ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

BEN ACOSTA

An interview conducted on

May 10, 2018

Interviewer: Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai

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 Ben Acosta are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on May 10, 2018.

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WONGSRICHANALAI: Where and when were you born?

ACOSTACOSTA: January 27, 1939.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And where did you grow up?

ACOSTA: Fort Stockton, Texas. Born and raised here. And still here.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Is your family from Fort Stockton?

ACOSTA: My dad came from Mexico . . . Now, he told me he came in at one-year-old. Now, in my opinion, I don't know how a one-year-old can remember that. But I went along with it. But my mother was here already. She was in the United States as a citizen. But he came from Mexico. And I don't know what year it was. He died, I'm gonna say five, six, seven years ago just before he turned 93. And my mother died very early, left five of us children. I was just five or six years old when my momma passed away and left five of us. And then my dad remarried. Before he remarried the second time, he child a . . . a son out of marriage, and then married the second wife. And she had five and there was five of us, and then they had eight other ones. So that made it eighteen except that one that he fathered out of wedlock would make us nineteen.

So, we grew up in a two story house here in Fort Stockton and, of course, the male ones—we got two stories—would sleep upstairs. Of course, families separated. But we grew up . . . and I'm the only child on my mother's side that stayed with my stepmother. The rest of them couldn't handle her or she couldn't handle them, so they moved over to my aunt's or uncle's throughout the city and then after, outside the city. But I'm the only one that was raised up until I turned twenty-one and got married, so, that's . . . I put it all in . . . I've been married 57 years. Same wife. Yeah.

In the service, I was drafted, during the JFK presidency. And if I understood correctly, he said no married men, especially with children, would be drafted. Which in my case, I was. And I also want to say, you can hear heel marks from here to Bakersfield driving all the way there and into El Paso on the pavement, you know, trying to get off of it.

But, yeah, I ended up in Germany for eighteen months, had my second child born while I was there. And, uh . . . I couldn't get used to it and I wanted to get out, and I tried the senators and the congressmen, to write them a letter and my dad too to get me out but eventually ended up the first year trying to get out, but I was in Germany then and I said, "Well, there's no need to keep doing it." Because, what's another year?

But, I wasn't very satisfied in my own world. Because I couldn't believe what the Army would tell you to do, and then turn around and do the opposite. We would stand guard against East Germany, and you're issued either an M14 or handgun. With only three rounds. And then the Army would tell you, "If they shoot at you, don't shoot back." I said, "Well, why can't I defend myself?" So, I told one of my officers, the lieutenant, "I'm sorry sir, but don't send me down there anymore because I'm going to try to defend myself." That's one area where I couldn't believe that they were, "do this, do that," and then tell you not to do this and do that. So . . . But that's one of the reasons I couldn't get used to it . . . Maybe . . . Maybe I didn't understand it or . . . I don't know for sure, how it was, but that was my experience while I was there.

Now, we really got worried at one time when the Soviets were coming to Cuba. I was a radio man for my lieutenant and we were in the armored infantry. And early one morning, we had an alert call. So, everybody got their weapons, then loaded up in their carrier. . . personnel carriers. You feel my knees go [shaking noises]. We were told why. 'Cause the Russians or the Soviets were coming with a ship, unless we . . . I think it was . . . Yeah, it was Kennedy that told them, "You better go back or the consequences will be there." But that one time I really got frightened or scared, which everyone was, because I had never really been involved with anything like that. But my knees started knocking, literally! I started sitting and I was like, "I wonder why!" But I was frightened. At age 21, I think, maybe . . . I may not have been the only one who felt that way. But we were always just gonna go to war.

But praise God we didn't end up there and, again, I'll repeat myself, I didn't end up there because Vietnam came afterwards, and I didn't get to go down there. I don't know what would've happened to me if I would've made it through that era or not. But Oscar being one of them, my brother-in-law, Gomez Endurias. He made it over there. And a buddy that retired at the Army but he made two services or two terms in Vietnam. And he retired from them and he lives in, around San Antonio area. But he's very fortunate to have survived that conflict there. Or whatever you want to call it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So what year were you drafted? Sixty-one?

