell you an interesting story. I had a sergeant. I was going through basic, and I was a squad leader and had a squad, and I had some previous leadership experience. Anyway, they selected me as a squad leader, and we had a platoon leader who interestingly enough stayed on after basic training to become an acting sergeant for the next cycle of draftees and soldiers. He was that good, or they thought he was that good. He talked like you would see an Army guy in basic training on television or the movies. Anyway, I thought he was kind of a joke. I thought he was a loser, but we had one other guy in there that had a little sense—one of the squad leaders. And the other two squad leaders were pretty low I.Q., gung-ho kind of idiots. But we went into town one time and went out to drink a beer, and this platoon leader starts asking us, "If we get over there now, and I asked y'all to charge up a hill—you know you're going to die—you'll still do it, won't you?" I started laughing. I thought it's got to be a joke. He was dead serious, and these two bozos said, "Yeah, sergeant. We'll do it. We'll do it." And they were dead serious. They would have done it. Now the other guy was smarter than me—the other squad leader—he said, "Yeah," but I knew he didn't mean it. At least he had a sense enough not to say anything.

So, that was an example of the contrast of the kind of people. You had people in there that were going to college. You had people in there that didn't finish the 8th grade, but you got close to all of them just going through basic. And I could see going through hard training with them—hard physical training—how it would be even more so if you'd be in battle. You would be even more tied to—good and bad—to each one of these individuals. It's an interesting concept.

RAICO: So, since you enlisted in the early stages of the war, what did you think of the conflict going on in those early stages in Vietnam when you did enlist?

BLAKLEY: Well, initially you thought, "Hey, got to stop communism." The Domino Theory was also big. It's when you conquer one country, and the next one goes communist, and the next is communist. It wasn't being talked about as a civil war between the North and the South Vietnamese. It was talked about as communists against the world—against communism taking over the world. So yeah, I thought we should be over there. You necessarily don't want to go over there yourself, but you thought, "Yeah, we should be over there to stop communism right there." And the more you thought about it . . . and I won't go so far as to say the whole Muhammad Ali or Cassius Clay, as I guess he was known at that time, you know, "Them gooks

ain't never done nothing to me." That's a little bit of that kind of thinking in terms of, "They really haven't done anything to the United States." A little bit of that started to enter into it. But keep in mind: the early stages of the war, the University of Texas was kind of a hotbed of liberal thinking, but even from there still the majority of people thought we were doing the right thing. We were stopping communism. We were stopping the Chinese from going . . . the Russians from going taking over that part of the country. So yeah, at that stage of the war I thought we were right to be over there doing the right thing.

RAICO: Were you personally afraid of the spread of communism, or did you really even think it was going to spread?

BLAKELY: Well, it was just one of those things. You didn't stop to think about it. It was, "Hey, you're supposed to think this." It wasn't that big of a deal, so you thought that. You were coming out along the era of being afraid of when the teacher would tell you, if we have a nuclear attack, to get underneath your desk. Well, that's the dumbest idea. What the hell is that going to do for you? But it was that kind of thinking, and you got into that. And . . . so yeah, stop communism. We were not that far from the McCarthy hearings and all of that. So yeah, at that point in time I think probably communism was the devil, and I didn't pursue it hard enough to realize that a lot of it was a false devil; a lot of it was nonsense. But yeah, it was a real fear of communism following World War II, Korea, and now Vietnam. There was a strong fear that communism was growing, and we were diminishing a little bit. So yeah, you were afraid of communism. Yeah.

RAICO: What was your conception of the United States at the time of your enlistment?

BLAKELY: You know, there was no specific thought about it at that time. You didn't really have a concept of the United States in broad terms. The United States was home, apple pie, motherhood, all the good things. The United States was always right; the United States was . . . I'll give you one correlation. When I was a freshman in high school, my older brother was a junior. We had a really good football team, and we won every game. Got to the last game of the year, and we lost. And I always felt like that was the first loss of my innocence. I just thought, "Hell. We couldn't lose. We were the Seagraves Eagles. We win every game." Then we lost, and then you thought, "Real world steps in." That's kind of the way it is about your feeling about the United States. We're the good guys. We always win, and we won World War I. We won World War II. But then you start getting some thought in your mind about, "Are we sure we are doing the right thing?" So, it was a very strong and positive with just the edges of grey, edges of doubt beginning to seep in.

