

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

LINDA MARTIN

An interview conducted on

March 23, 2018

Interviewer: Mikayla 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 Linda Martin are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 23, 2018.

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

Transcriber: Carson Jones

Editor: Alyse O'Hara

The electronic file and complete transcript of this interview were processed in the Department of History at Angelo State University and are available at the Dr. Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.

MULLEN: All right. So, it looks like it's working, if you just want to go ahead and state your name for me?

MARTIN: Okay, my name is Linda Harlow Sargent Martin.

MULLEN: Okay, and when and where were you born?

MARTIN: In Granada, Mississippi, 1952, February 7th.

MULLEN: Did you grow up there all your life . . . ?

MARTIN: I did. I did.

MULLEN: So, when did you move to Texas?

MARTIN: We moved here when I was thirty years old with my second husband Bill, current husband for forty-six years, and our children when they were in first grade and third grade. So, we have been here for a long time because they're both married and have grown children.

MULLEN: And what made you want to move to Texas?

MARTIN: Job. Yeah, my husband got a different Job.

MULLEN: All right. So, what is the name of your first husband?

MARTIN: Stanton Gerald Sargent.

MULLEN: When did you meet your first husband?

MARTIN: We met in high school; we were high school sweethearts. We met on a blind date—his best friend and my best friend. Um, we went together on the blind date, and we hit it off and didn't date anybody else after that. So, we were high school sweethearts. And during that time, it was the lottery draft, and his number was seventeen, so we knew his number would come up. So, he had been in college and dropped out of college and just kind of worked and did different things until he was called up.

MULLEN: And do you know what he did when he got called up? Where he . . . when he got sent? What job he was given?

MARTIN: Just went through basic training down in Fort Polk, Louisiana. We had talked about getting married because I would have graduated high school by that time, and that was a thing we did back in those days, in the late '60s early '70s. He said he didn't want to get married until he got back, and then later on, after . . . during basic training he said, "Yeah, let's do." December the 10th, 1970 we got married.

MULLEN: That's cute. And so, he was sent to Vietnam?

MARTIN: Yes, he was.

MULLEN: In what capacity did he serve?

MARTIN: He was a gunner. He would go out and protect the other troops, and that's how he was killed. He was killed during ambush, April 21, 1971. So, he was only over there three and a half months. We both knew he wasn't coming home. He had written it in his diary. He'd written some of his friends. Never wrote it to me, but did write it to his friends. And I had um . . . a lot of people don't believe in them, but I had premonitions. One time, I had awoken from a dream where there was a casket down on the stage of my old high school auditorium, and I was told I had to come down there, and I said, "I don't want to." And so, I did eventually and he was lying in the casket.

Another time was I worked for a little store. Back then we didn't have Wal-Mart; we had little five-and-dime stores, so I was a cashier. It was a cold, rainy February day. I was the only one in the store other than the manager who was in the back office. And all of a sudden I'm . . . I'm in this dream, shall we say? Thought pattern? Someone asked me, "Well, how long was he over there before he was killed?" And I said, "Three and a half months." It was three and a half months. Uh, and one other time that I remember, I was buying furniture and storing it so when he got home, we would have stuff for a home because I was working, and he was sending money home. And I had just about bought a dining room set. Went to pay for it, and said, "No, I'm not going to need this," and I turned around and walked out. So, I think God kind of protects us and prepares us for different things, and I definitely think he was preparing me for this, for what happened.

MULLEN: So, you said he got lottery drafted. What were your feelings? Do you remember when he . . . his number popped up?

MARTIN: My heart sank. Um, we knew that he was going. At the time, I had older brother—six years older than me—that had already gone, and so I knew what was in store and so did he. He had other friends that had gone. So, we both knew that he would be going to Vietnam; we knew that. Um, but we both loved our country. And so, while we did not treasure the thought of his going, we knew it was the honorable thing to do and that he was going to fight for the freedoms of innocent people, and I've been very fortunate to meet some of these people. Not necessarily those particular people, but some Vietnam people who appreciated . . . so, unfortunately our government ended up using it as a political war, and these people were not saved from the communist grasp.

MULLEN: So, were you hoping he would return? You . . . ?

MARTIN: Oh yeah, oh yeah. We both hoped it, but the night before he left, I laid in his arms and he said, "If something happens to me, I don't want you to be alone." And so, we both knew in our hearts we both wanted him to come home, but somehow we both knew he wasn't. I went with his family to put him on the plane in Memphis, uh and as he boarded he turned around and waved, and I knew that would be the last time I saw him alive.

