

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

FRED WILSON

An interview conducted on

March 22, 2018

Interviewer: Stevan Saucedo

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 Fred Wilson are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 22, 2018.

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SAUCEDA: Okay, um, first, I can pretty much just start out with your name.

WILSON: Yeah, Fred Wilson.

SAUCEDA: Fred Wilson. All right. Um, and when and where were you born at?

WILSON: I was born in Detroit, Michigan

SAUCEDA: All righty. What year?

WILSON: Thirty-eight.

SAUCEDA: Thirty-eight?

WILSON: Nineteen thirty-eight [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: Okay [chuckles]. A little while back, huh?

WILSON: Yeah, I'm afraid so, but I've lived through so many wars.

SAUCEDA: [Laughs] And kind of just, uh, your childhood growing up, if you don't mind.

WILSON: Yeah, I was from . . . uh, until I was nine years old, I lived in Detroit, and then my family moved to Kentucky, in western Kentucky. And then when I was sixteen, I went to college, and nineteen, I went to graduate school in Kansas. Lawrence, Kansas. University of Kansas.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: And things were starting to cook up by then. While I was at, uh, college, I went to college in my hometown, Murray, Kentucky, which is Murray State University, and I got my bachelor's degree in physics and in math there. And I also took ROTC, which is the reason for mentioning that; it's pertinent to the other. Um, by the time I got to Kansas, the Army was . . . they would give me deferments, but only for six months at a time, and they started really putting the pressure on in 1963. Uh, "We need you." That was the time things were beginning to happen. Um so, I finished my presentation of my thesis on November the 2nd in '64, and three days later I was in the Army [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow. So, that was a really quick turnaround for you, huh? [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Yeah, well, I knew it was coming. They . . . they just weren't going to give me anymore deferments, so I had to finish. I didn't get my master's degree. I went straight from a bachelor's to a doctorate, which is risky because if you fail out sometime, you don't have anything. You don't have a degree at all. But, uh, because of that, because of my background—math and physics, a lot of stuff in computing, and this was fairly early days of computing . . .

SAUCEDA: Mm. Yeah, I know the technology wasn't quite what it was at today.

WILSON: Yeah, there was no internet . . .

SAUCEDA: Oh, yeah.

WILSON: . . . at this time. So, that made it . . . but I was commissioned into the Army Security Agency in, uh . . . in, uh, 1959, which meant that on my uniform I wore signal flags, which is Signal Corps. I took some correspondence courses from the Army while I was doing this, um, in Kansas, so I was . . . I . . . after some training—which I know you'll get to later—I went to . . . I was in . . . uh, I worked in the office . . . for the office of the assistant chief of staff for the Army for intelligence, and my primary work was in nuclear weapons, but also connected a lot with missiles in space.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: Yeah, that's kind of the story [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: Okay, um, just kind of going back, I know you started saying that you got into the ROTC and kind of like I guess more of the military style at a young age. Was there any like siblings, or did your parents . . . ?

WILSON: No, I was alone. Um, nobody else. My dad never served, and his . . . only his . . . the only other person in my dad's family was his oldest brother who was in the Navy in World War I, uh, which was quite different. At the time I was in college, uh, ROTC—for two years was—mandatory. Everybody had to take it. Every boy had to take it.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: And . . . and I had planned to go to Georgia Tech, but the reality set in by the time I was a sophomore that there's no money, [chuckles] you know.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles] Yeah.

WILSON: It's expensive. And so, I decided to stay on, but that meant that I needed to work, and I had a job. Well, actually, I had two jobs. I worked for the . . . I worked for the physics department. I worked in a furniture store, and ROTC paid a little bit. So, it all helped.

SAUCEDA: Oh, yeah.

WILSON: So, I went on and finished that.

SAUCEDA: Uh, just to clarify, what was your, uh . . . whenever you went in, what was your classification in the armed forces and what kind of branch were you in?

WILSON: Well, I was commissioned as a second lieutenant.

SAUCEDA: Second lieutenant.

WILSON: And then because of the degree and working on graduate school taking correspondence courses, I was promoted to first lieutenant. And uh, so I entered the Army as a first lieutenant, and in eighteen months, I was promoted to captain . . .

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: . . . because people were dying fast.

SAUCEDA: Yeah, yeah. That was a really . . .

WILSON: Second lieutenants didn't last very long.

SAUCEDA: Yeah, intense war. All righty. Um, and then, kind of, whenever you went in, what military conflict did you kind of start . . . did you go in?

WILSON: Well, this was the time Vietnam was cooking up.

SAUCEDA: Oh, yeah.

WILSON: So, uh, you had a situation where nobody really understood who the enemy was unless it's somebody who's shooting at you.

SAUCEDA: Right, very confusing. I know whenever we kind of went over that in class, um, there was different stories where you really couldn't even tell who was on your side, who wasn't, and different people walking around that you didn't know.

WILSON: Yeah, the sad thing was there was a lot of atrocities that were committed, and people here couldn't understand that. And I don't say they were right, but, um, when a nine-year-old boy might come up behind you, or an eight-year-old girl with a machinegun and shoot down your buddies, you don't fight for your country when you're there. You don't fight for the flag; you fight for your buddies.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm. You fight to stay alive, right?

WILSON: Yeah, that's . . . you . . . you have a relationship that nobody can understand unless they've served, and it . . . it's a strange kind of a thing. In a way, um, because of the nature of . . . [background music grows louder.] Boy! The nature of the situation . . . you don't think about these things a lot. The use of drugs was incredibly rampant because you were on edge so much. And, you know, the next step you take might be on a mine, or it might be on some kind of a bamboo trap. They had, uh, logs that were pulled back, and they would release them, and they had spikes on them. Uh, you go through a levee. You could have a . . . a machine gun automated with a trip wire, start shooting everybody, jumps off to the side, and you put bamboo things out there with spikes on them.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Um . . .

SAUCEDA: So, very dangerous.

WILSON: Some people were captured. They would tie them down spread-eagled over areas where bamboo grows. Bamboo grows that much a day.

SAUCEDA: Oh, yeah.

WILSON: Go right through them.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: So, you die that way. But uh, yeah, that was . . . uh, that wasn't . . . that's not really pointing to your question. I'm rambling [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: [Laughs] Oh no, you're fine. Um, there's definitely different stories. Everyone has their own story . . .

