

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

MIKE HARTMAN

An interview conducted on

March 24, 2018

Interviewer: Lance Hartman

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 Mike Hartman are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 24, 2018.

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L. HARTMAN: How would you define West Texas and where does it begin?

M. HARTMAN: I'd define San Angelo as a great place to live . . . undoubtedly, or you wouldn't be here! As for raising kids, it's a great place. Ten times better than any big city.

L. HARTMAN: What are the differences between West Texans and Texans from other parts of the state?

M. HARTMAN: West Texans have more patriotism than in other parts of the state.

L. HARTMAN: That goes into my next question: How would you characterize the West Texas relationship with the military?

M. HARTMAN: Great. It's fantastic. People in the military like the West Texans. They enjoy West Texans being around them. They would rather fight alongside a West Texan than fight against one.

L. HARTMAN: When and where did you enter into the armed forces?

M. HARTMAN: I entered into the armed forces in San Angelo, Texas. I had to drive up to Abilene and take my test in Abilene and was shipped out from there also.

L. HARTMAN: What service were you in and when did you enter? What years did you serve?

M. HARTMAN: I served in the Marines from 1966 to 1976.

L. HARTMAN: During your years in service were you primarily in the enlisted ranks?

M. HARTMAN: Yes, strictly the enlisted ranks.

L. HARTMAN: Your military rank ended as staff sergeant?

M. HARTMAN: That's E-6 staff sergeant.

L. HARTMAN: Which conflict did you take place in?

M. HARTMAN: I took place in the Vietnam conflict, if you want to call it a conflict.

L. HARTMAN: Why did you enter the armed forces?

M. HARTMAN: I really didn't have any place to go or anything to do, so I said, "Huh, I'll go into the military." And I did, stayed in there for 10 years, 5 months, and 22 days, not that I was counting.

L. HARTMAN: What did you think of the conflict going into Vietnam when you enlisted?

M. HARTMAN: I didn't really know that much about it. I went ahead and joined up, and next thing I knew I was there.

L. HARTMAN: What concept of the United States at the time of your enlistment?

M. HARTMAN: The concept I had was that everybody should do his duty. That is the way I looked at it. You should do your duty and be happy about it.

L. HARTMAN: What did America symbolize to you at the time? What do you think it stood for?

M. HARTMAN: America stood for strength and . . . That's all I can say about Vietnam. American stood for strength, and it did.

L. HARTMAN: What did you understand about the mission you were being asked to complete?

M. HARTMAN: Well, not so much initially. They said, "Oh, you're gonna go here, you're gonna go there, and I did. I went there and I went there. And, just like I say, it's hard to conceptualize. You did what you were told when you were told to do it. Especially being in the Marines, you did what you were told when you were told to do it. You didn't argue, you didn't backtrack . . . nothing. You just did what you were told, when you were told.

L. HARTMAN: What was your training like?

M. HARTMAN: Oh man! My training was pure hell. I mean sixteen weeks of boot camp, then you got out and went to infantry training regiment, and . . . What do you think? Infantry training regimen consisted of Marines being Marines just going to the boonies and staying out in the boonies and living out there, that's about it.

L. HARTMAN: Where did you go to boot camp and infantry training at?

M. HARTMAN: I went to boot camp in San Diego, California, infantry training at Camp Pendleton, California.

L. HARTMAN: What were race relations like when you entered the military?

M. HARTMAN: We really didn't think about race relations at that time. There was nothing to think about. We didn't think about it at all.

L. HARTMAN: Even in the civilian sector, was it higher?

M. HARTMAN: Well, no not really because we didn't think about it at all. It just . . . Race relations didn't really come about until the late 60s.

L. HARTMAN: What sort of training, if any, did you receive regarding race relations in the military? Did you receive any training on the subject?

M. HARTMAN: Well, yeah, later on in my service career. Yeah, we did. We got back around to it. They made you go to race relations . . . You didn't really think about it that much at that time because there wasn't any race relations.

L. HARTMAN: What sort of training did you receive regarding encounters with locals? What I mean by that is, Vietnam culture, or history, or how to distinguish between the civilians and the enemies?

M. HARTMAN: While I was over there?

L. HARTMAN: Yes.

M. HARTMAN: Well, I was over there . . . And with people over there, you just didn't let them get close to you. You didn't want to. And if you did, you always had somebody around you at the same time that was a marine also. I'll give you an example. When we went to a barbershop that was out in the town, you know, we always had somebody with a sidearm with us at all times. So, one time, I got up and was the last one in there and I was getting a little bit worried and I pulled my pistol out of my holster and kept it laying on my lap while I was getting shaved and a haircut. I did!

L. HARTMAN: Tell me a little bit about your time in Vietnam.

M. HARTMAN: Well, it was rough. It was hard. You would go here one day and it was hotter than hell, you know, and then the next day it would be cold as hell. Because they had the monsoon season. It was just like I say, hell on wheels.