MULLEN: What was your conception of the United States at the time of him being drafted, going to Vietnam, what was your mindset in that moment?

MARTIN: I've always loved our country. Always. I grew up in a hardworking middle-class family, very patriotic. Loved the idea . . . [begins to cry]. I'm sorry.

MULLEN: No, take your time.

MARTIN: We are in the greatest country in the world. It is worth fighting for. We have to stand up and fight for those who can't fight for themselves. I'm okay. I grew up saying the Pledge of Allegiance, loving the freedoms that we have, loving the country that we are in and those who served. We come from . . . I have . . . although my father was not . . . he was what's called "4-F." He couldn't serve because of physical issues, but um, he and my mother instilled a love for this country, and we were taught that in our schools too: to love and respect those who serve. Um, I had uncles who served, and it's funny how our paths have crossed since then, and we'll share that later.

MULLEN: With that mindset of the United States, do you mind if I ask what you thought of the anti-war movement that was going on during the time? The protest and rebels and draft-card burning and . . . ?

MARTIN: I thought it was horrible. I thought it was horrible. I thought it was anti-American. I still think it's anti-American. They weren't . . . if you're against the war, that's one thing. But when you speak out, you're speaking out against those who are serving, who are laying down their lives for that freedom that you have to speak your mind and your heart. Do you have that right? Yes, they die for that right. They fight for that right, and I respect your right to do that. But while our guys are in what were called back then "the killing fields," you do not denigrate them; you do not denigrate this country. So, I felt and still feel very strongly about that.

MULLEN: Did you have friends who were a part of these movements? Family members who supported it? Or were you surrounded by people who shared the same patriotic mindset as you did?

MARTIN: I was, uh . . . my family was very patriotic and my friends. Did I know of anybody? If I did, I wasn't aware of it. When you grow up in a very small town of 6,000, people usually know you well and had respect for where you were and what was going on in your life to not cause you hurt. Does that make sense?

MULLEN: No, that makes perfect sense. You're doing a great job.

MARTIN: So yeah, most of my friends . . . all of my friends were very supportive and very loving. When Stan was killed, it was heartbreaking; it was life changing; it was a tragedy. But he went knowing he was serving his country, so he died with honor and dignity and fighting for the lives of those in his group of people . . . group of soldiers.

MULLEN: Did you contribute to the war effort at all? How did you support Stan while he was deployed? Um, how did you . . . ?

MARTIN: I sent lots of homemade chocolate chip cookies that, by the time they got there, were crumbs, but he said the crumbs were good. [Laughter.]

MARTIN: We did not have the communication things back then that you have now, which is wonderful. We had letters, and I would get letters that were covered in sand or red clay, so I knew that he was out in what they called “the bush.” I knew what he was doing and the sacrifice that he was giving as well as the other guys. I thought . . . there was a young man that went through boot camp with him that was at his side the whole time, and years later, I did get to meet him, he and his wife. And it was a bittersweet meeting, but it was closure for him, and it was closure for me because he was able to answer some questions for me, and he was able to heal to see that I was okay.

MULLEN: That’s great. How do you remember your first husband’s memory? How do you keep him alive? With . . . because I’m assuming that he’s still very much a part of your life today.

MARTIN: He is our children’s guardian angel. Always has been. He, to them, is Uncle Stan. He has always been a part of their lives. His medals hang in our hallway as you come in the front door. They learned to love and honor him for what he did and what he sacrificed. They just know he’s still with them, as I do. There was um . . . some people would call it a dream. It was not a dream. The children . . . I had remarried to Bill, and he is my hero. The um . . . I woke up in the night, and Stan was standing by my bedside, and he said, “I need to talk to you.” Now this was seven years after he had passed. And so, we walked down the hallway, arm in arm, sat at the kitchen table. He was here and I was here and I had my hand on his arm, and he said, “Baby, you’ve got to let me go.”

And I said, “I didn’t realize that I was still holding on. I thought I got on with my life.”

And he said, “Well, you’re still holding on, and I can’t get my angel wings until you let me go.”

So, I apologized, said I loved him, he walked me back down the hallway, he tucked me in bed, and kissed me on my cheek [gets choked up]. I still feel that kiss. In the morning when I woke up, I felt the whole world had lifted off my shoulders, and Stan had his angel wings.