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: . . . and kind of like their own experience of what happened during that time

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: So, um, definitely a lot of the same things, but I know you kind of mentioned earlier that you were kind of maybe being forced or kind of pushed to join the Army?

WILSON: Well, yeah. Well, the situation was . . .

SAUCEDA: Like did you have any motivation yourself?

WILSON: Well, there was a draft. Uh, but when I graduated . . . when I went into college, I was still sixteen at that time. I was in school with guys who had gotten out of the military just after Korea.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Because I graduated from high school in '59, and that meant I was dealing with some really . . . some guys who had had some rough experiences. I had . . . I was . . . Fort Campbell was near our university, so I had a lot of guys who got out of the Army that had been paratroopers, and they were particularly rough sort of guys [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: [Laughs] Yeah, you got to be a little rough around the edges.

WILSON: You bet. Yeah, they were. So, that was . . . when you're sixteen and you're in college, and you're with people like that who have been in combat, they don't have any time for foolishness. And it makes you grow up a lot in that situation, which I thought was interesting now looking back at it.

SAUCEDA: Oh, yeah.

WILSON: But, I wasn't really forced to go in, and later on, I saw a number of kids who were drafted. When the draft got going really big later on . . . and some of them were Yale lawyers. They got their degree, their law degree, but they were drafted because they did . . . I don't understand that either because they should have used them in the . . . they could have used them in any number of ways. Um, people who could get out of the draft did.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Uh, as our president did [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: Yeah, I know we just went over in class today that there was, um, different ways people got out, especially the wealthier, um, and stuff like that. So . . .

WILSON: Well, and that's been the story forever except in World War II, more or less. In World War . . . some in Korea but more in World War II, they, uh . . . because we were attacked in such a vicious way, I think it rallied . . . it never makes sense to me that you kill off your nineteen- and twenty-year-olds.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm, because that's your next generation.

WILSON: And, you know, especially in a war that you don't know . . . you don't know any . . . you have no . . . don't know why you're there.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm. So, did the draft, um, kind of persuade you, in a way, to join?

WILSON: No, actually it didn't because I . . . I wasn't kind of aware of the draft [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: [Laughs.]

WILSON: You had to register, and I did at eighteen, but, you know, at the . . . uh, I knew what I was going to do because by the time I was going to college, I got, uh, a fellowship to go on to study, and because my tuition was five dollars a credit hour.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: Think about that.

SAUCEDA: [Laughs] Yeah, that's a lot different from today's . . .

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: . . . uh, tuition.

WILSON: Yeah, because . . . and I had a lot of jobs. I was teaching. I . . . I did teaching in labs, and then later on I was in research. So, it was . . . it was a way to help pay for college. My folks didn't have anything to . . . to be able to support anything like that, and, um, I kind of liked it. It wasn't, uh . . . but there's a world of difference between training and reality.

SAUCEDA: Yeah, totally two different things.

WILSON: Yeah, that's . . . uh, you know, that was it. But, I really wasn't pushed into it. Um, I had to take it for the first two years, and usual . . . you don't automatically get to take the second two years. You have to be selected. It's much more selective now, especially here with the Air Force.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Much more selective on who they take. But uh, it was, uh . . . it was an interesting time.

SAUCEDA: Oh, yeah.

WILSON: I can remember. Yeah, I can remember more about ROTC than I remember about most of school [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles] Yeah, just because you were so involved with it.

WILSON: Yeah. Right, you are, very much. Every Thursday afternoon, you had a drill and things like that. But, I think the Army, well, the Air Force now is more academic than we were. When you're training for the Army, you have a broader area of things, and it's much more on the idea of combat arms. I'm not saying the Air Force isn't the combat arm, but they spend a lot of time focusing on the academic part of aerospace. And times have changed as much as I hate to admit it. Times have changed and technology has advanced, yeah.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles] Just a little.

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: Right. Uh, what did you think of the conflict? Or did you have any like, I guess, prior knowledge? I know you kind of saw on TV versus the media stuff, and then being there . . .

WILSON: Yeah, of course we only had three channels: ABC, CBS, and NBC.

SAUCEDA: [Laughs.]



WILSON: That was it! And if the president gave a speech, there was nothing to watch.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles] Right.

WILSON: But, uh . . . um, I was in the Army during the Tonkin Gulf Incident, and then the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Um, I knew that it didn't happen the way it was reported.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: And this was disturbing. Um, we don't know who shot at who first, but it was presented to the American people as, "This was an attack on the United States."

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: And so, we're going to destroy it back, and that's when we started on North Vietnam. In the . . . in the beginning, it was you're looking at the Viet Cong really who the . . . the movement in the South . . . that's not to say there weren't people from the North. There were, but, uh, the . . . the actual professional soldiers weren't fully involved. And the Ho Chi Minh Trail hadn't really got set up. But when we pushed it . . . from the same kind of stuff that you have, uh, in college, in history, you know, about the French. And um, it was French and . . . French Indochina and the Japanese had been there, and the French were there now. And you have all these French Colonial homes, and then they fought against the resistance. Ho Chi Minh, he . . . we could've . . . if we would've only known what we were doing. Um, Ho Chi Minh, he loved the United States actually. He thought it was great, and he had written their constitution based upon the American Constitution.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm. I know he actually even, uh, ga . . . or, not gave his word, but he even pretty much said, "Oh, that's a good constitution."

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: The US one. So, he actually agreed with ours as well.

WILSON: He certainly did, which strikes a lot of people as strange, but when the French . . . well, he was pretty earthy in some of the things that he said. But, he said, "We've smelled the Chinese for years, for four-hundred years, and the French for a hundred. We're not going to smell somebody else for a while."

SAUCEDA: [Laughs.]

WILSON: And, um . . . so he . . . as from . . . he led the insurgency. We didn't know how to fight an insurgency. It seems like in the military history, the generals always want to fight the last war.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Added to that, nothing happened between Korea and Vietnam really in terms of conflict. So, you had a lot of, um, people who had reached field grade rank. Do you have any military experience or people you know something about?

SAUCEDA: Uh, not too much. I really haven't come from a . . .

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: . . . military background or anything like that. But uh . . .

WILSON: Well, field grade means major and above or . . . in the Army. Marines and Navy, it's lieutenant commander. Um, see if I got that right. A lieutenant in the Navy is a captain in the Army. A lieutenant commander would be a major, yes. So, that's right. Lieutenant commander. Anyway, they have . . . they have scrambled eggs on their hat. But they're supposed to be able to command larger units, and there's no slot really in the Army for a major. Um, in fact, the Germans—I'm going to kind of just to give you kind of a picture—the Germans didn't even use the same name of rank. Um, a lieutenant commander rank equivalent in the German Army would be a "corvette commandeer," which was the size of the ship he would command.

