

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

DARLA CAMRON

An interview conducted on

March 26, 2017

Interviewer: Jana Camron

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 Darla Camron are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 26, 2017.

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The electronic file and complete transcript of this interview were processed in the Department of History at Angelo State University and are available at the Dr. Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.

J. CAMRON: My name is Jana Camron. It is March 26, 2017, and we are at 2109 Dartmouth Place, San Angelo, Texas.

D. CAMRON: My name's Darla Camron.

J. CAMRON: Okay. When and where were you born and where did you grow up?

D. CAMRON: I was born in Lovington, New Mexico . . . um in 1962. I grew up, early years, just about all over: Winters, Fort Worth, Ballinger. Um but then we moved here to San Angelo, went to first and second grade, then we moved to Big Spring where I um went the rest of my school-age years.

J. CAMRON: Cool. Um what is the name of your relative who served in the armed forces?

D. CAMRON: His name's Larry Calcote.

J. CAMRON: And how are you related to him?

D. CAMRON: He is my uncle by marriage.

J. CAMRON: When did they enlist in the armed forces?

D. CAMRON: Um during that time, there were drafts going on. Um, my uncle had a very low draft number, so therefore, he decided to enlist into the Texas National Guard. Um, he was in the National Guard for a year or two and then several of his buddies convinced him just to go ahead and sign up for the Army itself.

J. CAMRON: What . . . Oh, you just said what branch they were in. Um . . . what years were they in the service?

D. CAMRON: Uh, he was in the service from nineteen-sixty . . . six in the National Guard and then enlisted in late part of '67 into the Army and then stayed . . . three years, I believe.

J. CAMRON: So, not that long?

D. CAMRON: No.

J. CAMRON: In which military conflict did they take part?

D. CAMRON: He was in the Vietnam War.

J. CAMRON: Oh. So, a long time ago?

D. CAMRON: Yes.

J. CAMRON: Why did they enlist in the armed forces? I feel like you just answered that.

D. CAMRON: Yes, it was because of his low draft number, so he enlisted into the Texas Army National Guard.

J. CAMRON: What were your thoughts about your family member's decision to serve?

D. CAMRON: At the time, it didn't really hit. All I knew was that my uncle was going to go off for . . . they said about eighteen months. But then when he actually joined the Army itself and they sent him to Vietnam, that's when it really hit because my family started watching all the news about the war on the television. And so, that's when it became real to me.

J. CAMRON: So, what were your hopes or concerns about their service?

D. CAMRON: Uh my concerns were really just that I didn't want to lose my uncle. But at the same time, I was watching my aunt—who, at the time, was pregnant with their first child when he left—and she was a nervous wreck, you know? She couldn't have the television on because of . . . They were just so graphic and everything, showing, you know, the bombed-out places and bodies and everything. So, seeing her being traumatized by this . . . because we're only eight years apart and you know, she was a very young mother. And you know, it was devastating to watch her—you know, someone that was more like my sister than an aunt—go through all of this.

J. CAMRON: I can only imagine. What were your hopes or concerns . . . Oh, did we just . . . I think we just did that one.

D. CAMRON: Yes.

J. CAMRON: Was your family deployed overseas?

D. CAMRON: Yes, in Vietnam.

J. CAMRON: What was your conception of the United States at the time of your family member's service?

D. CAMRON: Um, my conception was that I couldn't believe that they would send someone over, you know, even though I was only seven, eight, nine when he was deployed. And I just did not understand why. Why do you send people over there into something like that? You know, I could hear my parents talk about, you know . . . them calling the Vietnamese all different kinds of things—"commies" and everything else—and there was a whole lot of mixed feelings. How could you talk about someone else in that way? Because at the time, I didn't really realize they were the ones that were actually killing our soldiers. So, that . . . you know, that had an impact on everything.

J. CAMRON: So, if Larry participated in a military conflict, what was your understanding of the Vietnam War?

D. CAMRON: Uh, I honestly didn't have an understanding of the Vietnam War. All I knew was that my uncle was over there, and it was tragically affecting my family members. It wasn't until I was older, probably in high school, and started taking government classes and history class that I understood the real . . . you know, just really understood what the consequences of the Vietnam War were.

J. CAMRON: What were your most vivid memories of your family member's time in service?

D. CAMRON: My most vivid memories is just seeing everything on T.V. You know, for a six, seven, eight, nine-year-old, you know, when all of that's going on, to see images like that on a T.V. screen . . . you know, you're going, "That doesn't happen here in the United States, so why? Why is it happening over there? Why are men having to fight over there?" Um, it would give you nightmares. I mean, this is something that a small child should not have to . . . have to see or you know, even . . . you know, another enlisted man. You know, their kids—their own kids—shouldn't have to see things like that. So, it had a huge influence.

J. CAMRON: I agree. Um was he in active combat or did he have a different position?

D. CAMRON: No, he was in active combat. Um I don't really remember where he was at, but I just remember my parents always talking that he was in one of the main fighting areas, you know. And um he was captured for . . . approximately six months but then was released. Um, from what I understood, they traded some soldiers or something. The Vietnam and uh United States traded soldiers, and he was one of the ones that was released.