MULLEN: That’s a wonderful memory. I’m very happy you got to live through that.

MARTIN: There is now a war memorial on my hometown city square—four—that has Stan’s name on it. We did fundraisers for it for about a year. We raised \$10,500 for it, and back then it was a lot of money and still is. But when we started raising money for the Vietnam memorial, we found out there was not one for World War I, World War II, or Korean vets and now there is. And it has all their names on it to honor them lest we forget.

MULLEN: Do you mind if I ask what kind of medals Stan received for his service?

MARTIN: Oh honey, I wish I brought them with me. I will send a photograph of them. He received every honor that you can receive when you give your life—of course, the Purple Heart

and the Gold Star. There is a whole case. There's . . . it's a shadow box, and I will send you a photograph of those.

MULLEN: Thank you, I would appreciate that. How did you know Bill? If you would like to transition into your second husband.

MARTIN: You're going to love this story. Okay. So, Stan's brother was in Korea on the DMZ with Bill. After Stan was killed, Bill, from Iowa, came to Mississippi to be in my brother-in-law's rock 'n' roll band. [Laughter.]

MARTIN: My brother-in-law and sister-in-law were matchmaking before Bill even got there, and I said, "It's too soon. I'm not interested. No, I'm not. No." So, my best friend was getting married, so I went over to my sister-in-law who was a beautician, and she frosted my hair. My hair came down, way down my back; it was long. Do you remember seeing those caps where they pull the hair through?

MULLEN: Yes, ma'am.

MARTIN: So, here's my long hair. Bill had come in the night before. He had hitchhiked from Iowa to Mississippi. He had slept on their couch, but they stayed up half the night talking. And so here I was in the kitchen. It was a tiny little house. I was in the kitchen. Brenda had my hair through this, and it was like really really bad, and he rolled over from his sleep on the couch, and he looked over to the kitchen, and that was the first time he saw me. He got up and he left. The smell was bad enough, okay, from the bleach. So, anyway, he left. I found out later he walked just a few blocks over to the cemetery was, huge cemetery, and he walked straight to Stan's grave. Had never . . . didn't know where to look or anything, but it was like he was drawn there. That was the first time that I saw him. So, the second time was after my best friend's wedding that Saturday, and the band was practicing in the living room. I walk in and Bill is—now this is summer, like July—and he had on cutoff blue jeans, a brown tank top—and yes, I still see him in my mind—bleached-out blond hair, those crystal blue eyes, and he was singing "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying." And as I watched him, I was thought, "Hmmm . . . maybe I am interested." He helped me through a very difficult time. He is my hero. He was back then, and he continues to be after forty-six years.

MULLEN: I think that's very sweet. Um, when did y'all get married?

MARTIN: We got married about nine months later. I debated whether to share this with you or not, but I'm going to. I had um . . . my dad was a mechanic and a wrecker driver. I'd seen lots of wrecks in my nineteen years, and I had just met Bill. Stan had been gone several months, and I felt like I was betraying Stan by seeing Bill so quickly. And I thought, "This is wrong." I was going about ninety miles an hour, and I pulled my car off the road headed straight for a bridge. There was a river probably fifteen, twenty feet to the right, and I knew if I hit the bridge just right at the speed I was going, there wouldn't be anything I would be gone. And if that didn't do it, hitting on the right side, I would roll into the river and that would take care of it because I didn't want to be a burden on my parents. I was probably six feet from the bridge, and I pulled back over into the road because I saw . . . people talk about seeing flashes before you . . . the man

that's in the other room, his face flashed before me. God was saying, "You do have something to live for." After I got past the bridge, I pulled the car over, and I cried because, as a Christian, I would have never thought about doing that had I been in the right emotional state, but God being who he is . . .

MULLEN: Yes, ma'am.

MARTIN: . . . showed me, "Linda, it is not the end; it's the beginning."

MULLEN: God is an amazing protector.

MARTIN: He is.

MULLEN: And look at you later, forty-plus years later.

MARTIN: Forty-six years later, two children, seven grandchildren and three great-grands.

MULLEN: Oh, wonderful!

MARTIN: And you're supposed to tell me now how young I look to have all of those children and grandchildren.

MULLEN: You look so young. You've lived a very fulfilled and rich life. You're just filled with history, the stories that you have is just amazing. I feel very honored be able to record you and to interview you.

