

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

CALEB MILLER

An interview conducted on

March 6, 2018

Interviewer: Erin Drew

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 Caleb Miller are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 6, 2018.

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Interviewer: Erin Drew

Transcribers: Erin Drew and Christine Foley

Editor: Carson Jones

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DREW: Okay, I think it is recording . . . All right so, my name is Erin Drew and we are in the Angelo State library in the study room, and it is March 6th at 3:33 p.m. Okay so, can you state your name for me?

MILLER: It's Caleb Miller.

DREW: All right. And when and where were you born?

MILLER: I was born in Carrollton, Texas, which is up, further north of here.

DREW: Okay . . .

MILLER: On January 17, 1989.

DREW Okay. And did you grow up there?

MILLER: I did not. So, my parents moved . . . we moved around a lot, actually, when I was a kid. So, actually, I have no memory of being there at all. I grew up in a town north of the Dallas area for the early years of childhood, in a little town called Denison. My grandparents have always lived in San Angelo and so, we moved here uh at some point growing up, and this is pretty much where I call home.

DREW: Okay. So, you call San Angelo home?

MILLER: I do.

DREW: All right. So, since, technically, you are like a West Texas native, uh how would you define West Texas?

MILLER: Uh . . . West Texas is . . . is a lot of personality. I think we are very proud of a lot of things: of our work ethic, our hospitality, our appreciation for uh the military. And yeah, there is just a lot of personality.

DREW: Yes, I agree. And where does it begin? Like, where do you think it came from?

MILLER: That's an interesting question. Yeah, there's a lot of jokes that have been made over the years of people saying that, you know, you are either born Texan or you're not. I don't think that I really agree with those because it is . . . I think a lot of it is a mindset. And so, I think there is. And I met several people over life that have moved here and have really adopted to that mentality. So . . . I think it starts in your mind and what you're willing to do, and kind of get what you put into it.

DREW: I agree. Okay, and then, what do you think is different between West Texans and Texans from other regions of the state?

MILLER: So, having grown up in uh . . . for seven years and other parts besides West Texas, I don't know if there is a whole lot of a difference. Texas, overall, is pretty . . . is pretty proud . . . proud to be Texas. I think maybe out here, you get a little bit more of like, wide open spaces as opposed to, you know, cities. You get more of like, kind of rugged individualism. A lot more, like, ranchers and farm boys. But overall, as like the mentality that goes into Texas is very similar across the state.

DREW: Yeah. I've noticed that too, being from San Antonio. Like, the differences of the ranchers and stuff. So yeah, I agree with that. And then how would you characterize the West Texas relationship to the military?

MILLER: Super friendly. As . . . there's a lot of Texans, [laughs] in West Texas especially, that are in the military. I have never met anybody who is a Texas native who is not at least appreciative of the military, the people who serve in it. It's a really solid relationship.

DREW: Yes. Okay, and then when and where did you enter the armed forces? And what branch did you serve in?

MILLER: So, I enlisted through a recruiting office in the Marine Corps for . . . here, from San Angelo. But they were a substation, so I actually . . . the place where I enlisted and shipped to boot camp from was in Dallas, and then boot camp was in MCRD¹ in San Diego, California. Along with combat training, I did my specialty MOS training. I did it in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, but a majority of my time was spent in California where I was stationed.

DREW: That's cool. Okay so, what years were you in service?

MILLER: So, I enlisted in January of 2011 and got out in January of 2015.

DREW: Okay. And then . . . during your years of service were you primarily in the enlisted ranks, or a non-commissioned officer, or a warrant officer, or an officer?

MILLER: So, I was uh . . . I did enlist. I was never an officer. I worked my way up through the ranks to a non-commissioned officer. So, I don't know what you know rank wise . . .

DREW: [Laughs] Not that much!

MILLER: . . . but everybody starts off as an E-1, an enlisted one. By the time I got out, I was an E-5, a sergeant.

