

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

JOSEPH PIÑA

An interview conducted on

March 27, 2017

Interviewer: Elisa Chavez

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 Joseph Piña are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 27, 2017.

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.

[Ms. Chavez conducted this interview with Mr. Piña over the telephone. This affected the quality of the audio.]

CHAVEZ: Okay, my name is Elisa Chavez. What is your name?

PIÑA: My name is Joseph A. Piña.

CHAVEZ: Okay. And what is your current location?

PIÑA: Currently located on Fort Lee, Virginia.

CHAVEZ: Okay. And I'm located in the conference room in the Department of History at Angelo State University. Okay, and your name is Joseph A. Piña. Okay. When and where were you born? Um and where did you grow up?

PIÑA: Can you repeat the question?

CHAVEZ: When and . . .

PIÑA: You broke up.

CHAVEZ: . . . where were you born? And where did you grow up?

PIÑA: Oh, okay. Um May 17, 1983, and I grew up in San Antonio, Texas.

CHAVEZ: Okay. Um how was your childhood?

PIÑA: Um my childhood was great. My parents worked hard to give us uh everything that uh we needed.

CHAVEZ: When and where did you enter the armed forces?

PIÑA: I entered uh . . . I entered the armed forces under the delayed entry program, April 15, 2003 um in San Antonio Texas.

CHAVEZ: And which branch did you serve in?

PIÑA: Uh I am still currently serving in the United States Army.

CHAVEZ: Um how many years of service have you already served?

PIÑA: I have served already thirteen and a half years.

CHAVEZ: Okay. During your um years of service, were you primarily enlisted ranks, a non-commissioned officer, an officer, a warrant officer? And if you served as an officer, what was the source of your commission?

PIÑA: All thirteen . . . well, eleven of the thirteen and a half years have been on the enlisted ranks of a non-commissioned officer.

CHAVEZ: Okay. Um in which military conflict have you taken part in?

PIÑA: I have taken part in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Inherent Resolve.

CHAVEZ: I'm sorry. Could you repeat the last two?

PIÑA: Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Inherent Resolve.

CHAVEZ: Okay. Why did you enlist in the armed forces? What motivated you to do so?

PIÑA: Well, I . . . honestly, I just wanted to get away from San Antonio and see something different. And I saw a way to get away from San Antonio and be a part of something bigger than myself, while being able to travel around the world and being able to take care of my family. So, I enlisted.

CHAVEZ: Um what was your training been . . . what has your training been like?

PIÑA: Uh my training has been excellent. Um there's been some good, there's been some bad. Um some of the training has uh pushed me to my limits. And uh I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.

CHAVEZ: What would you say was the hardest training that pushed you to the edge?

PIÑA: I would probably have to say uh ranger school would uh be the one that pushed me to the edge. Um going on sixty-one days of a little bit of sleep, and uh grueling tasks, um wet environment . . . um carrying over 150 pounds a day, running anywhere between eight to twelve miles a day, um little to no food. That was probably uh the one that pushed me to my limits.

CHAVEZ: Okay. Um what were your race relations like when you were enlisted?

PIÑA: [Speaking to someone else: "Hey, get out."] Uh race relations . . . um when I first went in, for probably for the first couple of years, I saw that they were very segregated as far as um almost every uh race kept to themselves. Uh whether it be Caucasian people, uh African Americans, Hispanic, um Islanders, uh everybody always just kind of kept to themselves. And um probably within the last four years, I've seen that uh change, and the racial barrier has definitely uh been torn down a little bit.

CHAVEZ: And which . . . which kind of people did you hang out with when you were starting out?

PIÑA: I . . . I hung out with everybody due to the fact because coming from where I grew up, uh there was Caucasian people, there was Hispanic people. Um when I went to college, there was African American people. So, I hung out with everybody because that was what I was used to.

CHAVEZ: Yeah, I kind of figured. I just wanted to ask. You're just so friendly. Okay, um did you find your service challenging?

