

ORAL MEMOIRS  
OF  
TRAVIS THOMAS

An interview conducted on  
September 2, 2016

Interviewer: Kade Chanthavong

Transcriber: Christine Foley

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 Travis Thomas are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on September 2, 2016.

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.

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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.

CHANTHAVONG: Okay, what is your name?

THOMAS: My name is Travis Thomas.

CHANTHAVONG: When and where were you born?

THOMAS: Born in Dallas, Texas, 1982, June 18th.

CHANTHAVONG: Where did you grow up?

THOMAS: Irving, Texas.

CHANTHAVONG: Alright, how do you define West Texas?

THOMAS: West Texas is different from the rest of Texas. It's more desert and mountains than green grass and trees.

CHANTHAVONG: Where does West Texas begin?

THOMAS: I would say West Texans begins in the Midland-Odessa area and then onto El Paso.

CHANTHAVONG: What do you think the difference is between West Texans and Texans from other regions of the state?

THOMAS: I would say, maybe the ethnicity in West Texas is more Spanish, more Hispanic people. East Texas is more . . . white to African American than the west.

CHANTHAVONG: How would you characterize West Texan's relationship with the military?

THOMAS: They strongly support it just because there is the largest army installation in West Texas and there's also little installations on the way through West Texas. So I'd say they support them and are happy that they're in their city.

CHANTHAVONG: When and where did you enter into the armed forces?

THOMAS: I entered in the Army in 2013, ah, February 11th, in Dallas, Texas.

CHANTHAVONG: What were your years in service?

THOMAS: I did a total of four years.

CHANTHAVONG: During your years of service, were you primarily in the enlisted ranks, a non-commissioned officer, an officer, or a warrant officer?

THOMAS: I was in the enlisted.

CHANTHAVONG: Which military conflict did you take place in?

THOMAS: Enduring freedom in Afghanistan.

CHANTHAVONG: Why did you enlist in the armed forces?

THOMAS: To make a difference in the country and to fight for what I believe in.

CHANTHAVONG: What was your training like?

THOMAS: Training was difficult. Coming from not doing a lot of physical stuff to going in with the other ones who do it every single day from four in the morning to eleven at night, it was just difficult.

CHANTHAVONG: So you went from basic training straight to overseas or did you spend some time on base before going overseas?

THOMAS: I spent a total of six months on base before deploying and two training rotations, one in El Paso, Texas, and one in California.

CHANTHAVONG: What were race relations like when you enlisted?

THOMAS: Can you repeat the question?

CHANTHAVONG: What were race relations like when you enlisted?

THOMAS: Ah, I don't really know the answer . . .

CHANTHAVONG: Was there racism? Was it diverse?

THOMAS: It was very diverse. Basic training had a lot of ethnicities and when I got to Fort Bliss, I was surprised that there were a lot more ethnicities than I thought there would be.

CHANTHAVONG: But everyone seemed to get along, there wasn't any race bashing, anything hateful?

THOMAS: No, no, there was nothing like that. If there was something that would be hateful, it would be where you're from, what city, what state, if your state was better.

CHANTHAVONG: Did you find your service challenging?

THOMAS: At times I did. There were certain points that I thought were difficult but I overcame them.

CHANTHAVONG: What conception did you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment?

THOMAS: Hm.

CHANTHAVONG: How did you feel about the United States when you enlisted?

THOMAS: I thought we were strong. Like, man . . . Out of the years of my enlistment, I just felt like the army, in general—I can only speak for the army—has gone downhill from there, due to just little things, kicking people out of the army, budget cuts, stuff like that.

CHANTHAVONG: What did America symbolize to you at the time of your enlistment?

THOMAS: I thought of it as freedom, and a great country to live in.

CHANTHAVONG: So, you said you were deployed overseas, what did you understand about the mission you had been asked to complete?

THOMAS: I understood the mission pretty well, the mission we were given was not as difficult as missions given to other units. Ah, we had difficult times, several months out of the deployment, but as a unit and as a company, we overcame them.

CHANTHAVONG: What units did you serve in in your deployment?

THOMAS: The unit I served in was . . . Bravo Company 141, 3rd Brigade, at Fort Bliss.

CHANTHAVONG: Did you serve in direct combat during your deployment?

THOMAS: Yes.

CHANTHAVONG: Were you wounded in action?

THOMAS: No.

CHANTHAVONG: Did you ever become a prisoner of war?

THOMAS: No.

CHANTHAVONG: What did you think of the local inhabitants that you encountered?

THOMAS: It was definitely different from any other places I have been. Going from housing or cities . . . It's just different. There's a different economy over there, different religion, and they just have a different way of life from what we're used to in the states.

CHANTHAVONG: So, most encounters were good encounters, right?

THOMAS: Yes. We linked up with elders with each village we went to and they were just really friendly and willing to help us out, looking for the Taliban, or the bad guys in that area.