DREW: Okay. And then . . . one second . . . and so, you served as, like, a non-commissioned officer. So, did you have a source of commission or . . . ?

MILLER: No. So, that would be just an actual someone who went in as an officer.

¹ Marine Corps Recruit Depot

DREW: Okay . . .

MILLER: That requires the college education before going in. [Laughs] I waited until after.

DREW: Okay. And then in what . . . in what military conflict did you take part in?

MILLER: So . . . well, they got Bin Laden while I was in training. I enlisted not necessarily with the hope, just the expectation, that I was probably going to end up in Afghanistan or Iraq during the operation that, well, is still going . . .

DREW: Yes.

MILLER: There are all those things kind of winding . . . down and up and winding down, back and forth with that. So, uh . . . just with the war that's been going on since 9/11.

DREW: Hm. And then why did you enlist in the armed forces? Like, what motivated you to do so?

MILLER: So, when I was a kid and trying to decide what I wanted to be when I grew up, I was talking to my dad and he basically asked me, you know, "So, what you do . . . so, your occupation isn't always what you're called to do. You've got to find what you feel called to do, and then find a job or occupation that lets you do that." And especially at that point in life, I felt called to serve, to stand in between innocent people and anybody else who was willing to cause them harm. And the military seemed like a great way to do that.

DREW: Yes. Okay, and then what was your training like?

MILLER: Uh so, boot camp was thirteen weeks, I actually . . . uh . . . was in English class here. I wrote a paper on what boot camp was like. It was not anything like I expected it to be. I found it, physically, much easier than what I went in expecting it to be.

DREW: Well that's good then!

MILLER Yes! [Laughs] And I was a little bit older, too. I was twenty-two when . . . I turned twenty-two in boot camp, actually. That was a great birthday [laughs]. So, I was a little bit older than most of the other people there and so, it wasn't difficult, but it got really monotonous. Like, this . . . the idea of everything that you do is watched and monitored, to the fact while you are even getting dressed in the mornings. Like, you put on your left sock. You put on your right sock. And so, the little things like that and not having no control over your own day-to-day choices was the most difficult part of it, really. That stopped . . . basically . . . I mean, once boot camp was finished and we were officially marines instead of recruits, things got a lot easier in that respect. So . . .

DREW: So, you had more freedom after boot camp?

MILLER: We did, yeah.

DREW: Okay.

MILLER: After boot camp, when we were still at a student status until we had finished all the other training, we had combat training and the specialty training for our MOS. But there was more stuff . . . like, you had more time over the weekends that you could go and do stuff that you wanted to do. You could call family members and stuff like that . . .

DREW: You weren't restricted.

MILLER: Right.

DREW: Okay.

MILLER: You usually still had places you had to be . . . here by this time or around that time, but there was a lot more freedom. Then, once the . . . school training was finished and we got to the fleet, as they call it, then it became much more like a job. That, you know, "We are going to meet at six in the morning for PT, then the work day ends at five, and then you are free to go and do whatever."

DREW: Yeah. So, like . . . work, yeah.

MILLER: Right.

DREW: Okay. And then . . . what were the race relations like were when you were enlisted?

MILLER: I never saw any issues with it. I certainly met individuals in there who . . . who were racist, but by and large—like, as a whole—I never saw or experienced any type of discrimination of any kind to a different race.

DREW: Did you find your service challenging, other than, like, the boot camp . . . ?