PIÑA: Um I have! Um being that uh I've been uh going on my second marriage and soon going on my second divorce—don't tell anybody—uh you know, things have been very challenging. Uh hasn't always come easy, but um . . . still, um I wouldn't change anything.

CHAVEZ: Do you think your service was the cause of your divorces?

PIÑA: Yes.

CHAVEZ: Yes. Was it just the time that you weren't able to spend with them? That's what caused it?

PIÑA: Well, when you look at uh my first marriage, um I was married for—[whispering] one, two, three, four—five years. And out of those five years, I was actually only home for about twenty-four months. So, it kind of took its toll. And then here, um I leave for work at 3:45 in the morning, sometimes four in the morning, and I usually don't get home until about seven thirty, eight o'clock.

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

PIÑA: Uh none.

CHAVEZ: None.

PIÑA: None.

CHAVEZ: Okay. What did America symbolize to you? And what do you think it stood for?

PIÑA: Uh [clears throat] I think it just symbolized freedom and being able to be different and being able to chase a dream. And I think it still stands for that today.

CHAVEZ: Okay. Were you deployed overseas?

PIÑA: I was.

CHAVEZ: And where were you at?

PIÑA: I was in [clears throat] . . . well, when uh we talk about “deployed overseas,” do we . . . are we counting Korea as a deployment? Or Thailand? Or are we just talking about Iraq and Afghanistan?

CHAVEZ: Uh we can do both.

PIÑA: Okay. So, um Korea, Thailand, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

CHAVEZ: Can you tell me the difference between Korea, Thailand and the Iraq, Afghanistan? What were they . . . were the two different?

PIÑA: Yeah, they're very different.

CHAVEZ: No, like, because you said before um that the Iraq and Afghanistan were deployment something.

PIÑA: Oh, okay. So, I guess . . .

CHAVEZ: Yeah, I couldn't hear you.

PIÑA: I got you. So, uh Iraq and Afghanistan are mostly uh known as combat zones, versus uh going to Korea and Thailand where . . . uh even though Korea is still considered a demilitarized zone because of the cease fire agreement, um there's very little hostile uh intentions going on right now. Well, at that time. Not right now.

CHAVEZ: Yeah. And what years were you at Korea, Thailand, Iraq, and Afghanistan?

PIÑA: Um Korea in '03 and Thailand in '04. Uh Iraq from '05 to '07. Um Iraq again in '09, and Afghanistan in . . . 2011 to 2012.

CHAVEZ: What units did you serve at . . . serve in during your deployment?

PIÑA: Um HHC 136 Infantry and 227 Infantry.

CHAVEZ: Can you repeat the first one?

PIÑA: HHC 136 Infantry.

CHAVEZ: Can you elaborate what that is?

PIÑA: Uh yes, it's the headquarters and headquarters company of a . . . an infantry battalion. Uh part of 1st Army Division. With those, I was with a . . . I was with a scout platoon.

CHAVEZ: Did you serve in direct contact during your deployment?

PIÑA: Yes.

CHAVEZ: You want to elaborate more on that?

PIÑA: I decline.

CHAVEZ: Were you wounded in action?

PIÑA: I . . . I received a . . . a severe concussion . . . uh one mild concussion and one severe concussion on two different occasions through . . . due to uh IED blasts.

CHAVEZ: Due to what?

PIÑA: Due to IED blasts, uh Improvised Explosive Devices. Uh my vehicle was blown up on two different occasions.

CHAVEZ: Did you ever become a prisoner of war?

PIÑA: No.

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

PIÑA: Um . . . mixed emotions. Um the . . . the ones that were . . . that were genuinely trying to rebuild their country and um get rid of um, I guess you could say, like, the Taliban or the foreign fighter group that was uh taking over their country. Uh they really just wanted to make a change. They didn't want us there no more than they wanted um the Taliban there. They wanted to have freedom to just live their lives as like . . . like everybody else did. And then you have the Taliban that were trying to kill us um, which, I didn't like them very much.