MARTIN: Oh, baby. Oh, thank you.

MULLEN: You're welcome.

MARTIN: We have to remember who we are because that's who . . . what we've been through makes us who we are today, and through God's loving grace, um we become stronger, more life-giving, more understanding and empathic to others and what they are going through in life, and their journeys. I'd love to hear your story.

MULLEN: That would be one for another time.

MULLEN: So, do you instill the same sense of patriotism in your children and your grandchildren because your second husband being military, your first husband being military, and you being as patriotic as you are, do you instill the same sense?

MARTIN: Absolutely, absolutely. Um, my grandchildren know where I stand and they too stand. I have a nephew who has done four tours and just retired a couple of years ago—a lieutenant colonel—and he was in the Marines. He got out because his wife said, "Okay, after fifteen years I'm ready to go home."

And he said, “This isn’t where God wants me.” So, there was an opportunity to go in the Army and National Guard, so he did so. And he just retired after twenty-five years or so and four tours. My brothers both served. I have another nephew who has served. We come from a long line of people who love this country and are willing to serve this country. And we serve . . . when one serves—say the husband serves—the whole family serves. I will never forget when Michael came home early—my nephew—and his wife and my great-nieces were asked to throw out the pitch at a university ball game. Michael was the umpire. It was one of those moments you see on YouTube all the time, and even thinking about it, I just choke up. So yes, we instill in our family, in our children, and in our grandchildren to love this country because it is this country that allowed them the freedoms to do, to live, as they want to live.

MULLEN: That’s wonderful. So, what is your—because I am in a Vietnam War class—what is your overall thoughts and opinions on the Vietnam War itself? From maybe . . . from a wife’s perspective? Like what were thoughts during this time?

MARTIN: Okay. It started out as an honorable war. It ended up as a political war. There were young men who gave their all, and there were politicians who allowed them to. When we go into another war—and we have in the Middle East—we should not go in there for political reasons. We should go in there to free people, and then come home with honor and dignity knowing that we have done the right thing and not be used as political pawns because we did not save the people in Vietnam. They are under communist rule right now. They do not have free lives; they can’t come and go as they choose like we do. We can get in the car and go to Iowa or wherever we want to go, get in a plane and fly across the world. This is not true with communist countries. They can’t go from one city to the next city. They can’t go from one province to the next without permission and without papers. We can’t imagine a life like that. I don’t ever want to imagine a life like that. This country was founded on freedoms: freedom of religion, freedom to protect ourselves, freedom to help others, and to have a free life. I don’t ever want to see that go away. It’s too precious. We’ve got to fight for it; it’s too precious to lose.

MULLEN: Um, being that Stan was in Vietnam, did you try to stay as informed as possible? Did you read the newspapers, ask questions through letters? Did you try to stay up to date because he was over there, or would you have been trying to keep up to date regardless?

MARTIN: Yes and yes. Always informed. Always. I watched the news with my mom and dad at night. Even, you know, in junior high school, I’ve always been fascinated with politics and the way the government works. I continue to be . . . continue to stay active. If not me, who? You know, who? We got to do it. It’s not, “Oh, they need to take care of it.” No, it’s us; it’s you and me; it’s our country; it’s not their country; it’s our country. So yeah, I stayed up with the news because of Stan’s situation, because of my brother being in there during the Tet, which was 1968. It was huge. Well, you know from having studied it.

MULLEN: Yes, ma’am.

MARTIN: Um, a big thing. Um, from friends still being there even after Stan was killed. But I continued . . . I like to be informed. I like to know what’s going on. Um, I can’t live . . . I . . . I’ve

got a precious friend that I absolutely adore, but she lives in her own little world. The day that 9/11 happened, she goes, “Well, that doesn’t have anything to do with us, that’s”

And I’m going, “Uh, yeah, it does.” Um, our world has just changed. So, it . . . while I wish I could be more like her in some ways, there . . . I wouldn’t be who I am if I didn’t stay informed, if I didn’t try to make a difference.

MULLEN: Um, so, talking a little about Bill. Did he . . . how . . . in what ways did he serve?

MARTIN: He was in the Army.

MULLEN: Okay.

MARTIN: He served . . . he thought he was going to Vietnam also. And so, he joined. Um, he had gotten a deferment for college once, but then he said, you know, “I need to do this.”