RAICO: So, what was your training like when you went to boot camp?

BLAKELY: Well first of all, we were in Fort Polk, Louisiana in the summertime, and that's seven degrees cooler than hell and mosquitoes twice as big; it was really bad. So, you got into shape there, or you didn't make it, and I was an ex-football player and was in reasonably decent shape. It was hard for all of us to start off with because it was just so doggone hot. Once you got used to it, you got back in to it, and it wasn't that big of a deal. But the training they gave us, in every class, Vietnam was emphasized. Everything you did was Vietnam because that's where we all thought we were going to go whether you were a National Guard, reservist, draftee, and

volunteer whatever. We all thought probably that's what they were emphasizing—probably where we are all going to end up—so that was on your mind every day.

I'll give you an example. It was a joke and I tell it as a joke now, but in a way it was kind of serious. I wear glasses. I was raised on a farm, so I was always a pretty good shot. I could handle a rifle or shotgun or whatever, but when we went out to the firing range, it was raining that first day. And of course my glasses got wet, and I didn't qualify. So, the ones that didn't qualify had to come back the next day, and the next was clear, and I qualified no problem. But the day it rained, this old sergeant comes by while I'm shooting, and I'm missing everything because I can't see anything because my glasses are wet. And he said, "Blakely?"

"Yes, sergeant."

"When do you go to the grenade range?" No . . . "When do you go to the hand-to-hand combat training?"

I said, "Next week, sergeant."

"When you get there, I want you to pay a lot of attention because the looks of your shooting you're going to need it."

Now it was a joke, but it wasn't all a joke. It was, you know, "If you don't learn how to shoot something, son, you're going to be nose-to-nose with these guys." And I tell this as a joke now. It's a funny, cute little story, but the overlying factor in all of this was get ready to fight them. These were not a bunch of puny-ass, little yellow geeks you're fighting. These are some strong soldiers that have been fighting for years and years and are well trained and well armed, and they don't mind dying. It reminds you in some ways of some of the same situations we have today with Al-Qaeda, and ISIS, and some of those people—people who believe in something else fundamentally strong. In this case it wasn't the terrorist Muslim/Christian concept. It wasn't really communist/democracy. It was more of a nationalism. It was more of a, "You're in our country. We want you to get out. We don't care why you're here. We want you to get out." You see that in the Middle East now, so they emphasized that over and over. So, you were always so conscious of that and conscious of the fact that you better be in good shape, and you better be able to shoot good, and you better be able to use our weapon, and you better be able to think, and you better be able to do the thing they always emphasized: You take care of you buddies.

But the one thing that makes the American solider the best solider in the world—whether we were or not, I don't know—is the fact the we're innovative, and we think for ourselves within the lines of discipline. The Army lays down new ways of attacking a problem. So, it was pretty hectic. At any point in time, you get a bunch of people from a lot of different places of life: farm boys and city boys. You had guys who had never ever picked up a gun in their life, and that's the thing about the Army you got to remember: They teach the simplest method. They go back to A, B, C, and for a guy who's already done it—you know J, K, L—its dumb because I know how to clean a weapon; I know how to aim one, but for a guy who never picked a gun his life, they have to teach that guy how to shoot and hit something. So, it may be boring for you, but all training is based on the least denominator, the person who needs it the most. That's where they start their training. And it's not going to hurt you; you can just reiterate some of the things you already knew, and it will teach that novice how to do something. So, when you all get out of firing weapons, just about everybody in there—with a few exceptions—is a fairly decent shot. So, that's what the Army is all based on is that kind of conceptual training: if we say everyone is an idiot, and we're going to teach you like you're all idiots, and if you're not an idiot that's okay, they'll catch up to you at some point in time, and we all go in together.

RAICO: So, during this time, what were the racial issues like when you did enlist?