J. CAMRON: Wow. Was your relative wounded in action?

D. CAMRON: No.

J. CAMRON: Okay. Um if your relative was a prisoner of war, did you know if he or she was dead or alive?

D. CAMRON: Um, there for the first two or three months, we did not know, but we weren't getting regular correspondence from Uncle Larry. So, you know, we'd go a month without hearing from him. And it all just depended on where they were at and how much fighting was going on in the area that they were at. So, you know, when you don't hear from him for three months, it . . . You know, you really began to worry.

J. CAMRON: I would worry. Um . . . what were your fears about your family member's return home?

D. CAMRON: Um, my fears were not knowing whether he had been injured or whether they were telling me the truth about what was going on, you know, with him. Um, they tried to not talk about it much around my cousins and I but, you know, as a young child, you're beginning to have a pretty vivid imagination. So, seeing images on the screen, you're going, "Oh, my gosh." You know, "Was his arm blown off?" Or you know, no telling what could've happened to him. So . . . so, yeah, I was . . . I was concerned when he returned home.

J. CAMRON: Did your family face any difficulties or challenges as they reintegrated into civilian life?

D. CAMRON: Yes. Um, any loud noises, he would just really panic. Um, when he got home and . . . with his firstborn . . . born um son, Jim, crying in the middle of the night would startle him and set him off. I remember I would always go spend a lot of time with Bobbie and Larry and he would wake up screaming in the middle of the night and that . . . you know, back then I don't really think they called it PTSD but, you know, he definitely had some post-traumatic . . . you know.

J. CAMRON: Stress.

D. CAMRON: Stress going on. Uh he worked on farm equipment and even using of the heavy tools he had to use . . . and the noises . . . If he got caught off guard, you know, he would have to go to a different area of the shop, some place that was quiet, and settle down before, you know, he could resume work. It took a while for him to get over that.

J. CAMRON: Is your family member a Texas native?

D. CAMRON: Yes.

J. CAMRON: Um how do you think that shapes their experiences in the military? So, how does Texas influence their time in the military?

D. CAMRON: Uh, I don't really know that I can answer that question. Um . . .

J. CAMRON: Okay. We can . . . We can go on.

D. CAMRON: Yeah.

J. CAMRON: Did your family member's time in the military change your conception of Texas in any way?

D. CAMRON: Uh, some, yes, since he first went into the Texas National Guard. You know, I didn't exactly at the time realize that soldiers from all over the nation were going over there. I just thought Texas. You know, he was in the Texas National Guard. At first, they didn't exactly tell us that he had joined the Army but . . . or if they did I don't remember it. But yeah, I just thought, "Why are they just sending, you know, just Texas soldiers over there?" I . . . being young, I didn't realize that this was a nationwide, you know, thing that, you know . . . that soldiers from all over the nation were going.

J. CAMRON: Do you think if you were a little bit older this could've um . . . you could've understood this a little bit more?

D. CAMRON: Oh, definitely. Oh, definitely. Most definitely. Because I mean, you know, you're

not fully developed emotionally. And you see people crying around you but you're going, "Why are they crying?" And then you have to stop and think, "Oh, you know, my uncle's in a warzone and so they're going to cry because they don't know about, you know, their husband or their son or their niece or nephew over there." So . . .

J. CAMRON: Has this changed your conception of the United States?

D. CAMRON: Oh, yes. Because the more I learned about the Vietnam War, you know, why . . . Why in the world were we even in it? So, if I remember right, Nixon was the president and then Johnson, I believe. Or no?

J. CAMRON: I think it's the other way around.

D. CAMRON: Okay.

J. CAMRON: Johnson then Nixon.

D. CAMRON: Johnson and then Nixon. But, yeah, I can remember them not being very fond of our president and everything, so, yeah, it did affect that.

J. CAMRON: Do you have any items, objects, or correspondence that you wish to share with the project?

D. CAMRON: Um, at the time—this has been years ago—I had a letter from him. And it is in with my mother's stuff at her house, and I would one of these days like to find it and everything. And he sent me this little uh medal thing from over there that is with the letter.

J. CAMRON: Do you have any concluding remarks to make? Either advice to people enlisting now or just any concluding statements that you have about what you said?

D. CAMRON: Uh, really, all I can say is that it's really hard for a six, seven, eight, nine-year-old to grasp the understanding of, you know, our country being at war. And I think our military leaders and the leaders of the government need to think more about our families. We go into conflicts trying to help people, like the Iraq War and everything but, you know, the thing is when we pulled out of Iraq, part of it went back to be the same way. So, we have to look at all aspects. Can . . . Can we change the people? You know, do the people really want to become a democratic society? What are we going over there fighting for? And you know, is the lives of our servicemen worth it? And I think that's the thing that I came out with. Because I mean, that made a huge impression on me, you know, when I was younger. And I just do not understand why we have to be in some of the conflicts that we are, you know, and put our, you know, moms, dads, and our children in harm's way.

J. CAMRON: Well, thank you so much for letting me interview you.

D. CAMRON: You're welcome.