MULLEN: Mm-hmm.

MARTIN: So, he joined and ended up going to South Korea on the DMZ, which is also a war zone. But all the other guys . . . most of the other guys he knew went to Vietnam. He lost a couple friends. Um, we went to um . . . we’ve been to Washington a couple of times before. A couple of guys, his friends, were not on the wall, and it was because they were killed in Laos or Cambodia, and at that time, we weren’t in those two countries. Um, I think that has since been rectified. But he . . . he was hit hard by losses of friends. He knew he was in a warzone; he conducted himself as such, and he still served honorably.

MULLEN: Um, did he have any issues adjusting to coming back?

MARTIN: No.

MULLEN: Being in the military back to a civilian . . . ?

MARTIN: No, no. But our . . . the guys that served in the war zone—like I said before—being out in the bush, uh, did. Um, Bill has a brother who served at the same time as my brother, and we often wonder if they ever saw each other and never knew who each other was. Um, they both were in . . . you could hear Eddie, my brother, would send home recordings, and you could hear gunfire and bombs in the background. Rick, Bill’s brother, and his wife—back in . . . in last year . . . February of last year—went back to Vietnam. And he had mapped out all the different places he had been, and he went back to a lot of these different places. And it was a very healing process for him. My brother doesn’t talk about it. He has no desire to . . . he, um, was proud to serve his country but doesn’t talk about what happened while he was there doing it.

MULLEN: Um, I’m assuming Bill was very supportive in you wanting to keep Stan’s memory very much alive within yourself and your children. In what ways did he help you kind of facilitate his memory within the home?

MARTIN: We fly Stan's flag that was on his casket on the 4th of July and on Veteran's day. There is a photograph that I took a couple of years ago of Bill saluting that flag. He . . . the day we got married, we decided on Wednesday to get married, and Sunday, we did. His grandfather was gravely ill in Iowa, and we were in Mississippi. And he wanted to go see his grandfather, but he didn't want to go without me. And so, anyway, we got married. He was twenty . . . we got married in my mom and dad's living room, and he was twenty minutes late for the wedding. Probably three years later, two or three years later, I found out why. He had gone by Stan's gravesite to say, "I've got her. I'll take care of her. Don't worry." He has loved Stan like a brother although he never met him. He has honored him. Um, he has . . . it's never been an issue. I mean, you know, a lot of . . . I've heard stories of, "Well, I don't ever talk about my first husband because it causes issues."

And I'm going, "I can't fathom that." Bill is the most loving, life-giving man, godly man, that I have ever met. He has been supportive in every way possible. He has held me when I cried. He has laughed with me about different stories I've told. He has honored Stan in any way . . . in every way possible. And appreciated . . . appreciates his sacrifice for our country and appreciates him as a man.

MULLEN: I think you're very lucky.

MARTIN: I know I'm very lucky. I know I am.

MULLEN: So, um, we're approaching the end.

MARTIN: Okay.

MULLEN: We're kind of out of questions.

MARTIN: Okay.

MULLEN: Um, is there anything else you want to add? Any stories you think need to be told? Any concluding remarks? Um, things that you think . . . that I haven't asked but need to be said?

MARTIN: You have done wonderfully.

MULLEN: Oh, thank you.

MARTIN: The thing that has touched me is that you care. Um, it's nice to know there are still young people who care about the sacrifices of my generation. When um . . . when I see young people walk down the road, down the street, down the sidewalk, I wonder what they're thinking about. I wonder, "Do they care?" Um, do they love this country as much as I love this country? And I pray that they do.

MULLEN: You're doing wonderful.

MARTIN: Back last fall, even after all these years, um, I was given a pen, this pen—a Gold Star pen. I thought I'd closed all those chapters. I thought I had um . . . I was good; I thought I was

good. And when my name was called to go up to receive the Gold Star in honor and recognition of Stan, but also recognizing the sacrifice that I had walked through . . . it's never been about me. It's always been about Stan and the guys and their sacrifice. But when I was told, "I appreciate what you went through," and I've done this for other wives and other husbands of . . . of people who are serving. You know, "I appreciate what you've done, your sacrifice as a family because when one serves, all serve." But I'd never had that done to me, and that meant a lot. That put the icing on the cake. So . . . and that's all I have to say about that, as Forrest Gump would say.
[Laughter.]

MULLEN: Well, thank you so much.

MARTIN: You are so welcome.