MILLER: I found, at times, yeah, that there were aspects of it. The majority of my time in and after boot camp and in training . . . that . . . I was attached to a logistics battalion. And so, we . . . I was a heavy equipment operator, and so we did a lot of convoys, loading and unloading trucks with fork lifts and big, you know, heavy . . . heavier pieces of gear; doing earth work with, you know, bulldozers; building . . . uh berms for training camps. There are battalion exercises that we went on. And so, there were times were there was a lot of uh . . . an all or nothing deal. We would go from doing, you know, "There's not a whole lot going on" and everybody's kind of like, "Lay down low" to "We've got six convoys that are going out that have got to be loaded and ready to go," and a lot of stuff had to go. So, there's a lot of times when it was late nights and just all out, and there were a couple times . . . So, I did two years in and then married and so, there was a few times . . . my wife was with me out there for the last two years. And there were a couple times when I would end up calling and be like, "Hey, I'm not going to be home when you get home tonight uh [laughs] because we are going to the field for the next six days." So . . . there were definite challenges and things to work with, but by and large, it wasn't anything that I

or she resented. I mean, really, as long as you maintained an open mind-set, then kind of rolled with the punches, there wasn't anything that rocked the boat too bad.

DREW: There was nothing that was . . . physically challenging. It was more, like, the little things?

MILLER: There was . . . it was mostly little things. I really, by and large, I did not find the military to be super physically challenging. I mean, there were definitely fitness standards and we spent a lot of time physically training, but that was mostly stuff I've been doing in the years leading up to it anyways, and then still do it to some extent.

DREW: Yeah.

MILLER: [Laughs] I don't run nearly as much as I used to. The physical training requirements weren't anything that I had problems with.

DREW: Okay. What conception did you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment? And what did America symbolize to you?

MILLER: So . . . I think America then, and really kind of still does . . . and this kind of sounds . . . to put it this way almost sounds slightly negative so bear with me. I think that we celebrate a lot of individualism, not as in we're all about the individual, but as in the individual has so many opportunities. Other countries . . . you know, places that we've been and have seen that are different systems of governments and economies and what not, are much more geared towards . . . towards societies as a whole. Which has some benefits to it as well, uh but I feel like you take away a lot of the drive to compete to excel at anything when there's not a reward for doing it. Like, what's the point in being better, or the best, at something if there's no recognition or anything to it? And so, I think that . . . so, America always, to me, has been a symbol of the opportunities that are available to you. And a lot of it does take a lot of work. I had to uh . . . maybe kind of going off the question a little bit . . .

DREW: No, you're good!

MILLER: . . . but in that light . . . so, I was home schooled my whole life, growing up. And when I went to enlist in the military, because I did not have an official high school diploma, that presented some difficulties. I went to Howard College out here and got my GED. Well, they weren't accepting GED waivers anymore, so I ended up having to take a semester of college credit hours to become eligible to enlist. So, I put myself through a semester of school while working full time, living on my own . . . and other things like that. And so, it wasn't something that I was able to just walk into the office and say, "Sign me up!" Because I did push through that, I was able to get out and now, I have been able to come to school here at ASU with no student loans, no debt, anything like that. And that has been a tremendous opportunity. It had to cost four years of my life in the military to work to get in, but it paid back in as long as I'm concerned. I think that there is a lot of . . . there is a lot of opportunities available to everybody if we are willing to . . . to do the work that it takes to go out and hunt it down.

DREW: And do you think that the diversity that we have in America is what makes it so different than, like, what you see overseas and, like, stuff like that?

MILLER: Yeah. So, we certainly are diverse. We got a lot of . . . I mean, America, we're a melting pot. We got everything from everybody, and I do. I think that gives us a lot of opportunity. To an extent, that's opportunity that we probably don't fully take advantage of . . . the diversity we have available to us. We still . . . are weary of different, which is really a shame because there are so many things that we can learn from the different people that have experienced different things, and have experienced some of the same things and dealt with it in different ways. So yeah, I would definitely say that diversity is a strength that we have available to us and one that I wish we would utilize more.

DREW: Yeah. And then were you deployed overseas?