ACOSTA: Ah, no. November . . . Let's see . . . November the eleventh, or October the eleventh, of 1960. And left the discharge in '63. Early '63, I think.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And where was your basic training?

ACOSTA: Basic training was Fort Collins, Colorado. Both basic and AIT. And from there we were sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey, and from there was boarded on a ship back to . . . over to Germany. And then the rest of the eighteen months, that's where I spent . . . Gelnhausen, West Germany.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How did you become the radio man?

ACOSTA: I really don't know. I just was handed one and they gave me instructions on how to use it, and operate it and all this, and I had to carry it. There's a little story of my second lieutenant officer, from Tacoma, Washington—his name is Lieutenant Prentice. Real fine fellow, in my opinion, kind, didn't force me in anything that . . . maybe I felt . . . I didn't have to do. But while we were in training, going up, Germany has some tall mountains or hills or whatever. And he said . . . He called me Greasy. Mexican, greasy. "No, you stay backwards. That radio's pretty heavy, so you don't have to follow out. But when you get over there, just find me over there." He was the type of person that probably was compassionate in the way he felt about maybe the same way the training, hard training that we took, and doing all that hard stuff, you know, but, he said "No, don't try to keep up with me." Because he's a man with a very . . . active in his position and all that. But, again, in my opinion he was real fine officer, and didn't mistreat me at all. Maybe he did somebody else but not me. He was real kind to me. So, in ways that other officers might have treated their personnel, but yeah. Because we knew a McVay from here in Texas by the San Antonio area, and just south of Kerrville. McVay was his last name. He was a West Pointer. But

that guy was sharp. And he was completely different from Lieutenant Prentice. Because this guy, West Pointer, he was gung ho. All the way, all the way. There was a big difference between the two.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Were you with Lieutenant Prentice for the entire time of your service?

ACOSTA: Yes, for eighteen months, yes. Surely was.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did they tell you what your mission was, what the United States was doing at the time?

ACOSTA: Well, our mission was to defend our . . . our . . . our community . . . our country. That's the main problem. The main thing that I understood to know. But you also had to kind of look over your buddies around you. If you have or you're coming to combat, you know, look after each other. Look after each other's back, which should be regardless, whether they tell you that or not. In my opinion. But yeah, I served eighteen months there.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you interact with any German civilians at all?

ACOSTA: Not really. I knew some of them but not that well. There were some buddies of mine in the Army that had girlfriends, German girlfriends. That's how I knew about those ladies, the young ladies, or even the older ones. Knew more French people that had their businesses, like a pizza place or a restaurant or something like that. That's where I'd go eat. They kind of had, ah, Spanish words, that we could communicate. One of them was named was Adolfo. He had a pizza place, and that's where we'd go . . . Or I would . . . you know, and eat pizza or whatever. You know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, these were in . . . These were the town? They were not on the base?

ACOSTA: No, no, they were in the town. In the place of Gelnhaus . . . Gelnhausen.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, you lived in the town, not on the base?

ACOSTA: No, no, no. I lived in the base. Forty-Eighth Armored Infantry Division.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, tell me more about this day that you received the orders . . . the day when the Cuban Missile Crisis took place.

ACOSTA: I don't exactly remember the date . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: Right.

ACOSTA: Or anything like that. It was . . . anytime we had an alert call, it would sound in the base, you know, and everybody had to get out, whatever they were doing, and get their gear on and pick up their weapons and headed out to the personnel cars and load up. And we sit there

until other notice was given, the okay, "Alert is over. Go back to your units," and this and this and that. But most of the time when that was done, we'd roll out, and go up there to another area where we would set up perimeters and in a defense way, type deal. In case something was to come up, you know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, how close were you to the East German border?

ACOSTA: I was closer to Frankfurt than Berlin. But we went to go to summer training, it was in Wildflecken, they called it, whether it's pronounced correctly or not. And winter training was in Grafenwöhr, in the winter. And we'd do winter training there. And summer training in Wildflecken. I got my fingers shot off at training, and of course they welded it back together, Nuremberg, Germany. Where I was for about two or three weeks. For the operation of replacing my fingers.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Ah.