SAUCEDA: Oh.

WILSON: A corvette is a particular size. It's big. It's about the size of a . . . of a, uh, destroyer. But their ranks had to go along . . . the German ranks went along the size of the ship, and that's not the British or American tradition with the names of ships. Anyway, these people had got promoted pretty fast during Korea if they survived. And then they stuck in grade by . . . in the 1950s, uh, they were pushing people. High level . . . high . . . full colonels, lieutenant colonels were getting pushed out, made to take . . . you got a choice. You either retire now and take . . . if you retire at twenty years, you get, uh, half pay. If you retire at thirty years, you get two-thirds pay or something. It's either two-thirds or three-quarters. And things change over time, but it doesn't really make any difference.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: You're better off if you could make thirty years. So, you had these full colonels and lieutenant colonels, a lot of them, they had to take their permanent rank, which was an enlisted rank, to finish out enough to get their retirement. And those who were left were . . . were people who, either politically or for whatever reason, were able to hang on. But they wanted to get promoted because they hadn't been promoted for years. And to get promoted, they . . . when Vietnam came along, you had to get the Combat Infantryman Badge that . . . if you've seen that on a military uniform, uh, it's a rectangle with a rifle on it, and it's a blue background, and it goes above all the medals. You have to spend at least thirty-one days in combat, um, to have that, and it's . . . it's a real badge of honor. And if you have a wreath around, that means that you've . . . it's, uh, it's a very . . . you've spent a long time, and you know what you're doing in combat. Um, so these guys became very political. They'd do whatever they could to get into the combat zone just for thirty-one days . . .

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: . . . because they'd never get promoted. And if they didn't get promoted, they would be out. It's either up or out. So, these guys tried to get . . . they tried to go to Vietnam and give commands to people on the ground, telling them what to do. And then you had General Westmoreland heading up the whole thing, and he could not accept defeat. And actually, what that meant to him was, "If I'm not . . . if I don't win, then I'm defeated." Then in the Kennedy administration, Robert McNamara thought he could bring the same kind of analytics to combat that he used at Ford Motor Company. Well, that meant he . . . how do you measure whether or not you're winning in an insurgency?

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: This is a toughie. So, they started to do it on body count.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: And every level would report up. People on the ground say there were six people killed. Then the next one, "Well, if it was six, there must've been eight." Then it got inflated.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles] Right.

WILSON: And then by the time it got to Westmoreland, he reported to McNamara, and you had a totally inflated rate. So, by the . . . by the numbers that were being reported, they were killing everybody in Vietnam. All in order to avoid disgrace, and to them anything but victory was disgrace. This happened . . . same thing happened in Korea when MacArthur was fired because he wouldn't . . . he wouldn't obey orders from the president. So, I forgot the guy [chuckles]. I forgot the guy's name now, but it doesn't make any difference. Uh, he took over as commander. MacArthur was a five-star general, and the guy that took over was three stars at the time. Westmoreland only got four stars, and he never should've gotten four stars. Way too high a rank for where he was, but he'd get promoted. So, the Army became very corrupt, uh, field grade and above. Because they were . . . it became very political. "I want to get my way. I want to get what's good for me. I want to be able to stay in." So, it came . . . it became politically corrupt and, militarily . . . uh, not sufficiently competent to run a war against an insurgency.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: I hope that gets at your answer. You can tell me to shut up when I get through the question.

SAUCEDA: Oh, no. You're good. The more information, the better especially.

WILSON: [Chuckles.]

SAUCEDA: Um, just kind of going back to the beginning. Uh, whenever you were deployed over there, was there any particular missions that you had like . . . uh, I guess whenever you were flying there to start?

WILSON: Well, my . . . my mission was to . . . one of my main mission was . . . well, it's, uh . . .

SAUCEDA: I know you kind of have, uh . . .

WILSON: Yeah, it's complicated because . . .

SAUCEDA: . . . confidential information.

WILSON: Well, it's . . . it's . . . that's part of it, but part of it is also a very complicated situation. I was . . . uh, I was also looking at the Soviets because the Soviets had weapons in Vietnam. And . . . um, but missiles in space, and the nuclear part because I knew the nuclear weapons part. Uh, they didn't have any nuclear weapons, but some people said, "Well, they're down there. They may have them." So, there was that problem. Do they have any? And what are they capable of? And so, from that also I needed information on what the . . . you gather a lot of data from the telemetry. Whenever the Russians fire a missile, you get their telemetry, and you see what it was, and I had to calculate trajectories for that. And then, um, there was the situation where the Russians were kicked out of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh, you know, says, "You're not going to run my country," and he kicked them out. So, they said, "Fine," and they just left. And they . . . they left and took the manuals with them, and the Vietnamese didn't know how to run their surface-to-air missiles. Uh, they thought . . . they thought they'd try, so a plane flies over, they try to . . . they turn on their radars, and they try to fire a missile. But it's very complicated. You have to know what you're doing to get the missile to lock onto the radar. You can track the plane with the radar, but the missile's got to follow that.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: This was before they had the heat seeking missiles, and . . . although, they came along. So, a guy is flying. He sees . . . he sees what he thinks is a missile fired, and he knows the radar was on him, so he goes through a complicated, uh, maneuver, and he's not hit. So, he tells his buddies, and this spreads out that, uh, this is the maneuver. And the same thing happened to the Navy and the Vietnamese look and they say, "Hmm. Turn on radar. Planes do odd things."

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: "And I can predict what they're going to do. I don't have anything to hit them with, but what can I do?" You . . . you think about . . . this is insurgency. They had thousands and thousands of old, discarded Chinese weapons. So, they could set up a barrage with old anti-aircraft guns. Things from World War II were really primitive stuff, but you set up a bunch of lead flying out and a plane flies into it, it's going to take it out.

SAUCEDA: Right, it's going down.