MILLER: I deployed on what is called a MEU, M-E-U. It's an acronym that stands for "Marine Expeditionary Unit." So, my battalion, uh we were logistics. We were attached to the infantry division and went out on three ships. And the majority of the time that we were on ship, we were in the Indian Ocean . . . and that area. I went to countries like Bahrain, saw Dubai, Abu Dhabi, uh . . . oh, I'm drawing a blank . . . put in at a port in India, we hit Hawaii going in and out. Just different ports. So, as opposed to a single deployment to like, Afghanistan, and staying there for eight months, I was on a ship off and on. We would be on ship for like, two to three weeks, then put ashore and do a training exercise and then be there for like a week and go back on the ship for a couple weeks and put ashore someplace else. We got liberty ports in a couple of places. We got to see some different cultures in a couple of places. And so, yeah, that was my deployment and it lasted about eight months in total.

DREW: Okay.

MILLER: We just were mobile all throughout as opposed to being in one spot.

DREW: Okay, and it was just that one deployment?

MILLER: I just did the one.

DREW: Okay.

MILLER: So, due to the way those work . . . they trade out every so often. So, as we were leaving, the next group on a different set of ships was coming out. Because the purpose of an expeditionary unit—which is one of the following questions—as a mission, is a readiness work force. So, we were there in case of disaster relief. And they've done things, like, when hurricanes have hit other islands in places close, especially the U.S. territories, and then they can do disaster and humanitarian aid and relief. Typically, it is like an immediate response and as soon as other organizations come in and take over, the marines will withdrawal from it. Because, ultimately, our purpose is to defend, but we're there for . . .

DREW: Support, too . . .

MILLER: . . . support in cases like that as well.

DREW: So like, Puerto Rico? Stuff like that, too?

MILLER: Actually, yes. I'm not positive to what extent uh they were involved. I mean, you might've been there for that, but if so, as big and as fast as the response from other organizations was, I doubt I would've been there more than two or three days.

DREW: Uh, okay . . .

MILLER: But in the event that something is needed, the closer they are, they are prepared too. So, as a result of that, we went through some additional training for things like humanitarian aid. Kind of set up the camp, process refugees through to get them medical help and shelter, and things like that. It was a long work up. It was about a year and a half that we spent training for an eight-month deployment. I just did the one.

DREW: So, that was like the units you served in during your deployment? This missionary thing?

MILLER: Yes.

DREW: Okay, and then you didn't serve in any direct combat?

MILLER: I did not, to which my wife and mother are extremely grateful, and I am too. I certainly didn't join looking to get into a firefight, although I was willing should the need arise. But no, no direct combat.

DREW: So, that means you weren't wounded in action?

MILLER: I was not.

DREW: You did not become a prisoner of war . . . ?

MILLER: No, thank God. No. [Laughs]

DREW: Yes! Okay. And then what did you think of the local inhabitants that you encountered while you are over there?

MILLER: Uh . . . so, pretty much any place that we went to, the only place where we saw local inhabitants was in like, cities. And most of the places we went to, city-wise, in which we interacted with people, a lot of them were big tourist spots. So, I think that we . . . we probably kind of lost something there, as far as really getting to see the roots of culture of those countries. But it was still . . . I mean, people obviously talked different . . . different language, stuff like that. They dressed different, had different priorities, different things that they considered important and sacred and friendly and not friendly. So, before every place that we went to, we

had a safety briefing where they would, you know, talk about things and said, “This is something that this culture defines as threatening,” and it was something that we don’t consider. I know some places where it’s not polite to offer to shake hands, uh it’s an insult to throw something . . . it’s against the law. That doesn’t keep it from happening. There are even places where you’d get thrown in jail for things like that. It was interesting to see different things that different cultures prioritize.

DREW: To be aware of it, too, to prevent . . .

MILLER: Right, yeah.

DREW: And then, when you interacted with the local inhabitants, what do you think their conceptions were of the United States?