ACOSTA: But that's . . . That's about all I recall. All this stuff that I just mentioned but like, again, I don't know if it would have taken longer for my draft, or if I had been drafted after . . . while the Vietnam . . . I don't know. My thoughts are that it might've been different. That's all. I knew two local personnel that didn't come back. And Oscar might've mentioned their names. One of them was Salvador Duran, and the other one was Richard Davis. Richard Davis was lost in combat way before Salvador Duran.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you know them as a civilian?

ACOSTA: Yes, they were younger than me. Richard might've been about my age but I'm not sure. But, yeah. I knew them well. Both of them. When we were younger.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How did your service affect your family?

ACOSTA: I don't know. It affected my dad. Like I told you, he wanted me to . . . or he kept calling to see if I could get out. Because I had a child before when I was drafted, and was expecting our second one. So, he was . . . I think he was concerned about that. But I don't know what his feelings were.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you have any problems reintegrating into civilian life after?

ACOSTA: No, no. I didn't have a problem. Still don't. I, you know, I took it because I had to. It wasn't my choice and, like I said, I couldn't get accustomed to the army way. But I managed to survive, because one year, I was discharged, I said, "I can make it, no problem." Even though I was away from my second child, because he was born while I was in Germany. So, I didn't have . . . I still don't have a problem. It's just the memories that we're talking about, what I went through and what I wanted to do and I wasn't able to do or get out or whatever. I managed to make it twenty-four months or whatever. I'm glad I did, in a way. Now, I'm not saying I agree with everything, even the army, or any service. Because I was in the Army, not in the Marines, and I don't know if there's any difference, or the Air Force, or the Navy.

When a young man wants to join, I normally say this: I would go Navy or Air Force, personally. Army and Marines, they're ground people. They're the ones that go in there first. You got the Navy support from where there's [indistinct]. The Air Force from the air. So, they're not ground people. And I would suggest this to the rest of them. You have a better sense to come out, hopefully. Instead of on the ground. There's more, I felt, there's more men that have given their lives on the ground than have in air.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did any other members of your family . . .

ACOSTA: My oldest son. He was also in Germany. And what his reaction was, he said . . . He's fifty-seven-years-old and he's got his family. They live in San Antonio. He's got two boys and daughter. Both their boys are in their thirties and I don't know if they ever got notice of registering, or called out or anything like that. Or even volunteered.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Do you remember what race relations were like in the military during the time you were there?

ACOSTA: Race . . . the blacks and the whites. That was the only issue. I didn't see any problems with the Hispanics, or Puerto Ricans. Well, I consider them Hispanic also. Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and so on. But, uh, yeah, the blacks and the whites always had their differences. I got into a fight with two white guys because of that reason. Because they kept calling their names, what they normally would name them, you know. The n-word. And we were walking down the street and these two white guys, so and so, you know, and I said, "Hey, wait a minute guys, we're all here for the same reason." They didn't like it. So, we got into a fist fight. Yeah. But I had a lot of . . . both, both nationalities, friends. I can't say that all of them were good or bad, you know, but there's a little bit in every one of us. No matter what race you may be, you find the good ones and the bad ones . . . That's the only reason that I feel that we're all for the same reason here. Why should we have these differences that we carry or something?

WONGSRICHANALAI: What did you do after your service?

ACOSTA: I came back and worked for seismograph crews . . . and, uh, and afterwards, I went to roustaboutin' . . . At that time at the roustabout jobs, we were not hired. Hispanics were not hired. And the roughnecking, or the oil field . . . but, uh, some way or another, we managed to get in there. And then as roustabout crew chief . . . Intertek Gas Company from Houston came in in 1970, and we were doing a lot of work for them. And a certain member of that company asked me if I would like to work for them. So, I said naturally. Because it was something that I said, "if I can put in twenty or thirty years with these people, I'll be well off." Which it didn't happen after all. But I lasted twenty-three years with them. Which is in right now. You probably heard about it back then. Back in '94, '95, that's when the district that I worked for, and I did all the lab work and gas analysis for them for twenty years. And they sold out, and the district was shut down, and we were given a separate space. That's where my job ended.

