

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

JOE MARTIN

An interview conducted on

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Interviewer: Shayna Mullen

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 Joe Martin are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on April 16, 2018.

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MULLEN: All right, for the beginning of the interview, can you please state your name?

MARTIN: Joe Martin

MULLEN: Okay, and when did you get drafted into the service during the Vietnam War?

MARTIN: Well, to clarify a few things: I was in fact drafted, but, in those days if you could enlist in the Navy or Air Force or something else, you were not drafted. So, I beat the draft by one day by enlisting in the Air Force.

MULLEN: Oh, okay. So, where exactly in Vietnam were you stationed?

MARTIN: Mostly Saigon, Tan Son Nhat Airport, which was Saigon International for all practical purposes.

MULLEN: So, what motivated you to enlist in the armed forces?

MARTIN: The draft, pure and simple. I did not want to be toting an M-16 up in I Corps, so the Air Force was a much better proposition.

MULLEN: Sounds good. What was your training like?

MARTIN: Well, let's see. Everybody, of course—regardless of your branch of service—goes through basic training in the Air Force, which is 6 weeks I think. I went to Amarillo, Texas as opposed to Lackland down in San Antone, which is where, to this day, almost all Air Force basic training is held. But I went—with a lot of other guys—to Amarillo. From there I went to Keesler Air Force base in Biloxi, Mississippi to learn Morse Code. And I spent about six months there, I guess, and then that was the end of any formal training.

MULLEN: Did you receive any specific training in regards to encountering locals of Vietnam?

MARTIN: No.

MULLEN: What were your first impressions when you arrived in Vietnam?

MARTIN: Let me back up a little bit here. To get there . . . first of all, nobody in our outfit was sent straight to Vietnam. We had all been on a ground sight for one tour at least. I was in Alaska working for two years. And everybody who went to Vietnam in the EC-47, which was the aircraft we were on, went through a school there in San Angelo, at Goodfellow—about a week, or two weeks' worth—to attempt to give us some idea of what the equipment on the airplane would be all about. I have little to no recollection of that quite frankly. I know it did keep me from . . . I had spent a New Year's Eve down there when I could've been elsewhere; that's about the main thing I remember. And then anybody else of flying status had to go through two survival schools: one in Spokane, Washington, and the snow is about knee deep—a fine way to train for Southeast Asia; and another one in Clark Air Force base in the Philippines, which was more useful—jungle survival skills—which was actually not bad. We did learn a few things. So,

my impressions of Vietnam . . . we flew from Clark in the Philippines over to Saigon, and I think we made landfall probably about Camron Bay, and I remember looking down there thinking, “Hell. People are trying to kill each other down there.” That was my first impression.

MULLEN: Are you comfortable talking about any vivid memories during your time of service?

MARTIN: Oh, yeah. I don’t have a lot of vivid memories, but yeah, I’ll talk about anything you want to talk about.

MULLEN: Okay. So, what would be the one memory that sticks out when you think about your time during the Vietnam War?

MARTIN: You know, I was there for about 22 months, so I don’t have a *single* memory, I guess, that would . . . collectively, I worked with the Vietnamese the last six or eight months I was there. We were going to turn everything over to them. So that, collectively, would be my most vivid memory: working with those guys. But I can’t say a particular incident or something that stands out.

MULLEN: How much news from home did you hear while you were abroad?

MARTIN: We got plenty. We could get, uh . . . we had the Armed Forces Vietnam Network. You’re probably familiar with that. Well, maybe you’re not; you’re too young, but the movie Robin Williams was in a few years ago called *Good Morning, Vietnam* . . . I don’t know if you’ve heard about that or know anything about it, but we had that of course. You could get *Newsweek*, or what have you . . . so, yeah. The armed forces published—I think it’s still published today—called *The Stars and Stripes*, which was a newspaper published by the armed forces. It had . . . obviously, it was sort of slanted, but it had the news. There was no shortage of news if you wanted to get it. It wasn’t like it is today where everything was within 15 minutes; it might be a day or two, or a week late. But yeah, we could get news.

MULLEN: Did your service influence or affect your family at home? Were you able to keep in contact with them frequently?