MILLER: I guess it’s kind of the flipside of that coin. I don’t think we were certainly anything they’ve never seen, an American from the United States or anything like that before. Uh and so . . . and like the tourist side, we’d have cab drivers and we’d talk to them about what their life was like. They’d ask us some questions. I never got the feeling that we were disliked or that they resented us being there, but that was . . . we were not in Afghanistan nor did we fight in a war. It was places where we were there, they had goods and other things that we wanted, and were buying, trading. And so, very amicable relationships all around. I think that most of them had a definite pre-conceived idea of what marines were like, and they expected us all to be six feet tall, Captain America kind of guys. I’m not sure if they were disappointed with what they got or not, [laughs] but it was kind of interesting.

DREW: Do you think the way you respected them and didn’t disrespect the cultures . . . do you think that played a big part?

MILLER: I definitely think that. And part of that is just from the idea that . . . of how I feel if somebody different comes into West Texas or something like that . . . you know, we work hard. There’s not much that will irritate a Texan more than somebody who’s lazy and not working when there’s work that needs to be done. So, that’s something that I’d expect other people to respect and appreciate, and follow to the best they can. It’s like I try to extend that same courtesy in places where I was the outsider. I do. I think it helped a lot with our relationship.

DREW: You discussed this a little before, but how did your service affect your family at home?

MILLER: Overall, I think it was really well. My parents were very proud of me. I had a couple of other relatives—[coughs] excuse me—who had married into the family who were military. I’ve got an uncle—he just retired, actually—he was a twenty-year lieutenant in the Air Force, I think. Had another cousin by marriage who was in the Army and got out as a staff sergeant. You know, my family had the West Texas mentality. It was very open and receptive to the idea. Everybody had a collective sigh of relief when I never ended up going anywhere combat-wise. I don’t think anybody’s too worried about it, but everyone will kind of be happy when my inactive reserve time is up. But I can’t get called back all of a sudden, either, with what’s going on. I think everyone was proud. Everyone was very supportive. Uh there was a chance with different

training exercises that could've put a strain on our marriage, but I was very fortunate with the woman who had agreed to be my wife. [Laughs] And she was really excellent. We went into it with the mindset of we knew what we were getting into when we got married, and just didn't let anything phase us too much. I think my family was extremely supportive.

DREW: And so, she came with you to California for your training?

MILLER: She did. Not for the initial training though.

DREW: Okay.

MILLER: I was through all of that and was with the unit I ended up deploying with before we married, and she moved out with me then.

DREW: And you think that helped too?

MILLER: I do, yes. The long distance deal wasn't the most . . . to an extent, the long distance we did during training I think helped a lot with the long distance we had during the deployment. So, I think it worked well.

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

MILLER: Well . . . so, I remember in boot camp, the ceremony where we were given our official marks of transition from recruits to marine—it happens after hellishly long hike up a stupidly steep hill. And getting called to the ceremony, that was a great feeling, when boot camp was almost over. While deployed, I got the chance to see a lot of different things. I got the chance to see a . . . honest to God thunder and lightning storm out in the middle of the ocean, where it was black as pitch. We went out on the deck for a little while. After a while, they told us we had to go in. It went from black night all over to just white lightning, just as far as you could see, one side of the horizon to the other. Lit the whole night up, then it would go dark again and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

DREW: Oh, wow!

MILLER: And then it would flicker and flash again. The ship was rocking, and saltwater from the ocean sprayed everywhere. That was really . . . I tried taking a video of it and it did not do it justice [laughs] at all. But that's a great memory. Things like seeing the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, in Dubai and standing underneath and looking up at it. Different structures, different things, a little snapshot of just memories and places were some pretty vivid memories.

DREW: Probably some of the cultures, too? Just the buildings or . . . ?

MILLER: The buildings, yes, I've always been drawn to buildings and architecture, even construction. That definitely drew me in, seeing the way they do things, older kinds of structure and some places in Europe and places like that. It's been cool. A lot of like, the way things are in different places . . .

DREW: Your major today, civil engineering, did that make you want to study that? Or did you already want to do that before you went in?