But then I got into a dry-cleaning laundry business for thirteen and a half years. At the age of 65, 67, we sold it, and ever since, my wife and I have been home by ourselves. I try to stay active, doing something, doing the lawn. The church that we attend, I take care of the property outside, not inside. They got their own custodian to do that. But I take . . . the mow,

grass and weeds, and the property. It's a big property so . . . And they pay me well. So, I try to stay active 'cause I don't like to be sitting down in my recliner and watch T.V. and maybe munch on this and this . . . I'm not the type. I learned at a very early age how to work . . . and my dad taught me that in the cotton fields or wherever. And, uh, I stayed that way and I'm still . . . At my age people look at me strange, says, "You're too old to be doing things like that." But I give my lord the credit because he's the one that sustains me in what I can do. But that's . . . that's me. My wife, she stays [indistinct] watches T.V. and news all day long.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Having grown up in Fort Stockton, tell me, how has it changed? In all these decades?

ACOSTA: When I grew up, if you go down 18, towards Monahans or 1053 Imperial, up until you start seeing . . . maybe the pastures . . . I would say about five miles out on east side, there was water. We had a lot of water. The Comanche Spring was flowing. Like milk would. Milk and honey. And when they opened up the building farms, for, I'm gonna say about fifteen to eighteen miles southwest of here. They start a farm, and water . . . They water their crops and all that. That kind of dried up all the springs here, the swimming pool and all that. And this, two highways, uh, water . . . any water and all this was farmland. Trees . . . would cover the whole road. The roads weren't as big as they are now. Trees for five miles out . . . Shaded all the way. Water on both sides, just, galore. But, uh, again, when they opened those farms and buildings, they drilled their wells and they dried up our . . . and you can see. Go out there maybe, you don't see nothing but . . . Don't look like there was any farming done but there was some. I did a lot of cotton picking there, trying to hone the weeds from the cotton, before the cotton grew to harvest.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So when was this?

ACOSTA: Ah, I'm gonna say, middle 40s, maybe early 50s. But we . . . It's a big family. We didn't start school until the following year, in January the second. We worked all winter, in the cotton field, or anywhere sadly, to support eighteen of us. And my dad, and my stepmother, he had his own job as a service attendant in a fill in station. Where you had full service, not where you fill it up yourself, like we do nowadays. They would wipe their windshields and check the oils and all that had to go with whoever pulled up there and fill it up. But nowadays you have to do all of that your own. My stepmother would go up there and pick cotton with us, it was every Saturday at noon, we'd go pick cotton until about noon and then we'd get paid. We would get maybe fifty cents, a dollar, for our week's work. But one dollar, fifty cents went a long ways then. A candy bar was like, five cents. A Milky Way or Baby Ruth or Butterfinger, whatever, one nickel. We survived, praise God.

There's a lot of stuff that I can recall as Hispanics or Mexicans, they used to call us. We weren't allowed to go swimming in the pool, or the theatres, restaurants. If we wanted to go order something, we had to go to the back door. Just like the blacks. Even in our high schools, we'd travel out of town, and it'd be the same thing. Only the coach had to go in, get our hamburgers, well, it was mostly hamburgers, and bring them to the school bus, that's where we had to sit and eat. We weren't allowed to go in. I experienced that myself. All these youngers, they don't see that. Sometimes they may not believe that. You would tell them. And they've been told. I'd list my kids. And they came and realized that "Really dad? Did that happen?" And

me and my wife would tell them yup. It happened to us. We experienced that. But that's not a problem. I resent it then. But I couldn't help it. I couldn't do a darned thing about it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Oscar mentioned the segregated school you went to.

ACOSTA: Yes. If I recall, it was '55 or '56 when we finally integrated into the junior high. And those first few weeks, you could see the black kids go to one side, and the Hispanics and Mexicans go to the other side. Still couldn't communicate or get along with each other. Still having problems. Even in the classroom. All of us would sit on one side, they would sit on their side, and we wouldn't say much. We had the . . . It was an order that was given that we were to be in school. Yeah, there was a lot of . . . And his daddy had a lot do to that . . . Oscar's daddy . . . to that . . . to get that started. Not only him but there were other elderly people that saw it only right to do what had to be done. And, I think . . . I've heard so many things, that he kind of helped in that area. To get . . . get us . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, there were no . . . there was no violence associated with this?