BLAKELY: Interesting question because this was back in the day in Texas. There was a kind of a blind spot about racism in West Texas. There weren't very many blacks in West Texas. There just weren't. And so, we were racist, but we didn't know it, and honestly didn't know. We weren't consciously racist. I played baseball in high school in the summertime with Jerry, my brother, and Kenneth Hart: Three white boys on an all-black team playing an all-black team. We didn't think anything about it, but the first year I played college football, I had a coach . . . we played a team up in Oklahoma. I never played on a team with a black player. You know, college back in the early '60s and late '50s in Texas they didn't have any. We played a team up in Cameron, Oklahoma, and they had a big black fullback, and he was tough, and he was bad, and he was tearing us up. I was playing linebacker—me and Pudge—and the coach got us to the side at halftime and said, "Pat we got to stop that. We got to stop him."

I said, "Coach, we're trying everything we can."

He said, "Well, I've always heard if you kick them in the shins, that'll stop them."

Even then I thought that was the dumbest thing I had ever heard. Here was a college graduate coach telling us to kick a black guy in his shin and that'll make him . . . you know, the concepts are . . . it was beyond being racist. It was just a different world.

To relate that to the service, when I got in the service, we had a bunch of blacks in there, and you used expressions and said things that you didn't mean. For example, we're in a line one day going to the chow hall. And I'm a squad leader, so I'm in charge of keeping them in line or whatever, and this black guy comes in and jumps in line, and I said, "Back in line, boy. Back in line."

He said, "Fella, what do you mean calling me 'boy'? When you going to stop calling me 'boy'?"

And I quickly thought, and I said, "As soon as you stop calling me 'fella,'" and nothing happened. But I realized even then after it happened, I realized how racially bad that was, how racist that was me calling him "boy." But I did it—if you can say innocently—I did it without meaning he was a boy, just that's what everybody said when you talked about a black guy. And luckily nothing happened because I was able to turn it around real quick on him because he was looking for an excuse to start some trouble. So, that's the kind of thing . . . we were innocent racist if there's such a way of saying that, but you got out of that to a large degree. The military probably . . . I think the Army was probably the best for guys from the South and Southwest and maybe even the big cities in the East too. The Army was a really good way of desegregating the people involved. I think there's a whole lot of people who went in there without any firm idea. Now there was some KKK racists in there, but most of them were fairly innocent racists, and they changed their mind pretty quickly. People like me did, as you know I'm pretty liberal, but back then being liberal had nothing to do with black and white. So, it was a real funny time.

RAICO: Did anyone in your unit have racist tendencies toward the people over in Vietnam? The Vietnamese people? Did they say anything?

BLAKELY: Well, again the popular thing was, and again so many terrible things are done without malice, was to call them "gooks." And your sergeant would say, "You got to kill these gooks." They call them gooks back in World War II—the Japanese. It's just . . . it's a quick shortcut way of being derogatory without really specifying why you're calling them that. So,

yeah. I guess I don't think anybody specifically thought that the Vietnamese people were bad people or dumb people or evil people or people that shouldn't have the right to live. It's just that those were the people we were fighting: the South Vietnamese and the Northern Vietnamese . . . the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese armies. Those gooks were bad. They were all gooks. Some were good gooks, and some were bad gooks, and that's terrible when you say it like that. It sounds terrible today, but that's not the way you meant it back then. You just mean, "Hey, these guys, these Vietnamese are good and these Vietnamese are bad," and that really was the only way you meant it.

RAICO: What sort of training did you receive regarding you encounter with locals? Like training about Vietnamese culture or history. How did it distinguish between civilian enemies? Did you have training in how to deal local Vietnamese people?

BLAKELY: No, I don't recall ever . . . let me think for a minute. I'm not positive about that. I can't remember ever getting any kind of training on how to handle the people. All the conversation was about how to fight, how kill, how to stay alive. I don't ever recall ever having a single thing said about how to get along with Vietnamese people. I don't remember a single thing. I don't.

RAICO: After your time in the military, has your conception of the United States changed? And if it has changed, what are your challenges?

BLAKELY: Well, yes, but I think more than because of the military but just because of time. I've realized over the years that, you know, the United States government has done some bad things, and some dumb things, and the United States government and the United States is not always right. And it doesn't always do the right thing, but I guess that I didn't expect it back then, but now I acknowledge it out loud. And I also believe that—very simply because of those things—the fact that we still do most things better than most people in the world. I honestly believe that. I think as a country we still try to do—most of the time—the right thing. And I know all the dirty politics, and all of the things that get involved, and all of the Iraq War, and all of this. And I got many opinions about that, but I think that a lot of the reasons we do some of these things is good. We sometimes just do it in a dumb way, which sometimes as a country gets ourselves involved in situations that takes us a while to get out of.