MARTIN: As much as we . . . yeah, you could write letters. And one of the benefits, supposedly, about being in Vietnam was you didn’t have to put a stamp on it; you just wrote “free” up in the corner where the stamp would go. I’d mail mom and dad about once a month. Not nearly enough to suit them, but I was pretty busy otherwise. And there was something else, that I don’t . . . nowadays you probably don’t need it because what we’re doing here today with Skype and whatnot, but there was a thing you could get on the radio. You could get on a telephone, but it was broadcasted by radio over to your home. I never did that, but it was available.

MULLEN: Did you ever interact with any of the local Vietnamese citizens?

MARTIN: Oh, plenty. Yeah.

MULLEN: What do you think their conceptions of the United States were?

MARTIN: Hard to say. I think that some at least realized that we were trying to help, or we thought we did. I don't know if that was actually the case. But that was the whole premise: "Yeah. Hey, we're here to help these people." What they really thought was kind of hard to tell. You got to know what they wanted you to know. The language was extremely difficult to speak with any fluency, and that was a problem. But most of them spoke enough English to where you can communicate, but, you know, we never talked about philosophical things. Who knows what they really thought. I don't.

MULLEN: Are you comfortable talking about what you thought of the conflict when you enlisted?

MARTIN: Oh, sure. When I saw the conflict it was 5,000 or 6,000 feet in an airplane, so it was a little different perspective—not down on the ground with bullets whizzing past your head.

MULLEN: So, what conceptions did you have of the U.S. during the time of your enlistment?

MARTIN: The United States in general or the United States's participation in the war? I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at.

MULLEN: The participation in the war.

MARTIN: Well, I didn't get there until 1970, and we were well on the way out by then, although that was not readily apparent, but we were. You got to understand too, I was 21 whenever I enlisted, so I was not some 18-year-old kid, which, by the way, is a myth that this whole war was fought by some 18- and 19-year-olds. Not so. There was plenty of guys well above 40 over there—not a lot, but they were there. The average age of our group—I'm going to guess—was probably 22 or so. So anyway, personally I thought this is a losing proposition. We got no business being here.

MULLEN: Did you find your service challenging at all?

MARTIN: In some instances, yeah.

MULLEN: What sorts of technology did you use during your service and in your area?

MARTIN: Well, to go back to the start . . . it's a little complicated, but our job . . . let me back up. Before going to Vietnam, as I say, everybody in this unit had a tour on a ground site somewhere. We were all a part of the Air Force Security Service, and that meant, in essence, we were cheap labor for NSA. So, you could talk about code-breaking and what have you, but unless somebody intercepts and copies the transmissions, then you're never going to have any code to break. So, we did that sort of stuff somewhere in the world. We literally had sites all over the world. As I said, I was in Alaska for a couple years before I went to Vietnam.

[Brief interruption.]

MARTIN: Okay. Anyway, so the technology was mainly radio to intercept enemy communications or communist communications—both on the ground. And when we got to Vietnam, of course, we were working against the Viet Cong, or the North Vietnamese, or both sometimes. So, that part of the technology is what we used and the airplane of course. We did that all from an airplane. And for the day, it was fairly sophisticated stuff for the mid-'60s.

MULLEN: Okay. How did the controversies over the war affect you while you were in-country?

MARTIN: It didn't affect me personally at all. We were all aware of it. You couldn't help it. There was . . . there was a lot of problems over there, because we were aware of what was going on in the States. For example, I don't know if you're aware of the Kent State episode in 1970—I guess it was—where some kids were protesting at Kent State University in Ohio, and the National Guard opened up on them and killed two or three. So, we were aware of that sort of stuff. But to me, personally, it didn't affect me one way or the other.

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

MARTIN: Not really, no.

MULLEN: Okay. Well, is there anything you would like to talk about in regards to your experiences during the Vietnam War as far as combat and everything goes?

MARTIN: Well, like I said, the combat I saw was from an airplane 5,000 or 6,000 feet above it. And you could clearly see stuff going on down there, and we had every radio known to man or woman. And so, you could hear sometimes the conversations between the helicopters coming in to hose down the area or whatever. As far as actual combat goes, no. The Air Force considered what we were doing as a combat mission. I don't, but the Air Force considered it to be because, yeah, we could get shot at. But, if they ever shot at me, they missed.

MULLEN: Okay. I think that covers all the questions for the interview. Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview and to answer any of the questions that we have in regards to it.

MARTIN: Hey, you're welcome.

MULLEN: Thank you very much.