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

PIÑA: I would say some of it was good because um they knew of some Americans trying to help them. But some of it was also bad because they had bad uh situations um with U.S. soldiers that didn't give them a calm feeling while we were around.

CHAVEZ: Did you ever engage um with them in a conversation about what America meant to you?

PIÑA: No, not with what America meant to me, only what their country meant to them.

CHAVEZ: And how was that?

PIÑA: They wanted to . . . they loved their country and they just wanted a place to be able raise their families and to do the simple things that we take for granted. They wanted to be able to farm, and teach their kids how to play soccer, uh be able to have school systems so uh they could learn to read and write because . . . for their kids to be able to learn to read and write because schools uh weren't available to them at the time when they were growing up.

CHAVEZ: Um how did your service in . . . influence or affect your family at home?

PIÑA: I'm not sure.

CHAVEZ: Not sure.

PIÑA: You would probably have to ask my family.

CHAVEZ: Yeah [laughs]. Um what are your most vivid memories of your time in the service?

PIÑA: What are my . . . excuse me? Say that one more time.

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

PIÑA: Um my most vivid memory?

CHAVEZ: Yes.

PIÑA: I would say when uh . . . it was some of the . . . after some of the engagements that we were uh a part of and knowing that we were all okay afterwards. Being able to—

[audio cuts out]

PIÑA: —about it and uh joke about . . . uh joke about—

[audio cuts out]

PIÑA: —that had just happened. Like, “Oh man,” like, “that . . . you know, that bullet just grazed you.” Or, “Oh,” like, “you just got shot in your vest.” And we found humor out of it uh because at the end of the day, I mean, you have to find humor in something. And uh that's what we tried to find humor in. And then um I'd have to say my other most vivid memory is when uh friends died, and they'd take them uh . . . from a body bag, and they'd put them on a flight and uh we'd just give our last salute and we get to say our last goodbyes.

[Phone ringing]

PIÑA: Okay, I'm sorry.

CHAVEZ: No, you're good. Um what sorts of technology did you use in your service?

PIÑA: Uh can you please elaborate?

CHAVEZ: Um I guess the different weapons or the different technology that you were introduced to during your time with service.

PIÑA: Um... hm. Weapons systems. The only thing I will comment on is an M4, um which is a rifle . . . carbine. Um a fifty cal, heavy machine gun. A C-40 Bravo heavy machine gun. Um a 249 SAW, a Squad Automatic Weapon. Uh a nine mil Beretta. An M3, which is a handheld



grenade launcher. Uh an M320, which is a modified version of the grenade launcher. An AT . . . and a javelin. The rest I cannot say because it's classified.

CHAVEZ: Okay. Um did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to your civilized . . . civilian life?

PIÑA: Sorry. Say that one more time.

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

PIÑA: Of course I did.

CHAVEZ: And what kind of challenges did you face?

PIÑA: Um well, I can tell you the very first time I was at base, as soon as I got home, um . . . I was in Germany. I just got back from my first deployment. I walked into the gas station, then uh . . . it was . . . and it was uh an AAFES gas station, which is sponsored by the uh . . . by the armed service. I went in there, got a Gatorade, and walked out without paying. And um they chased me down a couple blocks, and uh they wanted to arrest me uh for not paying, but when you're . . . when you're deployed, uh Gatorade, uh water, energy drinks, all that stuff is free. So, you go into a refrigerator, you take it, and you just keep walking and you just start drinking it. And I hadn't readjusted yet, so I stole the Gatorade, which I did go back and pay for. Um but other than that . . . um, you know, I knew it was going to be hard to uh reintegrate with my family. Um my wife at the time had been doing everything on her own, raising our two boys for the past fifteen and a half months and I knew that I couldn't just come in and start telling everybody what to do because it really wasn't my place at that time. So, you know . . . challenges.

CHAVEZ: Did you face any other challenges?