And we're so slow as a country to move, to change our opinions about race, about all kinds of different things, religion, anything. It sometimes seems like we're not moving at all, but if you back up and look at it from a historian's viewpoint, you know, if we veer in one direction not doing things properly for a long time, we manage to get ourselves back on course. It's kind of like a like a pendulum: sometimes we go too far the other way. But you always have to remember in the United States that everything here, even in this late date, that so many things go back to not just the Revolutionary War and the Founding Fathers and the ideals they said, but the Civil War. The Civil War set so many things in motion with race and the way we govern ourselves and states' rights—all kinds of things we're still having and still living with today and will still live with from now on probably. Then we get better but we also sometimes drop back and get worse, and if you plot our progress, it's probably upward with a lot of downward jags as a country.

Sometimes I get so frustrated with some of these people in the election this year and so forth. These people are complete idiots, but there's a lot of real idiots out there in this country and that's the scary thing about it. There are a lot of real idiots, and some of those idiots think I'm an idiot. But probably this country—when all is said and done—this country was founded on some principles that were pretty new to the world's way of thinking, and we have pretty much tried to adhere to those principles with lots of failures and lots of losses and lots of zigs and zags for a couple hundred years now. I still think we have room to get better. I still don't think we are regressing like the Roman Empire or the British Empire. I don't think we are receding. I still think there is room to grow; I still think we are growing. It's just sometimes it seems like it's in spite of ourselves.

RAICO: Looking back, how you feel about your service?

BLAKELY: I have kind of mixed feelings. It's funny because I never did see active duty. I came back and finished my last few months in Austin, and then I went and got back into school and went down to Houston to go to law school and was going on weekends. I went one weekend a month with the reserves, but even then—for a couple years—we thought there was a chance of being called up. Your life was kind of on hold to a certain degree. You weren't in a real big hurry to get out of school because you thought if you got out, you might be more likely to be sent overseas. That wasn't really true because they would send the whole unit, but there was a lot of confusion. Looking back, I think it was a good experience for me, and in some ways—if I could guarantee I'd survive—I miss the fact that I lived through that Vietnam Era, but I didn't actually participate in the war itself—in Vietnam.

Now, that doesn't mean I want to go kill a bunch of people, but that experience itself is something I kind of wish I had because I like to experience things. We got shadows of it during training and the sergeants talking about it over there, what you had to do . . . Excuse me, I'm going to get a drink of water . . . what you had to do to stay alive and what you had to do to defeat the enemy, and we got the feeling of what it was like over there. In some ways it's like reading a really good book—I mean a really, really good book—where it's about something you've never done, whether it's a detective mystery or anything, and you get a chance to feel just a shadow of what it's like to actually have done it. You haven't done it, but if you read a good enough book, you get a little bit of the feeling. Being in basic training was stronger than that; you really got that feeling. Some of these guys had been over there, and most of everyone was going to go over there, so you got a real feeling of what it was like to be in harm's way. But yet, you didn't quite get all of it. I could see the same thing happening if you were over there and you were in the rear echelon—you were a chief clerk or typist back at the headquarters. With the exception of the times they raided those places, you might not ever have any combat. You could also say, "I kind of wish I had been in combat." And yet given the choice at the time, you probably would have said, "No, I don't want to go to combat." Nobody wants to go. Well, most people don't want to go to combat, but it would be kind of nice if you had.

The overall experience was kind of a hollow thing and yet kind of a real thing too. I got to experience some very intense training. I got to meet some people, and I didn't make any lifelong friends because we were separated after that, but I met some people under circumstances . . . I remember going to Lake Charles with a couple of guys from Arkansas, and he ran into a girl there from Arkansas, and what were the odds? And just things happened that wouldn't happen any other way. I'm really glad I got that chance to get that exposure, and I had a chance

to be exposed to that part of it. I kind of wish in a left-handed way that—if I could guarantee that I'd have lived—that I'd have been exposed to more of it. But overall, I think the service in the military—the Army particularly because that's what I was in—it's a melting pot. It's an awfully good way to learn a lot about a lot of different things and a lot of different people.