WILSON: So, one of the things the Navy pilots would do is dive down, and they'd fly into the barrage, and they'd lose a plane. It wasn't until much later that they got sophisticated surface-to-air missiles that were actually guided by radar, but I tracked the first one that was shot at on . . . on a map. The plane reported his position and everything, tracked it, to see where . . . he was flying to Vietnam . . . I mean to North Vietnam.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: So, that was, uh . . . well, I was trying to gather information, go through analysis. I . . . not a spy, but take information, the hard information, and, uh, analyze it and report it. Another thing during this period of time, the Chinese detonated their second, uh, nuclear explosion. We didn't know much about the Chinese, so . . . uh, there was enough knowledge beforehand that they were going to do this that we got the Air Force to fly an airplane with chemical receptors on the wing to fly through the . . . through the cloud, and we were able to bring back through this analysis of this . . . and this ties in with what I talked about, corruption, as you'll see in a minute. Uh, when you analyze that, one of the chemicals found in the cloud was lithium. Now, there ain't no lithium in a pure fission weapon. You just don't have it.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: You're using uranium! And you may have . . . you might have a seal around it. It all depends on how you build the thing, but that would most likely be beryllium or something else. It's not going to be lithium because first of all, lithium will burn in the air.

SAUCEDA: Right, it'll burn quick.

WILSON: It's a very . . . you keep it stored in kerosene or something like that. And it's the third element, you know, hydrogen, helium, lithium. So, it's very lightweight. But lithium does appear if you have a fission . . . I mean a fusion component. So, I wrote it up that it was a thermonuclear weapon, or at least a boosted fission one, and that was . . . lieutenant colonel comes down, he says, "You can't say that."

And I said, "Yes sir, why not?"

He said, "It's because it's against the Army policy for the Chinese to have something."

So, again the idea was speak to power what power wants to hear.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: And that was very discouraging . . .

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: . . . for people trying to gather information and analyze it. You're trying to tell . . . trying to tell . . . speak the truth to power is not always acceptable.

SAUCEDA: Right. People just don't want to accept it.

WILSON: Yeah, they don't want to accept it. They want to hear what they already believe is true. And that was particularly the case in Vietnam, and . . . and from my point of view.

BOTH: [Laugh.]

WILSON: I'm not going to tell you that I know it all because I sure don't.

SAUCEDA: Right. Um, going off of that, did you ever kind of, um, get into the combat itself, or were you more behind . . .

WILSON: Oh, I'm behind the scenes.

SAUCEDA: . . . the scenes? Right.

WILSON: There's no place that's . . . no place that's safe . . .

SAUCEDA: Right, especially in Vietnam.

WILSON: . . . in an insurgency.

SAUCEDA: Right, especially there.

WILSON: There was the Tet Offensive. I was out of there by the time of the Tet Offensive. The Tet Offensive was one of those cases where it suddenly broke out all over Vietnam, so you . . . you know, even when planes would land at Tan Son Nhut, you'd have a big ole cargo planes there.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles] Right.

WILSON: They'd come in. They'd circle overhead, and when they got a clearance, they'd dive almost straight down. You just can't believe those things because where they . . . they can't be hit, but they dive down so they can't be hit at all. By an . . . get on the ground as soon as possible. And this Tan Son Nhut sits right there at Saigon, but they . . . uh, but still, you've got, uh, all kinds of insurgents out there, and you can't tell one from the other. They don't wear a sign that says, "Shoot me! I'm an insurgent."

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: [Chuckles.]

SAUCEDA: It was very difficult to . . .

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: . . . see who's who. Um, but was there any vivid memories that you have going back? Some kind that maybe, uh, you remember more vividly than the others or that stuck out?

WILSON: Yeah, some of the things . . . some of the things I . . . you want to blot out.

SAUCEDA: Right, very . . .

WILSON: It's very difficult, but this may sound strange to you. The . . . one of the most vivid things was . . . was a . . . had to do with the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It wasn't really a highway or a trail, but it was a number of passages from North Vietnam to South Vietnam that they would haul equipment and troops on. And you wouldn't always go on the same road. There were several routes. We had B-52s with, uh, pretty good heat seeking stuff. So, they . . . they would be flying over there, and they would look for something that was producing heat, which diesel trucks produce, and drop bombs on it. Or the C . . . ha! I can't remember. I don't know the numbers of airplanes. I think it was a C-47, but I'm not sure. Um, it was one of the old-fashioned Douglas airplanes, but they cut the side out of the thing, and they put in a . . . a .50-caliber . . . it has several barrels on it. It's a Gatling gun kind of a thing.

SAUCEDA: Right, kind of like a machine gun?

WILSON: So, you started out, and the thing winds, and then it shoots out about 1,500 rounds a second. Um, it's . . . it's called "Puff the Magic Dragon."

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Um, that's what everybody . . . and so, they would saturate the ground underneath that. Well, .50 caliber—that's half-inch.

SAUCEDA: Yeah, that's a very big caliber gun.

WILSON: [Laughs] That's a big . . .

SAUCEDA: Leave a hole in you real quick [chuckles].

WILSON: It does. Real quick. Um, it's incr . . . the . . . the disconnect was that: how can people on the ground know this is ineffective? And the powers that be don't understand it? It didn't take the Vietnamese long to say . . . to figure out, "They know where our trucks are. They're looking at us. So, how can we mislead them?" This is the key. Now, the Israeli Army learned this right away. Their idea of deception. We learned it fairly well in World War II because General Patton sent a whole army that wasn't an army at all in Britain. Uh, rubber tanks—they inflated them and everything.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: So, make a feint. F-E-I-N-T, feint.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Make a feint to the . . . to that . . . they make so you can mislead the enemy about your intentions. What the Vietnamese did is they'd find these trucks that had been bombed out or whatever, and they would build a fire under them and let them smolder and whatever. So, the planes would come over and drop bombs on these fires that had nothing to do with where they really were.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow. Right.

WILSON: Meanwhile, they're marching. The Japanese did the same thing in, uh . . . in . . . in Singapore. They came down to . . . through Malaysia on bicycles, through the jungle on bicycles, and when the tires wore out, they went on the rims. And they said nobody could attack Singapore from the back, so they didn't have any guns pointed that way. And when they got down there, there was no defense for the . . . the island.

SAUCEDA: Right, so it took them off.

WILSON: And Churchill . . . Churchill almost lost his position as prime minister because the . . . um, they lost Singapore. And he himself could not understand. He fired the gen . . . the guy that was . . . but it didn't make any difference. They were all captives then. Uh, they had to surrender the fortress that they believed was impregnable. So, here we had the Vietnamese who knew to do this. Everybody knew what they were doing, but it didn't sound . . . no, the Air Force said, "We're going to drop bombs, and we don't want anybody in the Army to tell us how to do it."