ACOSTA: Well, not extreme. Yeah, there was some arguments or fights maybe. But not to the fact that we'd hurt each other bad, you know, or anything like that, you know. Or a gang, or several got together, it always was two persons. Just knock it out. Get after it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And you say your coach would go in . . . You were on a sports team?

ACOSTA: Yes, except my dad wouldn't allow it because we had to go to work after school, go pick cotton until the sun goes down. I would join the football, baseball, even basketball, but as soon as he found out that I was in it, he'd go pull me out of it. "Hey, get out of here. Let's go. You got to go." I didn't . . . know why. I didn't know why then, but as I . . . as I grew up, I had an idea why he did. He couldn't support eighteen of us, because he was making fifty, fifty-five, sixty dollars a week. So he had to have some help some way or another. To afford. But I didn't see that until I got older. I realized then. But no, I did play sports.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And what was the interaction like on the teams? They were integrated . . .

ACOSTA: Well by that time, we were okay. There was no problems with that. Now they might've, a few of them, that didn't want to or didn't like to, but, ah, the majority of us got along fine. I had a lot of buddies that I went to school with . . . We still . . . Some of them moved on, some of them passed down, and we still remember the times when we were there. Some of them made it big in businesses. I only got into business for thirteen and a half years, and I didn't regret it except my wife kept pounding me, "Let's get out, you're 65." Otherwise I probably would've been there yet. I didn't get rich, but I managed to pay my business, pay off all that I had owed, and kept some for me and my wife. But I probably would've been . . . in the businesses there . . . I mean, prospering great. I walk in there and I know the people that bought it, and we're good friends. And my nickname is Chito. C-h-i-t-o. And everyone says "Chito!" And I walk in and say hey. And I can go in and out and, you know, anytime I feel like it. Everyone of them that works there, and the owners worked for me at one time. In that business. And we get along fine. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

ACOSTA: Well, I'd have to . . . I, ah, I can tell you the things about the park. I caddied there for golfers. Because that's where the golf course was. The men on the arena, rodeos, all that was there at one time. No longer there. No golf course, none of that. Just plain old barbecue pits and stuff like that for enjoyment and . . . . But we used to . . . At that time, there was plenty of water where the balls would end in the creek or the river, and we'd go in there and get maybe fifteen cents to pull the ball out for the golfer. We'd get wet and . . . But . . . It was fun, in my opinion, and I learned by that . . . People don't realize that the golf course was there at one time. We tell the younger generation and they say, "Really? There was a golf course there?" And I could more tell where the greens were, every one.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What is there now?

ACOSTA: Just plain old trees and grass . . . and fun. Lot of barbecue pits that the community hosts, and the baseball fields and stuff like that you know. Yeah, at one time, it was real pretty in my opinion.

WONGSRICHANALAI: This would've been in the fifties?

ACOSTA: Even before that. Yeah. Because I must've been twelve, thirteen-years-old when I used to caddy. Ah, the clubhouse used to be across the street from the second Pecos County Hospital was there. And it's a building there, still right off of 285 South. Now it's owned by the . . . Well, the county has some offices there. Like right across the street used to be a old house that was the clubhouse.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What sorts of people would play golf?

ACOSTA: Mostly whites. That's a lot of what I remember seeing.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Locals.

ACOSTA: Yeah! Doctors, all kinds of businessmen, stuff like that. I don't know if any Hispanics were interested in it . . . Even if there was, I don't know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well, I think that's about all I have.

ACOSTA: Well, I thank you.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Thank you!

ACOSTA: I see Oscar's got his picture on there. I think that's him. Is it not?

WONGSRICHANALAI: It is him.

ACOSTA: Yeah, I've seen that picture. Vietnam. I didn't have my picture taken with Class A uniform. I never . . . My former employers that I worked for that had been in the army wanted me . . . my name in my local paper. I said no. I don't know why I didn't want it in it. I had pictures of others, but not that Class A uniform that you normally see on ten by twelve or a twelve by ten at homes, I never had one. Again, I wanted . . . Very comfortable again when I was drafted when I was told that I wasn't going to be. But ah, I couldn't do a thing about it.