We live here close to Fort Hood, and when I was sales manager for a car dealership, we sold a lot of cars to soldiers. And I talked to all these soldiers that come back from Iraq and so forth, and some made a big deal out of it and some didn't make it a big deal at all. One guy brought me a bunch of CDs of all the action over there. Other guys were very quiet about it, which is true in all wars. Some people react in different ways. Seeing those guys, they aren't our finest. A lot of them in the volunteer Army are guys that were just looking for a job. They didn't have much education. But you get in there, and they start molding you, and they start teaching you things, and in most cases—whether you want to or not—those guys become patriots if they weren't before. They become stronger. They become better. They learn skills, and some of those guys, I'm proud to have those guys out there in front of us. They're some pretty good dudes. They may have only just graduated high school, but they're out there with a gun, and they're taking care of me. Don't make light of that; that's a pretty important thing. That's the basis of this country. The basis of this country is security. You can't have anything if you don't have security. Those guys may have gotten in because they couldn't find a job, or they got some girl pregnant and they're trying to get away, but they got in there and trained them and taught them, and when they got in the field or they got to Iraq or Afghanistan and put their life on the line, they did it for their families and their buddies, but they also do it for their country. That's our country.

I can get emotional about that because that could have happened to me, and I could have been in that situation. I would like to think that I would have reacted positively to that kind of action as a lot of these guys did. I know some didn't and that happens. But the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam—I remember arguing with some friends of mine about that. It's when you can't tell who the enemy is. The My Lai Massacre was when they killed a bunch of civilians in Vietnam. Lieutenant Calley killed a bunch of civilians—260 civilians. You have to cut him some slack. They court-martialed him. You got to cut him some slack because over there you don't know who your enemy is. You can never condone genocide as a policy. It might be hard to tell, but if you know they did it, you have to punish them; you just have to. That's what this country stands for. You have to punish them. Some people might disagree with that, but that's the basis for this country. We do things wrong, but if we find out about it, we try to correct it. These soldiers over there, bless their hearts. They do the hard, dirty work, and they don't love it, and they don't volunteer for it necessarily, but when it comes to it they do it like men, and we got to be pretty grateful for that. Like I said earlier, I think I could have responded the same way had I been in a more dangerous position.

RAICO: While you were enlisted in the service, did you know anyone who did go over to combat and come back affected by the war?

BLAKELY: Yes, Dave Herman. He was an officer that went over about a year or so after I was in. I went to school with him at Texas and met him later on in Houston. Dave was in ROTC in college, so he went over as a second lieutenant, and he went over when the war had turned sour. Lots and lots of drugs being done over there. A lot of fragging going on. Fragging. That's when your own troops kill their own officer . . . throw a grenade at their own officer. A lot of that was

going on, and he said you had to be careful giving orders or somebody would be fragging you. It was really getting sloppy bad over there. It affected him. He went over there with a military attitude, and he came back and said it had spoiled it all for him, so I found it real hard to think about it anymore. He never really got involved in anything too bad. He was involved in some firefights and saw some people killed and bad things happened, but he said the bad thing was when they were going in and out of the jungle and there were landmines. He said it was the second most dangerous part. The first most dangerous part was some doped up soldier got pissed at you and would drop a grenade in your boot or something. He said it didn't happen that often, but it happened every once in a while, and you heard about it and you got afraid. It really spoiled the chain of command giving orders. That was towards the end when it had deteriorated those last few years. It wasn't pleasant at all.

RAICO: Do you have any advice for young men or women who are just entering into the service?

BLAKELY: Go with the flow. Get the things out of it that you can. There's some really valuable things to learn in the Army. Some of them are just practical day-to-day things about survival and small things like keeping your room clean. A lot of these guys couldn't make up a bed. We had an inspection every morning, and you had to have your bed tight—I mean tight enough you could bounce a quarter off of it tight. Most of those guys, to this day, still make it that way. I make mine like that, and I probably didn't make a bed in my life until then. Little things like that and all the way up to bigger things like relying on your friends when you get in a tight spot, knowing you can trust your friends, knowing and learning how to shoot a gun, not being afraid of weapons, being familiar with guns.