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: And that's something that I'll never forget.

SAUCEDA: Wow.

WILSON: I know that that's not very exciting, but it's, uh . . .

SAUCEDA: Oh, definitely.

WILSON: When you realize what's happening . . .

SAUCEDA: Yeah, pretty intense. Um, you said you kind of did more of the back scenes with the technology.

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: Was there any kind of, um, I guess, uh, impactful technology that helped you in your job, and was there, um, anything that the US had more . . . or better technology than the Vietnamese at this point?

WILSON: We had . . . in everything, we had better weapons. Um, we had, uh, extremely powerful weapons. But uh, that may not have been the best weapon.



SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: Your weapons need to fit the situation.

SAUCEDA: Yeah, and I know the guerilla tactics . . .

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: . . . is more of what they were wanting to lean to, and that was just kind of not our tactic.

WILSON: A helicopter five miles away doesn't really help you a whole lot. Radios were something you couldn't do without, and they were vastly improved. We had good radios. Um, in the Philippines when we fought an insurgency there in 1896 during the Spanish-American War, MacArthur was there. His dad was a commander of the Army there, and they developed what was called the "grease guns," a .45-caliber weapon, that would have only two moving parts on the thing. And it was a really small thing with a huge . . .

SAUCEDA: Barrel on it?

WILSON: Well, the barrel was not so big. It was only this long, but it has this big piece in there, so when it fires it kicks back . . .

SAUCEDA: Oh.

WILSON: . . . and it pulls in the next shell. So, it could shoot fairly fast, and it was not accurate at all. But, you know, if you're fighting guerrillas . . .

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles] But if you're fighting . . . right.

WILSON: . . . you can spray, you know. And the .45-caliber pistol was developed in this same period—uh, good pistol. I still think it was the best pistol the Army ever had. Uh, they've got fancier ones now, but this one, it would stop anything because if someone is coming at you with a machete, and they're this close to you . . .

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm. Right, very close.

WILSON: If you have something with stopping power, that's what you wanted. Um, [chuckles] I had to compute trajectories using an adding machine for spherical trigonometry.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: And a log . . . log table.

SAUCEDA: [Laughs.]

WILSON: And, you know, it was hand computations. It was slow, but it was . . . uh, and it wasn't totally accurate either because the Earth isn't a perfect sphere. I couldn't correct for things like rotation of the Earth.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: I had to, uh . . . I had to make a fudge factor considering, "Okay, I'm firing at this angle, and the Earth is going to turn, how long is it going to take for it to get there? How . . . ?" I know how fast the Earth turns because . . .

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: . . . twenty-four hours is 360 degrees, so I can offset a little bit and say what the spot would be. That's how I did the computations. And um, I didn't even have my slide rule.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: That . . . that was . . .

SAUCEDA: Very intense work [chuckles].

WILSON: We had . . . we had excellent jet aircraft. Uh, they didn't have radar detectors in them. The Army, of course, didn't have any but the Air Force and the Navy did. And they ordered . . . what's called back then "fuzz busters." They were, uh, radar detectors that Radio Shack sold. It was to stop police from . . .

SAUCEDA: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh.

WILSON: . . . catching you. So, you put them in the aircraft to pick up the length to the . . . to . . . to the South, to the enemy's radars [chuckles]. And, uh, of course, now we've got fantastic, uh . . .

SAUCEDA: Technologies, uh . . .

WILSON: Well, you can know exactly if you've been locked onto. That's the neat thing now, you know. You get that beep. You know that you're locked on, and you know the kind of things you have to do. And so, our pilots are trained for that sort of thing. But, you're not . . . you're not fighting against another Air Force there.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: You're fighting against guerillas on the ground. A dis . . . you don't have any one headquarters that's going to take out everybody because you have individual commanders. That's why we were so effective in the Philippines. We had a guerilla war in the Philippines with Filipino soldiers and American soldiers who went off into the woods, and then we wouldn't surrender, and drove the Japanese crazy there!

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: Why we didn't learn that and bring it into Vietnam, I don't know.

SAUCEDA: Very interesting [chuckles]. Very different, especially, uh, coming from different points of view.

WILSON: Yeah. Yeah, there'll be people that really want to say we were fighting . . . we were there to fight for our country and make the country safe against communism. But, you know, it took Vietnamese . . . Vietnam ten years from the time of the end of the war to go to a capitalistic country. It took China seven . . . it took China forty years, and it took the Soviet Union seventy years. They all realized that system doesn't work.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Uh, [chuckles] I'm preaching, but you'll hear other people who can't abide saying that they were there for nothing, and that was my opinion.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: And especially when you came back, and the American public treated you like you were dirt.

SAUCEDA: Kind of going off that American public, uh, the news, how did it correspond . . . ? I know you kind of mentioned before with the body count—it was an inflation. But how'd y'all kind of, uh . . . did y'all hear any news from back home? Or was it anything relevant to what was actually happening in the war itself?

WILSON: Well, the Army wanted you to listen to the armed forces radio, and that was pretty well censored. They considered it bad for morale to hear dissenting views. When word came back to people from those who had been wounded or whatever. Well, you asked for a memorable thing. I was at Walter Reed Hospital, and . . . Walter Reed was an old hospital in Washington, D.C., and there was . . . uh, it was built in a strange way. Block with a lot of quarters, so you had spaces in between, these rectangular spaces. They must've been fifteen or twenty guys about your age who were out there and these were one or two limbs shot off, and they were teaching them to walk with . . . using prosthetics. They were doing their rehab. And that's something that you never forget when you see . . . when you see that. Could you imagine?

SAUCEDA: Yeah, that'd be definitely something . . .

WILSON: Yeah, that's, you know . . . that picture. Wow.

SAUCEDA: Yeah.

WILSON: But, they didn't want anybody to see this, so they had these squares, you know. Today the rehab is so much better . . .

SAUCEDA: Oh, yeah.

WILSON: . . . if you can get it. VA is not very . . . it's way underfunded, way understaffed, and we have much more serious injuries now because people survive, and they wouldn't survive earlier.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: If you get both legs shot off below the knees, the chances of survival in most combat is zero. Now, we have enough medics and people who know what they're doing to get tourniquets on, get you to a field hospital, get you in the air, fly you to Germany, where they . . . and they have surgeons on board that airplane and operating rooms. But even head injuries. There's a student that I had here who was shot. He was in Afghanistan. He was shot in the head. Bullet went through his . . .