L. HARTMAN: What was your first impression when you arrived in Vietnam?

L. HARTMAN: I thought it was a beautiful country. Beautiful! We got there and it was December of '66. And it was raining a little bit. Then it got a little warm and stayed warm. Beautiful country. It was all very nice and green. I thought, oh, this is going to be nice. Oh well, didn't I know, it wasn't very nice. It got real rainy. It got really cold.

L. HARTMAN: So, did you find your service challenging?

M. HARTMAN: Oh, yeah. Every bit of my service, because in the marines, in those days, you didn't have to be a Marine infantry at all times. I spent some time as a military policeman, some time as a career counselor, you didn't have to be in the infantry at all times.

L. HARTMAN: How old were you when you went over to Vietnam?

M. HARTMAN: Eighteen.

L. HARTMAN: What unit did you serve with when you were deployed over there?

M. HARTMAN: I served with the First Battalion, Third Marines, Third Marine Division. And I came back, and I got hit once, and that was enough.

L. HARTMAN: Did you serve in direct combat during your deployment?

M. HARTMAN: Oh, yes. Yeah, it couldn't get more direct than that.

L. HARTMAN: Were you wounded in action?

M. HARTMAN: Yes, I was. In Tam Kỳ province, May 2nd, 1966.

L. HARTMAN: What exactly happened?

M. HARTMAN: We were digging in on the side of a hill on an operation, and you could hear mortars start to come in. I thought, "Man, there's a mortar coming in!" So I jumped up in the air real quick and grabbed my entrenching tool, and started digging a little bit faster. And man, it hit about 15-feet in front of my foxhole, which wasn't really a foxhole because it wasn't very deep but it kept getting deeper and deeper as the night went on. Of course, the hill we went on was solid dirt and granite and it didn't get deeper very much. Then, about 2 in the morning, I heard a mortar coming in, and I had reached up to pull my helmet down a little bit. All of a sudden, I had stuff running all over my face, there is a lot of blood you can smell it. And I thought, "Somebody was hit." Then I said, "Damn, somebody's me!" I got a little upset because I couldn't shoot my machine gun anymore. I had to swap out with an AR-15, because it wouldn't operate. So, the next day it came around at sunlight and I got cleared off a little bit. They came around to see if it was alright, and the guy came to my foxhole and he said, "You're going out." I said, "I ain't going out of nowhere!" I didn't know how bad it was, so they told me, "Well, you're gonna have to go out because you are wounded." I said well, "I don't feel wounded!" I did. I mean it hurt like hell. Somebody turned around, and this guy shoved my face in his mirror, and goes, "Hey, look at that!" So, I went out. They landed us on the hospital ship to sanctuary, and when I got on the sanctuary, this navy man came by and picked up my rifle and dropped it over the side of the ship. Boy, I almost pushed his ass over the side of the ship, because we're checked out with those things! I told him that! I said, "I'm checked out with that thing man! You can't throw that over!" He said, "I'll give you a combat loss!"

L. HARTMAN: Did you ever have a chance of being captured while in combat?

M. HARTMAN: Oh yeah! I never was, but I had plenty of chances of being captured.

L. HARTMAN: What did you think of the local inhabitants that you encountered?

M. HARTMAN: It depends. I could take 'em or leave 'em. I really didn't like them at all. I really didn't like them.

L. HARTMAN: When you encountered the local inhabitants, what do you think their perceptions were of the United States?

M. HARTMAN: Oh, they were scared to death of us. We were 18-year-olds with machine guns and all sorts of stuff! We could take a life at the drop of a hat.

L. HARTMAN: Did you ever engage them in conversation about what America means to you?

M. HARTMAN: Oh yeah. They wanted to go to America. All of them wanted to go to America.

L. HARTMAN: What were some of your most vivid memories of your time in the service?

M. HARTMAN: My most vivid memories were when I was back here in the states, when I rotated back to the states after my first tour. . . . I don't really know what to say.

L. HARTMAN: Anything that sticks out more?

M. HARTMAN: Well, when you're in combat, you actually get to miss it when you come back. You actually do get to miss it. Because you're in combat every day and everything is different, and you come back here and you aren't doing the same thing.

L. HARTMAN: What sort of technology did you use while you were in the service?

M. HARTMAN: Well, I was in for ten and a half years. We went from the M-14 rifle to the M-16 rifle. So, that was one big deal, and the reason we did that, well, we couldn't carry a lot of ammunition with the M-14. So, we carried a hell of a lot of ammunition with the M-16. So, that's one reason we carried that.

L. HARTMAN: How did your service influence your family back home?

M. HARTMAN: My first tour didn't really influence or affect them at all. I wasn't married, and it didn't matter to them one way or another.