The bigger things are important, but you can't afford to look at the big picture; you have to look at the small picture. You can't look at what we're doing here; you have to look at what are we doing in my little area here to get by, to survive, before we can all get back home. It teaches you how to compartmentalize, but it doesn't mean you can ignore the big picture. I won't tell someone Vietnam is bad, and we shouldn't be there so don't fight, but you have to do what has to be done in your small world. You can think what you want in the bigger picture, but you have to do what's in the bounds of moral and right. You have to kill some people, or you have to do whatever you have to do. This doesn't mean you massacre civilians, but you kill enemy soldiers. You fight hard even though you might be a fighting a war you don't believe totally. If you think the war is totally immoral, do the right thing, but become a conscientious objector and get out of there. Don't endanger your friends and fellow troops by staying there and not trying. Don't frag your lieutenants, but do the right thing.

I would tell somebody to go in with an open mind, but prepare to not examine the big picture as much as you do the smaller picture. Hang on to your contacts. Learn as much as you can. Then look at the things you can set yourself up for. You can go to college for free when you get out on the GI Bill. You can buy a house cheaper with a VA loan. There's a lot of things you can use. So, if you're going to go in the military, be conscious of those things to be able to use them later on. You know? Or you can stay in for 20 years, retire, and get a job after that at 40 years old and go to college. I'm not saying to do those things or to not do those things. Know those options and what you can and can't do, and look at it with a cold, hard eye going into it. Make those decisions based on logic and not on emotions. Don't go in there just with a save-the-world attitude because you're probably going to get your ass hurt, but go in there with the

attitude that you're going to use it for your purposes. At the same time, you're going to do your duty and do what you're supposed to do for your country, for your friends, for all the things you believe in. Those things are not incompatible; they're compatible. That's a very broad picture I would give somebody going in.

RAICO: What do you think us as Americans in today's society have learned from the war in Vietnam as a whole? Like politically, militarily, socially? What do you think we have learned from our past in Vietnam?

BLAKELY: That's a complicated question, and I could talk all day. Well, I don't know. Sometimes I think, more than anything, we've learned small things. We learned to appreciate our troops coming back a whole lot more than we did back then. We appreciate people that go out there and fight for us even if we don't want them to, even if we believe they're fighting the wrong war. We've learned to appreciate them. You see there's a bigger response to soldiers coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan—positive responses. When you came back from Vietnam, people just ignored you . . . "Hey, baby-killers." You know? That kind of thing. That's a small thing, but that's a good positive thing.

On the bigger picture, golly I don't if we've learned or not. We think we still have to defend and be the world's policeman. It's not communism now; it's terrorism, but we still think . . . I don't know whether that's right or wrong anymore because I see things in a different light almost every day. The reasons why we do things sometimes are so complicated that you may not even know why we're at war. You see the dirty side of war: the money involved, the corruption, and all that. Then you talk to some guy who comes back from Iraq or Iran, and he talks about him and his buddies fighting, and him and his buddies doing their duty, and he seems proud and it makes you think, "Are we wasting those kids by sending them over there? Are we really doing some good?" Sometimes I don't know. Backing off and trying to look at the big picture, starting with Vietnam, we began to learn we can't put out every fire. We still try to put out too many. We've got to try to stay out of civil wars. I think we're trying to do better. At least when we do it now, we know we're doing it wrong. We've come to believe as a country more in allowing freer discussions about the rights and wrongs of it. I think with the Snowden papers and other stuff going on now, we have more discussion about it than we had with Vietnam. In Vietnam, all the rights and everything it was all just the hippies, and I think now that dissension is taken much more seriously and much more responsibly, people are looking at it in a different light than they did back then. I kind of believe we've evolved, but it's a slow process.

RAICO: Do you have any items or objects that you still have today that you had back when you were in the service? Pictures, or uniforms, or maybe papers?

BLAKELY: I have my discharge papers. I have a picture of me shaking hands with the general. At the end of my basic training cycle, I was selected as the outstanding trainee of that cycle. And you know, it's "Mickey Mouse," but I'm kind of proud of it. It's, you know, what the heck. It's like I was captain of the football team, president of the class; it's kind of cool. I really don't mean this to sound arrogant, but I played third game and I won third game too. That's really all.