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: . . . helmet. He fell forward. Another one had hit him in the chest and one in the shoulder. Um, he has, uh . . . uh, quite a limp, and his speech is distorted, but he has a perfectly wonderful attitude. One of the nicest guys I ever talked to. Great fellow. He is, um, getting . . . got his degree here in education. He'll be teaching. He's perfect. Another one I had who's from Afghanistan who was in ordinance disposal—they had a lot of IEDs—and he's PTSD all the way.

SAUCEDA: Yeah.

WILSON: He blows up in just a second. I get him in here, "Slow down." You know, "Take it easy." We could talk, but he just couldn't stand foolishness. And when you're in college, you want to have a crazy time.

SAUCEDA: Right.

BOTH: [Chuckle.]

WILSON: I mean, but you wouldn't be young if you didn't enjoy the . . . the kind of things you'd enjoy: laughing, going out with friends, and stuff like that, you know. He's thinking about, "You don't understand the world." Because he's . . . he's set to blow up at any minute.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Well, there's plenty of that from Vietnam. But mostly what you see there is people who are in shock and not so much violent although that happened. But there was a lot of good movies that were made. And if you've never . . . the best way to understand the long-term effect on people from Vietnam is to go to Washington to the mall . . . not the mall, but down near 20th,

21st off Constitution<sup>1</sup> where the memorial is and see the things that people bring there and leave. Pictures of their buddies . . .

SAUCEDA: Memories.

WILSON: . . . dog tags, all these things. And if . . . they never forget. And that's . . . that's pretty touching. Yeah.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: That's part of it.

SAUCEDA: You spent more time with them than actually the family you had back home.

WILSON: That's the only people you got. We could . . . and your family at home, you can't explain. You just can't. You can't. There's no way to explain that kind of a situation. Uh, I had a student, before I went into the Army. No, that was after. That was after I was out. He was at Virginia when a guy had a AR15 and shot several people there.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: He was not a . . . he was, uh, in high school, but he was taking a course there. And it hit him in his leg, and for eighteen months he was in terrible pain after having been shot. Um, and he couldn't go to school for . . . for all kinds of . . . I don't know how those kids at Parkland are going to school . . .

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: . . . after they were shot up. I mean . . . well, I know lots [chuckles]. You can't . . . you can't begin to understand it unless you were part of it, and that's the only thing I was trying to say.

SAUCEDA: All righty. Uh, was there any controversy with the news that was being portrayed back home, uh, as into where y'all were at . . .

WILSON: Well, you . . .

SAUCEDA: . . . in Vietnam?

WILSON: [Chuckles.]

SAUCEDA: Definitely.

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<sup>1</sup> 21st Street and Constitution Avenue

WILSON: They had a program. They had a program called *Good Morning, Vietnam*, which was trying to appeal to people, um, with music and what their interest was. But I don't think there'd be a single person who could tell you that they really knew what they were fighting for. And you'd hear . . . people would write letters home or whatever. You want that. That's really . . .

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: That's one of the most important things . . .

SAUCEDA: Keeps you going.

WILSON: . . . to keep you going.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: You know, you wouldn't think that it's all that important, but it is. And the . . . uh, they would ask questions: "What's it really like?" and things like that. But there was a disconnect there. It's like two different worlds. Um, I don't know how to say it any different. It's just not like . . . you step out the door, and you're in a different universe.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm. Very different.

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: Hm. All righty, um . . .

WILSON: And . . .

SAUCEDA: Go ahead.

WILSON: And I was just going to say, the kids that I knew . . . that was the thing after the fact when I saw what it did to the Vietnamese people who had nothing to do with combat. Little kids, not able to care for themselves, put in a boat and told, "I hope you survive. I don't know that I'll ever see you again, but this is better than being here." And I had some of those students . . . some of those kids as students later on. They, um . . . and then pictures that they had when they went home and saw their parents after twenty years or something like that.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: I had a class that was half Vietnamese and half not Vietnamese.

BOTH: [Chuckle.]

WILSON: And I had them work together in groups—at least one Vietnamese in every group—to put a chapter together, and one of them was interesting. He said a lot of the Vietnamese people didn't know that . . . didn't think Americans had any eyes.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: I've probably told you that one before.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Because they wore those silver reflective glasses.

SAUCEDA: Right, those glasses.

WILSON: Mm-hmm. Uh, yeah that's a . . . you get an awful feeling, but you can't . . . how do you deal with that? On the one hand, these neat kids, neat people, wonderful food. On the other hand, you don't know who's going to stab you in the back.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Yeah. And why am I here, and who's going kill me?

SAUCEDA: Right. Um, kind of a spin off, uh, in my English class, there was a poet that we went and saw where it was like the same kid that you were playing basketball or playing with, uh, yesterday could be the same kid trying to kill you tomorrow.

WILSON: Yeah. Yeah, exactly!

SAUCEDA: It's just one of those things.

WILSON: And you see that now, too, to a certain extent. And what's so bad about Vi . . . uh, Iraq and Afghanistan is that the CIA or the DEA may be protecting a drug lord there because he gives them information about competitors who are sending drugs to . . .

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: That's one major poppy area growing there.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Uh so, they would defend highly corrupt people who may have killed some of the people that you knew. That's hard to . . . you know. How do you . . . you say, "You all . . . you have to." And it's true. In intelligence, you always have to look at the bigger picture, but it doesn't mean it doesn't drive you crazy.

SAUCEDA: Yeah, I bet. Pull your hair sometimes. Um, kind of going closer to the end of the war, um, kind of whenever you're heading back home, um, did you expect any, I guess, kind of controversy or any challenges heading back?

WILSON: I didn't expect the . . . the animosity.

SAUCEDA: Right, I know it was really brutal for a lot of soldiers.

WILSON: Yep. And . . . and all these people . . .

SAUCEDA: But did you expect that?

WILSON: . . . calling you “baby killers.”

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: And, um . . . and spitting on the uniform. Um, people were . . . they were confused. Uh, I don't . . . I don't have any problem with them opposing the war. I wasn't exactly . . . I wasn't exactly a person that said, “Yeah, this is a war that we need to be fighting.” But I would hope they would respect the uniform.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Uh, you had the My Lai Massacre, which all said and done that's a lot of people. But again, things happen in combat, and you don't excuse them. You don't even begin to say they're right, but the public can pick up on it and see. This is an example of . . . they generalize to everybody. The most recent thing was Abu Ghraib we . . . they had when they were questioning prisoners. They'd been told to use extreme methods on the prisoners. Uh, they weren't nearly what the other side was doing to our guys. It doesn't mean that we should do it, but unless you've been there, and you understand the situation, you ought to be a little bit . . .