PIÑA: Um . . . sleeping. Um I didn't sleep much. Um and the . . . that, I can't talk about. Um . . . driving! Um I got so used to um my driver always driving in the middle of the road that whenever I went anywhere, I drove in the middle of the road, taking up two lanes. And I did that for about uh the first two months that I was back. I would take up two lanes in the middle of the road.

CHAVEZ: Did you ever get pulled over for doing that?

PIÑA: I did. And uh the . . . the cop . . . I talked to the cop. They . . . they uh understood, and uh they just said, "Just don't do it again." The uh German police were really nice uh people and uh understood. And uh were really helpful.

CHAVEZ: Okay. Have you faced any challenges when you . . . sorry. It's the same question. Um did being from Texas shape your years in service in any way?

PIÑA: I'm sorry. Say that one more time.

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

PIÑA: Um I don't think I understand the question.

CHAVEZ: Okay, I'll repeat the question. Um did being from Texas shape you in your years of service in any way?

PIÑA: Uh the only way I can say that it shaped me was um definitely the weather. Um the weather had a big factor of it always being over a hundred degrees. Being used to the humidity, um . . . and then also being from Texas, the um . . . of course, everybody knows that Texans have a sense of pride. And so, I definitely took that sense of pride into being into the military.

CHAVEZ: Okay. Since being in the . . . in the military, has your conception of Texas changed?

PIÑA: No.

CHAVEZ: No. Why or why not?

PIÑA: Uh no big reason. It just . . . it just hasn't. Um I guess more to the fact because I don't think of Texas all that often anymore. Um I hardly go home, and I just like to think of how I left it.

CHAVEZ: Since being in the military, has your conception of the United States changed?

PIÑA: No, it has not changed.

CHAVEZ: How do you feel about your military service, looking back?

PIÑA: Um I feel like I've done . . . I've accomplished a lot. I feel like there's still a lot more to accomplish. Um not nearly done, but so far, I can say that I'm satisfied but I know I still have a long journey ahead. Because the goal is to become one of the youngest sar majors uh the Army has ever seen, and I am on track to do that. So, um it's been good, but it definitely uh . . . not done yet.

CHAVEZ: You want to be the youngest what?

PIÑA: To be one of the youngest sar majors that the Army has seen.

CHAVEZ: And you're close to accomplishing that?

PIÑA: In four years, I will be.

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

PIÑA: Can you pause and give me one second please?

CHAVEZ: Yes. Um do you have any advice for the young men and women who are um just entering the service?

PIÑA: Uh the advice I would . . . I would give them is to really read up on uh what branch they want to come in and to definitely make a list of their goals that they want to accomplish while they're in the military. Because being in the military, it's not going to make you rich. Um you're not going to . . . well, some—I wouldn't say famous, but—some people do have their names recognized. Um but, you know, we do it for one another. And if they do come in, they . . . they have to realize that nobody's going to give them anything, that everything here is going to be earned. If they're . . . If they're expecting to be given something, like participation ribbons or a high five or an applaud, because they did . . . because they did their job, it's not going to happen.

CHAVEZ: Do you have any items, objects, correspondence that you wish to share with the project?

PIÑA: Say that one more time.

CHAVEZ: Do you have any items, objects, correspondence, um that you wish to share with the project?

PIÑA: Um I could. Um I can take picture of it.

CHAVEZ: I wonder if they allow that. I could ask. Um last question. Would you like to share anything else about your service?

PIÑA: Uh well, being in the services has been um one of the greatest things I've ever done in my life, and I wouldn't trade it in for the world. I would do it over and over again. And . . . I love what I do and I couldn't think about doing anything else for the rest of my life, even though I know that someday, I've got to move on. But where else do you get to have fun every day—what we call “fun” every day—and enjoy your job one hundred percent, um all day every day? And you wake up, you know, run five to seven miles in the morning. Uh they pay you to work out, they pay you to eat, and they pay you to have fun and go do the things you're trained for. I don't see why anybody wouldn't want to do it.

CHAVEZ: Okay. That's all the questions. Just want to thank you so much for your time.

PIÑA: So, did I pass?