I tell you what I did keep forever—I mean forever—was an Army jacket, a cold weather jacket, which I never wore in Louisiana at all. They issued you a big old warm . . . golly! And I wore that jacket. I still had that jacket when we moved to Gatesville. I probably got rid of it 20

years ago when I was 55, so I had it for about 30 years. It was a good warm jacket. I used it as a hunting jacket, and in really cold weather it was the warmest jacket I ever had in my life I guarantee you. But I don't have any medals or anything—just that picture of me shaking hands with the general.

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

BLAKELY: A couple of things in going through basic training. I always think back to my ignorance with that black guy in that line and how bad that was and me not knowing it. I used to have a bit of a temper back then. I remember getting in a fight with a guy. I got in a fight with this guy over a card game because he wouldn't pay me, and I said, "You're going to pay me."

And he said, "No. I'm going home on leave."

I said, "You ain't going home on leave until you pay me."

We had just gotten paid, and I hit him pretty good and busted up a finger pretty good. They came over and they got us up and the sergeant there said, "Well, if you had to bust him in the head to make him do something, he's got to obey orders."

I said, "Well, I was just trying to get him to pay gambling debts."

The sergeant was like, "Oh!" He was prepared to defend me to death, but he found out it was just a game of cards. [Laughter.]

One other thing, this was right before we shipped out; I'll never forget this. This is after we got out of basic going to a special school there at Fort Polk. There was a lieutenant there and he was a good guy. He and I talked from time to time, and he was fresh out of college—just a real good guy. Three nights before we left, we went in to Silsby. And in Silsby, Fort Polk was all their business. All it was was about two dozen bars and maybe a couple of convenience stores, and that was it. We went in and—to make a long story short—we drank all night, and got some girls, and didn't make it back in time for reveille in the morning. Now I'm the squad leader, and they called roll, and we're not there. When we showed up, he was there and I thought, "I don't know what he's going to do." Maybe I'd have to go through the training cycle again. The next morning in formation, he's out there. He's talking to everybody, and as he walked by me in formation, he said, "Oh boy, if this was two weeks ago, I would've had your ass. You'd be here for the next 10 weeks."

He walked by and said something else, and I just said, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

He totally let me off the hook. What happened was, we were supposed to get a cab and get picked up; the cab didn't come, and we couldn't get another cab. We were trying to make it by 5 o'clock or whatever time reveille was. He was trying so hard not to laugh and to get to me. You made those kinds of friends in there. They're kind of friends but they're just friends under those circumstances.

I met the first gay guy in there, as far as I know. There was a brother . . . when I was in high school, my best friend was a quarterback. His older brother was a drama major. So, I suspect he was gay, but in West Texas you didn't talk about it. We had a guy, a librarian from Detroit. He walked very feminine, and just the nicest, best guy you ever met in your life. Luckily, I had a real good opportunity to get to know somebody that, with my West Texas background, I might have taken offense to. Chances are he was a really good guy.

RAICO: So even with tensions about the possibility of going to Vietnam, you could still enjoy your training?

BLAKELY: You never acknowledged that. You never talked about it. You partied a little bit harder. You trained a bit harder. You joked about it because you never want to admit you're scared of going over there. You never want to admit you may be killed. You just didn't talk about it. There was a lot of 18-year-olds in there, and I was 21 because I had gone to college, but we didn't talk seriously about it. We didn't acknowledge the danger at all. We just thought if we went over, we would kick ass and stuff like that. I did that knowing it was a front—it was BS. Some guys meant it though; they didn't think it was shallow. They really thought we were going over there, and they would just go up and charge a hill. You do what you have to do. Quite frankly, that's good for the Army. They teach them to not think and do what they're told to do. There's a certain strength in that from the Army's viewpoint. It was an interesting time, but I kind of wish I had been in longer. I wish I would have went overseas, but it was a good experience for me. I really think everybody ought to serve a period of time in the Army. I really think they ought to. What harm could it do? Go out here and build roads for the federal government. Build bridges. Do it like old work programs back in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's day. It wouldn't do a bit of harm in the world. If you say, "I don't want to kill anybody," that's fine. We got a lot of work you can do besides that. I think it would be a good idea, but nobody's going to ask me.

RAICO: Well, I want to thank you for doing this interview with me today.