MILLER: So, it kind of flip flopped the other way. I joined kind of with the idea of doing the military as a career for the full twenty years. As I promoted and went through the ranks, I realized I don't like being the guy on the bottom of the totem pole and being told what to do. And I gave serious thought to doing the Marine Corps Officer Commission, but there was no guarantee to what job you'd get. And at that point in time, I knew I already wanted to be an engineer, attached to the engineering platoon and building things. I'd be getting to do some stuff on roads and things like that. I knew that I liked that kind of stuff. Since I wasn't sure if I'd get to be an engineering officer, I just decided, "Well, I'll go to school and be an engineer, civilian-wise." Really, it was the Marine Corps and the experiences I had there that influenced the school major.

DREW: And then uh what sorts of technology did you use in your service?

MILLER: Uh so, as an equipment operator, I did a lot of . . . I got to play with Tonka Trucks, basically, just the big boy kind. So, I had many different types of forklifts, bulldozers, a machine that picks up the big sea containers that you see on different ships, stuff like that. And so, a lot of different stuff, different ways to move goods and materials from point A to point B.

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

MILLER: You know, I really did not. I don't know how much that was due to not having done combat, but I never suffered from anything anywhere close to PTSD or anything like that. I knew some things were going to be a bit of an adjustment, just as far as different mindsets of people, especially coming to school and at that point, being twenty-five years old and being in a class with a bunch of eighteen year old freshmen. Not anything that I anticipated being a struggle of any kind.

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

MILLER: I think that it kind of did. With the mentality going . . . the way West Texas feels about the military and how supportive they are, always having that appreciation for those who serve, made it easier as a way to kind of mold into that lifestyle. It certainly didn't hurt. It didn't make it more difficult.

DREW: Yeah. I'm sure you probably had guys you were with who weren't from Texas. Did you see the differences between them?

MILLER: I don't know. Nobody that I was ever stationed with that I got to know really well had family who resented the military or anything like that. I just . . . I'm not sure . . .

DREW: Was there the same respect?

MILLER: I feel like the respect is there in a lot of places. So, I stationed in California at this massive base and I swear, it seemed like half the marines on there, a third at least, were from Texas. I mean, Texas is larger than other states too, but in the military, there's such a widely accepted way of life in Texas. I think that could be a little different from other states.

DREW: After your time in the military, has your conception of Texas changed?

MILLER: It has not. Things obviously change over the years, but in Texas, it's pretty much the same. I still see it as pretty much the same as when I went in. I still feel the same way about it. When I got out, you know, we moved back. Like, we're back in Texas.

DREW: You never want to leave Texas? This is home?

MILLER: Well, I like visiting other places, but Texas is home.

DREW: After the military, did your conception of the U.S. change?

MILLER: It did not. Like I said, I was fortunate: the unit I was attached to had a lot of great guys who were scattered all around. One of my best friends now, he got out too and he lives in Ohio. I got some others who are still in, stationed in Michigan, North Carolina. We still keep in touch. It's nice to actually feel roots . . . well, not roots . . . have some kind of connection with different places throughout the United States. I still really think that we still have so many opportunities and the military is just one of many avenues to reach some of them. But I think there's a lot of them out there and we should go get them.

DREW: How do you feel about your military service, looking back at it?

MILLER: I loved it. I really have absolutely no regrets from it. I think it played a pretty influential role in shaping my character and personality to who and what I am today, and I wouldn't have traded it for anything.

DREW: Do you have any advice for a young man or woman who is just entering the service?

MILLER: Uh you cannot be shy. The military is very much what you want to make of it, and you can excel as far as you want to push it. So many things that are above and beyond what most people think when they hear of the military as far as . . . there are extracurricular activities besides the basics of being a soldier. They're available to you if they want to pursue it. All you got to do is seek it out.

DREW: And then do you have any objects or items you'd like to share?

MILLER: I don't think so. It was a fairly extensive set of questions!

DREW: Yes. Okay, would you like to share anything else about your service?

MILLER: I don't think so. I think I'm good!

DREW: Thank you so much.

MILLER: Absolutely.