CHANTHAVONG: When you interacted with local inhabitants, what do you think your conceptions were of the United States?

THOMAS: They really don't like the United States, just because they think that we think we're better than them. But when it comes down to it, it's just who believes in their religion and their country more and stands by their country.

CHANTHAVONG: Did you ever engage them in conversation about what America meant to you?

THOMAS: Not with any of the locals, I didn't.

CHANTHAVONG: How did your service influence or affect your family at home?

THOMAS: They for sure missed me, but they were proud of me for stepping up and taking that oath to defend my country and fight for all the people over here.

CHANTHAVONG: Okay, so they kind of just understood what you were doing?

THOMAS: Oh, yeah, definitely.

CHANTHAVONG: What are your most vivid memories of your time in service?

THOMAS: Vivid memories . . . Well, I would say, definitely the training event in Fort Irwin, California, just because we were going non-stop every single day for two weeks. The whole deployment was just a great memory for me because I met people, great people, great friends, learned a lot of stuff, saw a lot of things that I would normally not see as somebody would see here in the states as a civilian.

CHANTHAVONG: Do you wish to expand on these things that you saw?

THOMAS: I think the things I saw overseas in Afghanistan is just . . . I saw some kids playing, and we would do training events and they would pick up our brass from the ammo that we shot, because that's how they make their money. They go sell it in markets. That's how they make their money as kids and as individuals. I also saw that in their religion, they . . . how can I . . . How explicit can I be in this? Like, how vulgar?

CHANTHAVONG: You can say whatever you want.

THOMAS: Okay. Like in their religion, they don't believe in having sex with a female. They'd rather have sex with a male or with an animal before engaging in sexual relationships with a female unless they are married. It's just their religion, and something that I saw while I was over there. It just wasn't right to me. It was disturbing. I also saw an IED blow up. They blew up one of our trucks. That was pretty intense and scary for the whole company. We thought we lost people or someone was injured. Thankfully no one got injured. But the truck . . . The truck was just obliterated. There was nothing left of it. And, ah, we were also cleaning up the base we were

at to move to a different base. We also found dead animals, dead animal parts, that we had to burn to get rid of. We couldn't leave them there, because people would get sick, and we wanted to take care of their land and their people, the people at the local villages.

CHANTHAVONG: What sort of technology did you use in the service?

THOMAS: There's a lot of technology used. It ranges from computers, you know, mine detecting equipment, satellite link radios, ah, cameras up in the sky that gave us 360 security, anywhere from night vision goggles . . . ah, just a lot of stuff that I would've never used in the civilian life.

CHANTHAVONG: So, ah, do you think you're gonna expect to face any challenges in your return to civilian life? If yes, which ones would those be?

THOMAS: Oh yes, definitely. I feel it's gonna be a challenge to go from that mentality of, you know, having that steady job and that steady mindset of being in the military, always getting a great paycheck and always having great benefits, to searching for a job, searching for good benefits and going to school. It's just going to be a change. That's the downfall of most people and that's how we get homeless vets, because they can't transition to that lifestyle of civilian.

CHANTHAVONG: So, do you feel like the army is doing a good job of preparing soldiers who are getting out of the military for civilian life?

THOMAS: There is classes and a lot of stuff open for those people who are getting out. It's just who takes that opportunity to do those classes and set themselves up for success, so they're not out there for a long period of time living off of family members or on the streets. It's just who wants it more than anything.

CHANTHAVONG: Did being from Texas shape your years in service in any way?

THOMAS: I wouldn't say it shaped anything differently, you know, you meet people from other states and see the culture they come from and it's just a great experience. I wouldn't say Texas or California or any other state has an impact.

CHANTHAVONG: So after your time in the military, do you think your conception of the United States is going to change?

THOMAS: Definitely not.

CHANTHAVONG: At the end of your service, how are you going to feel about it, looking back?

THOMAS: I'll definitely miss it. It'll always be something that will be a great experience, and I'll be proud of myself, that I can teach my kids and show my kids, "Hey, I did this, and if you join, you'll be doing the same thing."

CHANTHAVONG: Do you have any advice for the young men and women just entering the service?

THOMAS: My advice to them is to just go at it full force. Don't test the waters. Just go in it. Do everything your leadership tells you and teaches you. Take it all in, soak that in, and take everything with a grain of salt.

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

THOMAS: Make sure the young people that are coming in just study and still try and go to college. Part time, get there, get some kind of degree and work up the ranks in service, it'll help a lot. I wish I did it but I didn't. That'd be the only thing I could share right now besides all the other stuff that I've already said.

CHANTHAVONG: Well, that's pretty much it unless you'd like to talk about something else.

THOMAS: I think I'm good!

CHANTHAVONG: Alright, well I appreciate it.

THOMAS: You're welcome.