

ORAL MEMOIRS
OF
WILLIAM FAIRBETTER
An interview conducted on
May 15, 2017

Interviewer: Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai

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 William Fairbetter are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on May 15, 2017.

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WONGSRICHANALAI: Could you please state your name, sir?

FAIRBETTER: William Manning Fairbetter.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And where and when were you born?

FAIRBETTER: Winters, Texas on March 19, 1936. Born at home, it cost five dollars.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you have any siblings?

FAIRBETTER: Yes, I had a sister and a brother.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And you came in today with some material from your father. What was his name?

FAIRBETTER: His name was Milton Haynes Fairbetter.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And he served in World War I.

FAIRBETTER: Right.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did he ever talk about his service?

FAIRBETTER: Yes, he liked to talk about what had happened all the way from, actually, Camp [Bowie] in Fort Worth, which is where he was trained, and going over on the ship to France and some of his war experiences there in WWI. It was high time in his life. He was very proud of his service, proud of what he did there. He put it on cassette tape, and the tapes were in pretty bad shape by the time I decided to try to get it down on hard copy so it was more understandable, because the tapes were in such bad shape. But did get the basics of what he had told us, and it was quite an experience.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Was he originally from Winters, Texas?

FAIRBETTER: He was born in Italy, Texas, south of Fort Worth. I guess when he entered the service he was in [Boyd], Texas, so that's where he was when he left for the army, and he came back there. But then he went to Fort Worth and eventually wound up in Winters.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And so you grew up in Winters?

FAIRBETTER: Well, I spent my first nine years there, then we moved to Gorman and I went to

high school there.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Where is Gorman?

FAIRBETTER: It's about 75 miles southeast of Abilene.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Is that still West Texas?

FAIRBETTER: To me it is, yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How would you define West Texas?

FAIRBETTER: Everything west of Fort Worth, as far as I'm concerned. That's Cowtown, and it's always been called Cowtown, and I've got a lot of relatives in Fort Worth. So I know Fort Worth pretty well. But to me that's when West Texas starts.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Is there anything unique about West Texas?

FAIRBETTER: Well I think the people are little bit tougher out here than they are a lot of places, and seems to be, as least as far as I've seen, friendlier than most parts of the country also.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And other parts of Texas as well?

FAIRBETTER: Well I don't really, I don't really have any grudge against any other part of Texas, but I feel more comfortable where there's some open space. I was talking about that the other day with some fellas at . . . They were saying when they got into a country where there's a lot of big trees they just felt kind of closed in, just couldn't quite totally relax. Or when they get in that open space, it felt like they were okay. I think that's probably the way it is with everybody from the wild west out here. This is one of those places where your friends can call you Wild Bill and being in good humor about it and it sounds okay.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And so what did your family do when you were growing up?

FAIRBETTER: My dad worked at the post office and part of the time he was a rural carrier, part of time worked inside as a clerk. My mother taught school part of the time and she spent a number years as a editor of the Gorman newspaper.

WONGSRICHANALAI: When and where did you join the armed forces?

FAIRBETTER: In Stephenville. I believe it was 1955. It was the 36th Division of the National Guard. It was the same division my dad was in, in World War I, and I was in that company for, I don't know, maybe a year or so. I spent a little bit of time in a ordinance company in Fort Worth,

and probably a year and a half in a company in Cisco, Texas, the 49th Armored Division. Then I wound up in Stanford, a rifle company. I guess I was there for, I guess, three years. My MOS was listed as fire team leader and rifle squad.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What motivated you to enlist?

FAIRBETTER: Well, I knew, since this was during the time when you get drafted, if you pass any kind of physical, I knew sooner or later I'd end up in the military, and I decided to get some experience ahead of time. I hoped that would help me when I did get called in, and I thought probably I would be activated, but never was. So, I spent five years of drills and vacation two weeks at Fort Hood and I enjoyed it. I learned quite a bit and I got the expert infantry badge and qualification badge on M-1 rifle and Carbine rifle and a 45 pistol. Like I said, before when we were talking earlier I didn't really do anything except just be available if they needed to call me up and, of course, I was between Korea and Vietnam, in the years that I was actually making drills, and so I didn't ever get called to do anything important.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did your brother also enlist?

FAIRBETTER: No, he had Down Syndrome and so he was not able to do anything like that.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And was your father supportive of your enlistment?

FAIRBETTER: Yes, he was. I guess actually when I first signed up, I didn't realize it was the same division that he was in, in World War I, but I think he was somewhat proud of that fact.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Walk me through a typical day of being enlisted. What time would you get up, what would you do?

FAIRBETTER: Like at Fort Hood? Well, this is a long time ago, so my memory is not extremely good at this. I'm thinking we probably got rousted out about 6 o'clock in the morning and would have roll call by seven. For the first week, for instance, one of the years I was down there with the artillery company, I was in school for a week learning how to be a surveyor to survey the M44 Howitzer. It's a tract vehicle that carries a 155-millimeter Howitzer gun, and I had never done any surveying. That first week I spent everyday in class and most of the time not really knowing what was going on, but I found a master sergeant that was good enough to spend some time after class to explain things to me in cowboy language, so that I could understand what it was we were doing, and actually how to do it. And at the end of that time, we did. They assigned another fellow to me to carry the rod and I used the instrument for survey. We did actually survey in the location for the guns, and I wouldn't have thought you could do that in that short of time but, like I said, I certainly couldn't have done it without that sergeant.

