

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

ROBERT GOMEZ

An interview conducted on

October 12, 2016

Interviewer: Kellie Jo Elkins

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 Robert Gomez are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 12, 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.

Interviewer: Kellie Jo Elkins

Transcriber: Kellie Jo Elkins

Editor: Carson Jones

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.

ELKINS: My name is Kellie Jo Elkins and I am interviewing Robert Gomez. When and where were you born?

GOMEZ: I was born in Ballinger, Texas on October 22, 1968.

ELKINS: Where did you grow up?

GOMEZ: I grew up in Ballinger, Texas.

ELKINS: Awesome. How do you define West Texas?

GOMEZ: West Texas is a place that I was born and bred, and once I joined the Marine Corps, I knew that it was a place where I wanted to come back to raise my children.

ELKINS: Um where does it begin?

GOMEZ: What do you mean?

ELKINS: How do you define West Texas and where does it begin?

GOMEZ: Just the rivers and the mesquite. Being in California for fifteen years, there is no mesquites. It's all beaches, so those are the things you miss. It's the small things . . . the allergies, the pollen.

ELKINS: Yes, sir. What do you think the difference is between West Texans and Texans from other regions of the state?

GOMEZ: I'm not sure if there is a difference. It's just, being military for so long, you run into different Texans that are from Houston, the Panhandle, from Dallas. And those are city Texans. They're not *West Texas* West Texans, where we have all four seasons here in San Angelo.

ELKINS: How would you characterize West Texans' relationships to the military?

GOMEZ: We take care of each other. Especially as a Marine Corps [unintelligible], I would always pinpoint the kids I knew from around here. Or didn't know them, but I knew the cities, and I would try to—not take care of them . . . take care of them in a fatherly way, but—try to mentor them a little bit better.

ELKINS: When and where did you enter the armed forces and which branch did you serve in?

GOMEZ: I joined the United States Marine Corps on October 20, 1997 and was recruited out of San Angelo, and got pushed to San Antonio and shipped out on that day.

ELKINS: Oh, wow. Okay. During your years of service, were you primarily enlisted ranks, a non-commissioned officer, an officer, or a warrant officer?

GOMEZ: I retired as a company first arm, which is a senior enlisted advisor to the company commander. So, I was enlisted the whole time. So, I reached the rank of a first serg. when I retired, which is an E-8, and the highest you can go is an E-9.

ELKINS: Wow. In which military conflict did you take part?

GOMEZ: Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Restore Hope, which was in Afghanistan in 2009.

ELKINS: Why did you enlist in the armed forces and what motivated you to do this?

GOMEZ: So, the thing with me is I had the opportunity to join the Marine Corps right out of high school, but I had the opportunity to play football at Tarleton State. Priorities weren't set straight, dropped out of high school, did a couple of jobs, couldn't find anything. Was married and knew I had to do better, so I went up to the recruiter. Within thirty days, I was standing on the yellow footprints in San Diego to take care of myself and my family.

ELKINS: What was your training like?

GOMEZ: Went through Marine Corps recruit training in San Diego, went through marine combat training in San Diego, then was sent to supply school at Fort Johnson, North Carolina. And then from there, just . . . that was my first opportunity to come back to Camp Pendleton, and never looked back.

ELKINS: Did you find your service challenging?

GOMEZ: It was at first, but once you get your feet wet, I mean, it comes with a . . . I was a little bit older than your average recruit, so I was little bit more mature than your average young marine.

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

GOMEZ: I'm an American. I've always been an American. I believe in taking care of our country, and that was one of the actual reasons is . . . that I joined was to defend our country. And then . . . I was actually at work whenever 9/11 happened, and one of the marines that I worked with is a Puerto Rican from New York City. When the Twin Towers went down . . . so, she was actually talking on the phone with her grandfather and you could hear the bodies as they were flying out of the buildings.

ELKINS: Oh my gosh. What did America symbolize to you?

GOMEZ: Patriotism. Freedom.

ELKINS: Were you deployed overseas? If so, what did you understand about the mission you were being asked to complete?