L. HARTMAN: You got married around Vietnam, didn't you?

M. HARTMAN: No, I got married back here before I started my second tour.

L. HARTMAN: So how did you keep in touch?

M. HARTMAN: The only way we had. We had to write letters. The only way we had was to write letters.

L. HARTMAN: So, old snail mail? Nothing like we had today, no email, no texts. Sure as heck didn't have cell phones back then.

M. HARTMAN: No.

L. HARTMAN: How much news did you hear from back home while you were abroad?

M. HARTMAN: One time my grandmother sent me a San Angelo *Standard Times* newspaper when San Angelo won state, and that was the most news I got all at one time, the newspaper.

L. HARTMAN: So, you weren't receiving a lot of news while you were overseas?

M. HARTMAN: No.

L. HARTMAN: How did the controversies over the war affect you while you were in country?

M. HARTMAN: It affected me real bad. I did not want to talk to any of these idiots while I was back here. I didn't want to talk to them, see them. I really felt like thrashing them. Because all I could hear was all that they were doing was . . . protesting.

L. HARTMAN: So, I know Jane Fonda was in the media, and was doing different things on television. How did that affect you?

M. HARTMAN: Jane Fonda is a bad word around my house. We don't talk about her. We don't talk anything good about her. There's nothing to be said that's good about her. We do not like her. No Vietnam veteran likes her. In fact, I don't think any veteran at all likes her.

L. HARTMAN: Not particularly. I'm one and I could tell you I don't really care for her.

M. HARTMAN: When she did that, she spit in everybody's face.

L. HARTMAN: I agree with that. Did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to civilian life?

M. HARTMAN: Oh yeah, definitely! All kinds of challenges. Well like, finding a job, that was one of the main things. I don't know what the hell else to tell you. It was going to be really hard to come back to civilian life. I don't know what to say about that.

L. HARTMAN: So, after your time in the military has your conception of America changed?

M. HARTMAN: No, I am still very hard charging about it. Very patriotic, extremely patriotic. I'm a conservative. I like being a conservative. I don't like people that cuss the service. I don't like people that badmouth the servicemen. I don't like that at all.

L. HARTMAN: How do you feel about your military service when you look back at it?

M. HARTMAN: I'm proud of it. I don't know what to say about not being proud of it.

L. HARTMAN: So, do you have any advice for the young men and women entering into the service?

M. HARTMAN: Go in with your eyes open and make sure that you're gonna do the best that you can, because, like they say, every day is a holiday and every meal is a banquet.

L. HARTMAN: So, that is what you would tell your grandson since he is getting ready to go into the service?

M. HARTMAN: That's right. Don't take any crap from a stranger.

L. HARTMAN: Make sure he listens to his higher-ranking personnel, correct?

M. HARTMAN: Oh yeah!

L. HARTMAN: Do you have any items that you would like to share with this project? I could show some pictures. Are you willing to share anything?

M. HARTMAN: I have some pictures you can take with ya.

L. HARTMAN: Would you like to share anything else about your time in service?

M. HARTMAN: Well, when I went back for my second tour it was a completely different job. I had another tour of duty that I served in Vietnam. I didn't want to go at this time. I really didn't want to go at this time. My wife was pregnant with our first son. He was six months old when I first saw him. I really did not want to go. But I had to go. And I got back and he was six-months-old. That's not a good thing to be when you just got married.

L. HARTMAN: So, when you were over there, did you have anybody famous or special that you knew of? That might be in films or something today?

M. HARTMAN: Well, yeah! My drill instructor was Corporal Erme¹.

¹ Mr. Hartman is referring to R. Lee Erme (1944-2018), a veteran and actor.

L. HARTMAN: Corporal Ermey, huh?

M. HARTMAN: Yeah, that was my drill instructor.

L. HARTMAN: That's pretty interesting, something I could put in my report!

M. HARTMAN: When I first met him, he looked like he had fangs coming out of his mouth. He was a corporal and then, when he got on to doing things on TV, he was a sergeant. So he's pretty famous. I'll never forget the time he bit off the head of a rattlesnake.

L. HARTMAN: Well, see that's something you can remember for a while!

M. HARTMAN: I'll never forget his voice, no! We came walking by the rifle range, and we were walking along, walking right outside the barracks. And I hear this rattlesnake, I could hear it rattling. I know what that is! And he came walking by me, and he's holding this rattlesnake by the neck, and I said, "Oh, my God." And he goes, "Burwell!" And Burwell says, "Sir, yes sir!" And he says, "I got something for you, Burwell." And, oh, my God, he shoved that snake in Burwell's face and that's the last we saw of Burwell until we got back to the barracks. We didn't see nothing but assholes and elbows.

L. HARTMAN: Well, dad, I appreciate all the information that you have given me. And as a fellow veteran, you are the reason that I went into the service, the reason my brother went into the service, and the reason that my son is going into the service. You are our inspiration and we love you and look up to you.

M. HARTMAN: OOOORAY!!!!

L. HARTMAN: I appreciate everything you did, dad.

M. HARTMAN: You're welcome, son.