That second week of course, what we did in that case, once we had surveyed that in, it was one of those situations where surveyors are not of much help after you've already got the weapons located so, for the most part, unless they some kind of detail they needed us to take care of, and tell us, "Go over on that hill and get in that brush. If we need you, we'll come after you. But we don't want you standing around looking like you don't anything to do." But that's kind of the way that particular two weeks went.

One or two week period I went down there, that was with the rifle company, and we had gone through a twelve mile forest march at Stanford, and I found out later that was the preliminary part of becoming expert infantryman. It was one of the requirements, so they ran us through that. I did manage to get that far in required time so, after that, we did actual physical training at Camp Barkley, out here close to Abilene. Did some compass work locating different points out there at Camp Barkley and qualified with the individual weapons and did some physical requirements. And then, when we went to Fort Hood that year, I ran the bayonet assault course and it was fairly extensive all the way to the point of learning how to search for land mines with a bayonet and things of that sort. But anyway, I did get the Expert Infantry Badge, which I was proud of. It's not nearly important as a Combat Infantry Badge, but at least it shows that you made some effort.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So how do you find a land mine with a bayonet?

FAIRBETTER: Very carefully. Actually, as I recall, we crouch down fairly low and when you saw there's a place there might be a suspicious, you'd push the bayonet into the ground at a sharp angle, not vertical, but horizontal and try to locate it. And hopefully they've come up with much better methods than that by now but that was what we did.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was the greatest challenge of being in the military?

FAIRBETTER: I guess I wasn't ever really challenged that much. I liked it. In fact, I talked to one of the guys that ran the armory and talked to him about going active duty after I had gotten to the corporal rank and, evidently they had explained things to me a little bit more elaborate than they really were. So this guy was honest enough tell me I could either get paid for my rank or I could get paid for my dependence and lose the rank. So I thought, well they'll call me up anyway, and so I'll just see where I am when I get called up. As it turned out, they never did call me but I had originally thought I would try to get to a corporal rank and then go active duty and serve active duty whatever time I needed to and then get out. Like I said, it turned out it was not quite the way I thought it was going to be. I did stay in long enough to be a sergeant but never did anything of great consequence. And I'm proud of my service but, like I said, about the only thing I did was just be there ready to go if they decided they needed me.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And so you left service in which year?

FAIRBETTER: Nineteen-sixty.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you face any challenges getting back into civilian life?

FAIRBETTER: No, ever since I was in the guard. What you do is, you go to drill most of the time, like on a Monday night. You belong to the army for about three hours on Monday nights. And then, sometimes, I don't know how many time a year, probably four or five times a year, you also belonged to them for a weekend and that's when you go to the rifle ranges. If they've get some other sort of training that you'll be doing for the weekend, and then two weeks in the summer each year. That's at Fort Hood. So really, you're a civilian most of the time, in that case. We didn't even get called up for . . . Well actually, I think the unit got called two or three

different times over the years. I was in that some kind of little emergency. But by the time I found out about it, it was already done, it was over, no heroic type things we were actually called up to do.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And what did you do after your service?

FAIRBETTER: Well, you mean occupation? I did quite a few things. I was in work for life insurance company during the time I was in and did also for a years after I got out. But then I went to work for a printing company. I had been in printing before I went in to work for the insurance company and eventually, about I guess 12 years. Well, like the *Reporter-News* in Abilene, six years. Probably six other years in printing in one way or another. I went from the *Reporter-News* to Citizens Bank to run a print shop for them and got promoted from that to print shop manager to property manger. And that job, I guess, I was between that for about five years as a manager of the property. It turned out be a job that combined everything that nobody else wanted to do such as leasing the property out, overseeing construction work, and renovation work, and several different departments such as the printing department, cafeteria, the parking garage, the maintenance people, the people that keep the air conditioning going and so forth, the people that cleaned the buildings and so forth. I had five different departments that reported to me and wound up doing most of the purchasing and was head of security. Like I said, kind of decided, "Well, if he's willing." So they did that for five years, the bank sold out to a holding company in Dallas and eventually they got rid of most of the upper management and most of the middle management, which is where I was, in middle management. So from there I ended up going into construction and stayed in that the rest of my working years.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Do you have any advice for young men and women who are joining now?

FAIRBETTER: Well, yes I think so. I think what they should do is to make sure they understand the service that they actually join, and that way they won't be disappointed if they find out what will be expected of them and what their opportunities will be. I think that that would be mainly what I would suggest to them.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Thank you very much for your time.

FAIRBETTER: Thank you for your time. As we discussed earlier, I'm no hero, I didn't do anything great, and I am proud of the service I gave. Sometimes I wish now that I had actually gotten into active duty because I . . . Like I said, I'm proud of what I did but I would've felt better if I would have done more. Matter of fact, if I could get in now, I would.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did we get all of the information about your father? Like what year he joined, the rank he attained?

FAIRBETTER: Well, let's see, I'm not sure about that. I think it was 19 . . . I think it was 1917 he got in. I believe that's in that document I brought, but he did train at Camp Bowie in Fort Worth, and I think that was for about a year. And then he went from there to New York, is where they shipped out for France. Actually I think the company that he was in, I think they were in

France more than 30 days, but I think they were not actually at the front area more than about thirty days right at the end of the war. It was a pretty active situation, where he was. He got to be a corporal, and they offered him sergeant rank if he would stay in as part of the occupying force in Europe but he declined on that and came back. I think probably after the war he was there for several months, learned how to ski and did some things in France. I couldn't talk him into staying longer.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And then you retired as a sergeant.

FAIRBETTER: Yes.