SAUCEDA: More understanding?

WILSON: Yeah, more willing to listen.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Um, you know from your own experience here that there are some teachers that have a strict rule, and there's no way you can . . . you have an 89.9 average; that's not a 90.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: And I mean, that . . . they might say that, and they go by that, and they don't see a . . . you . . . they don't see any reason . . . well, no one's computations are perfect. In fact, they're not even totally objective. They're somewhat subjective. But I had a call today. A student wants to get into a class. First of all, it's closed. Secondly, it's past the last date to add. What would you say?

SAUCEDA: On that? It's hard to bend a rule for one person, and then you've got to do it for the next if it does get . . . get out like that, but it's just . . .

WILSON: Well, what you do is you ask for more information.



SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Last weekend, his father died, and he was at home, um, with, um . . . uh, with his family, as he should have been, and he couldn't really do very much during that time. Even if he could have, it's not a time that you're going to be able to . . . to think of what's important.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: That's one thing. Another thing is, um, he is a student athlete, and if he . . . he's going to have to drop a course, he would be below the minimum, and he wouldn't be able to continue.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: So, a death in the family, and everything cascades to the point. The saying, um . . . um, "Rules are made for the guidance of the wise and the obedience of idiots," or "the strict obedience of idiots."

SAUCEDA: [Laughs.]

WILSON: Um, you know, that . . . that . . . I was glad to accommodate the student, and I would like to have thi . . . thought that, uh, after that situation in Vietnam, people would be willing to give the military some slack on a situation over which they had no control. And there's no PFC out there . . . [chuckles] I take that back. One of the things that was done, if you were a captor of a group of Vietnamese . . . of Viet Cong. You know what . . . you know what C-4 is?

SAUCEDA: Right, like a bomb.

WILSON: It's an explosive. Well, one of the ways you set it off is with a detonating cord, and this cord itself burns at huge feet and so much so that it's a blast itself. You take that and you wrap it around the tree, you set it off, and it blows the tree down. Then you take that and you wrap it around each one of their necks, and you march them with that, and you've got the detonator in your hand.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: [Chuckles] That's one of the ways they moved prisoners. Uh . . . um, but when you've had people turn on you, you take more care. We've gotten better at that. We understand it better now, and that's why we've got the SEAL teams, and the special forces people and so forth, and the SAS in Britain. They work better together to . . . to know what the line is you don't cross.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: But it just seemed to me that . . . uh, the people . . . people just didn't have any . . .

SAUCEDA: Any knowledge of actually what . . .

WILSON: Well, they gave no slack. They made an assumption that if you're in the military, you must be a very evil person, and that went on for a long time. And that took . . . so, you find so many people who are homeless, dropouts from society and so forth, who were in Vietnam. And of course, they're dying now, but you'll still see some at the Vietnam memorial. And there's another memorial that is . . . is meaningful, and what has more to do with Korea, but it's still like Vietnam. It's very near that. It's a group of soldiers that are moving in a line, and they have on their . . . their, uh, rain part . . . ponchos, and . . . and they use . . . they're using the correct weapons that were used in Vietnam, too. And then over by the Lincoln Memorial on the hillside is the Korean War Memorial. Uh, these are . . . these more represent what the troop was going like. You just wanted to live to the next day. And if you . . . if somebody was working with you or around you, or doing something that made your life risky for no reason, they didn't last long.

SAUCEDA: Wow.

WILSON: It's . . . it's a . . .

SAUCEDA: With challenges, you said that, uh, many people were homeless.

WILSON: Yeah.

SAUCEDA: Was it hard whenever you moved back to like maybe get a home or a car, or possibly like a job? Or whenever you went out in everyday life, was it, uh, just different? People look at you different? Uh, treat you different?

WILSON: You didn't . . . I sure didn't emphasize my military service. Um, I started interviewing when I knew I was going to get out, and I had several interviews mostly with oil companies. And with oil companies, they didn't have any problem with that. Uh, I couldn't . . . I didn't get a single interview at a university. I did one. One was the military academy. I mean, the Naval Academy.

SAUCEDA: Mm.

WILSON: And the pay was so low, I . . . I . . . I maybe should've gone there. I don't know. I went to work for Exxon in Houston, and I did some . . . I did some interesting things there. I used my analytical abilities, but I . . . then I . . . then I, after three years, I decided that corporate life wasn't for me. I'm not . . . uh, I went to Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York, and I taught there until I came here, but that . . . that wasn't . . . for a lot of people, if you come . . . what . . . what you bring in the room with you when you're going to talk to somebody, if you have . . . uh, if you've got a chip on your shoulder, if you are dealing with, um . . . an image or flashbacks, or you . . . you know. When you see somebody and you want to hire them, you want to know that you're going to fit in here, and you're going to be productive. I'm not interested in what I can do for you. I'm interested in what you can do for us if I'm going to hire somebody. And if they saw something there they didn't like, it made it very difficult, and a lot of people didn't because of the sense you felt that nobody likes you anyway.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: Uh, it was . . . uh, difficult at many times. I was fortunate I think. I'd had . . . I . . . I had more benefits than a lot of people did. I told you last time you were here that I got the Army Commendation Medal.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: And I went down to Fort Polk to get that, and all these troops were lined up back there. And the majority . . . the [chuckles] . . . it was really interesting because there was three or four battalions that were out there. They weren't all white guys. At least half of them were minorities.

SAUCEDA: Wow.

WILSON: So, the draft seemed to be selecting minorities. I don't know why. I don't know how that's possible. It's supposed to be random.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Uh, nowadays with the volunteer Army, you see more minorities in the military also. They're very competent. They have to pass pretty hard tests. But is that really representative of what we want our country to be? These things you never forget, you never stop thinking about. So, [chuckles] it's a side light, but in my class right now, I have fifty percent minorities in my class. Most of them Latinos. And that had not been the case when I came here. Uh, and I see that, if anything, maybe that . . . maybe that war contributed something to people recognizing that all people are the same thing. I don't know, and maybe I'm trying to rationalize the war.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles] Yeah, definitely trying to sum it up. Um, kind of looking back, um, now since we've kind of talked about your experiences and stuff like that, how do you kind of . . . how do you feel about, um, your military experience, and did you kind of have anything to say to people more spec . . . specifically my age or the younger generation that are possibly looking into joining the military?