GOMEZ: So, I was hand-picked by my company, or the commander, as the company gunny for Operation Enduring Freedom. I was part of the retrograde from Iraq in 2008, coming into Afghanistan. So, I was there when we literally built Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan in 2009. So, the Taliban was moving from Iraq into Afghanistan, so were building the stronghold there so we could start bringing marines in to fight the insurgency.

ELKINS: Wow. What unit or units did you serve during your deployment?

GOMEZ: I was the company gunny for a combat logistics company, a 151 under combat logistics regiment 2 out of North Carolina, but I was an augmented staff that came from Camp Pendleton, California.

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

GOMEZ: Not direct combat. We were in direct support of the actual infantry of battalions that were coming into Afghanistan.

ELKINS: Were you wounded?

GOMEZ: No, ma'am.

ELKINS: No? Did you become a prisoner of war?

GOMEZ: No, ma'am.

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

GOMEZ: You see a different spectrum of how third world countries live. Their priorities are set straight in their certain ways. Their religion is completely different. It's nothing compared to what we have here in the United States of America.

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

GOMEZ: They didn't want us there. But just like anything . . . they didn't want us in Iraq. So, the thing is, the Taliban had a stronghold there, so we were mandated to go in there and take control of the stronghold. And that was a reason that the United States Marine Corps came in, along with the Army and the other branches of service.

ELKINS: Yes, sir. Did you ever engage them in a conversation about what America meant to you?

GOMEZ: No.

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

GOMEZ: I had a strong family at home. The thing was, like I said, I joined the Marine Corps late, so I had four kids when I deployed. The hardest part is telling them goodbye and telling them that you're going to come home. You know, you work eighteen to twenty-hour days, but you know the mission at the end is going to pay off because you are going to get to see your kids again.

ELKINS: Gosh. How did your service influence . . . I already asked you that. What are your most vivid memories of your time in service?

GOMEZ: The camaraderieship, the esprit de corps, interacting from different . . . I mean, I am from a small town in Texas. So, you interact with Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, you know, every nationality you can think of, and they become your band of brother or band of sister. And they will forever be your band of brother. So, to this day since I retired five months ago, we still communicate a lot. And I miss the Marine Corps all the time and I call them all the time to see how they are doing. But it's a brotherhood that's developed and instilled in you at MCRD, San Diego and it goes with you for the rest of your life.

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

GOMEZ: I did. I had struggles. I mean, we all have struggles, but there's treatments and there's phases. You have family, you have friends that you socialize with. So, I mean . . . I did, but I overcame them.

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

GOMEZ: Yes. My father is a Vietnam veteran, so he was very firm and very fair with me growing up, along with my little brother and little sister. So, I knew to be a leader. My father taught me young. So, that's what helped me survive and actually excel in the Marine Corps: to never accept mediocre, to always be above and beyond the call of duty. So, I was meritorious promoted four times. So, I think my father, the way he raised me, impacted the way I was made as a man.

ELKINS: Yes, sir. After your time in the military, has your conception of Texas changed? Why or why not?

GOMEZ: No. I'm just glad to be home.

ELKINS: Glad to be home. Has your conception of the United States changed?

GOMEZ: No.

ELKINS: No? How do you feel about your military service, looking back?

GOMEZ: I miss it, but it was something I will cherish for the rest of my life and something that I instill in my kids about the discipline, the esprit de corps, and the attention to detail and always setting the example.

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

GOMEZ: So, I served as a Marine Corps general instructor for six years. I molded a basic trained recruit to become a basic trained marine. Then I was sent to officer candidate school, and I would take a college graduate and molded them into a Marine Corps officer. The best words of advice I could give them was given to me when I was first joining the Marine Corps; it's to humble yourself. The way you were brought up was completely different than the marine tier, left or right, is so they are going to be different. You have to conform to the way the Marine Corps wants you to be. You learn to conform to what the Marine Corps mission is, you'll be a success in whatever you do.

ELKINS: Yes, sir. Do you have any items, objects, or correspondence that you wish to share with the project?

GOMEZ: Well, if you ever come back to this office, I have a phenomenal range flag that three recruits drew for me. It's awesome. There were kids from Los Angeles that came and painted this object for me. But I carry . . . I cherish a . . . like I said, I have a Marine Corps campaign cover. It's a lot of memorabilia that I have.

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

GOMEZ: No, ma'am.

ELKINS: Okay.