WILSON: Yeah, I think that the military is an honorable profession, and we have some people who have made a lot of difference. Among them, I told you about, um . . . [chuckles] his name is on the Central High School building over there.

SAUCEDA: Hm.

WILSON: Um, and anyway, he's a black general, and a super good guy. And he was Chief of Staff, and then he was Secretary of State. Uh, super . . . Powell, General Powell. Um, super good guy, and a lot of these . . . the Army has changed a lot, so has the military. Uh, we had started this program over here in security studies, and the guy that set it up was a retired Air Force colonel—one of the best men I've ever known. And I think it's one of the . . . he would have been a superior officer to work with. Uh, they understand how to treat troops and so forth. Um, Marines are always crazy. They're lunatics.

SAUCEDA: [Laughs.]

WILSON: But, um, I know that one family here in town, they have . . . uh, the parents divorced. Um, both of the husband and the wife were selfish in my view. They had two boys. Neither boy did very well in school. Um, they grew up with their parents fighting.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Uh, one of them, when he graduated—he was in ROTC at Central High School—and when he graduated, he enlisted and went right in the Air Force. And he went in, already an E-3 already. So, you go in normally as an E-1, which is slick sleeve, nothing on your shoulder.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: And . . . and promotion is not all that fast, but he went in already as a, uh, private first class, which was good, and he's moved up because he . . . he found a home there. He had a . . . a group. Now, one of the most important things to be . . . to have an enjoyable life is that you've got some kind of a group to relate to. And you can find that in a military unit. Uh, you'll find bad apples anywhere you go. You'll find them in the dorm. You'll find them anywhere. Police, whatever, there's going to be, I say, two percent rotten, and you'll run into them.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: But, you . . . there are . . . there are noble careers, challenging careers, uh, a worthwhile place to serve in the military. If the Army hadn't been so corrupt, I probably would've stayed in. Um, if I'd have stayed in, I wouldn't have had some of the things . . . wouldn't have experienced some of the things I have, and I'm glad I have experienced those things. But I would say to anybody who was interested in it, if you want to serve, if you're thinking about serving, um, there are certain things you've got to be ready for, and if you can't deal with that, you don't belong in the military. You've got to be . . . you've got to have . . . be willing to contribute to the spirit of the group whatever that group is. You've got to be able to take orders and obey them. Um, you have to understand that because you want to do something, does not mean that you should be allowed to do it, and there's going to be some rules that seem to be arbitrary and silly but, in the bigger picture, might make some sense. Why do you have to have your hair cut so short? That goes back a long way to sanitation.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: Sanitation rules developed out of the military because they found they got typhus. They got typhoid. They got all kinds of diseases.

SAUCEDA: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: And [clears throat] if you've got your hair cut short, you're less likely to get lice, and . . . which is easy to get when you're in a muddy battlefield.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: But a lot of people don't like that. My son gets his hair cut short, and he . . . of course he's . . . uh, the other day, he went to McDonald's, and he was standing in line, and has his hair very short. He works on the base, so he gets his hair cut out there, and at McDonald's, they said, "You get a military discount, and thank you for your service."

BOTH: [Laugh.]

WILSON: Just going by his haircut. Uh, I think you can be respected a lot more now. People now will wear their, uh, military hats like, "I served on this ship."

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm, you see them more now.

WILSON: You see it.

SAUCEDA: Right, you see it more openly now.

WILSON: And I . . . I wear my Vietnam War hat occasionally, and I have that jacket up there that's an Army jacket, which I wear. But, by the way, is Vietnam . . .

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: That's the, uh, representation of the wall, and that's the Vietnam . . . that's the Vietnam Service Medal. But this isn't the medal; it's just a pin. But anyway, it has the Army colors on it. Why is the flag like this? It always was reversed. The col . . . the ba . . . the stars were over here, but now they're here.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: And what was the reason for that? It was a very important one. It's the idea of the flag moving into battle.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow [chuckles].

WILSON: And of course, your name on it. And one of the things that . . . I can't stand up very well. Uh, one of my students, uh, was in, uh, Afghanistan, and he gave me this and this. These coins are common. Units do them now. And this coin was . . . uh, he was in the 3rd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group. That's something pretty awesome he served in.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: And he . . . he . . . we talked a lot, and when he left, he said, "I want you to have this to remember me by." Here we go. I think it's in this pocket over here. Another fellow that I know was in, um—I'm still hunting for it—was in . . . uh, was a dentist of all things. Yeah, here

it is. He was a dentist, and he was in Baghdad, and he has a medal for, uh, valor. Not many dentists do dentistry under fire. But he was in the 447th Expeditionary Medical Squadron in . . . in Iraq.

SAUCEDA: Oh, wow.

WILSON: So, these things you kind of . . . you meet people and you change coins with them. To kind of . . . kind of to . . . sort of like a club . . .

SAUCEDA: Uh-huh.

WILSON: . . . in a way where you recognize each other's, and you kind of know certain things, you know. I know your experience, and you know mine.

SAUCEDA: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: That's, uh, kind of saying that it's commonly done now. It's sort of an inside thing [chuckles].

SAUCEDA: Hm. All righty. Kind of to wrap it up, um, I know you just kind of shared a couple things with me.

WILSON: Sure.

SAUCEDA: Just kind of the little coins and jacket. Was there anything else you maybe wanted to say or, uh, maybe kind of, uh, let people know?

WILSON: Well, I was, as I said, I . . . sometimes this is difficult. Uh, it is, um, with great pride I feel that I had a chance to serve in the military. I don't regret it at all, uh, in spite of the fact that there was a lot of corruption in the situation. I think it's a worthy and honorable career, but one should not go into it with . . . uh, feelings or ideas that, uh, "This is going to get me something." You're going to be serving, and, uh, that's actually what it is. And that's the kind of thing, and there's many great things that can happen to you [chuckles] and some bad things, too.

SAUCEDA: Right.

WILSON: Because you are signing on to put your life at risk. Uh, I don't know if I've really helped you at all in all of this. I'm kind of rambling.

SAUCEDA: Oh, no. I think I got what I needed. Let me turn it off.