

Transcription: Elmer Allen

Good morning. Today is Friday, October 25, 2013. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Elmer Allen. We are at the William Courtney Texas State Veterans Home in Temple, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas General Land Office Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today. It's an honor for me and for our program. Sir, the first question I always like to start with during these interviews is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the Army.

Elmer Allen: Well, I was born and raised on a farm in Alabama. We raised cotton and corn, tracking behind a mule in the field, and then during harvest time in the summer, I'd get little odds and ends jobs to make a little outside money, you know. But farming, in the spring we plant the crop, you know, and then during the summer waiting for time to harvest, I did little odds and ends jobs like sawmill or railroad or whatever, you know.

What town were you closest to in Alabama?

Elmer Allen: Camp Hill, Alabama.

Camp Hill, all right. Where is that in relation to Birmingham or Montgomery?

Elmer Allen: It's 101 miles south of Birmingham, and it's 65 miles east of Montgomery. It's 49 miles west of Columbus, Georgia.

Okay, I got a good idea where that is then. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Elmer Allen: Yeah, there were five brothers and three sisters.

Five brothers and three sisters.

Elmer Allen: Ain't but two of us living now. One sister in Cleveland, Ohio.

Did you enjoy growing up on a farm or was it tough life, tough work?

Elmer Allen: Well, yeah. It was all right. I enjoyed it. That's all I know. I was born and raised on the farm. I was a regular field hand when I was seven years old, what I could do, you know. But a lot of things I couldn't do, you know. In the summer when almost time for harvest, you know, get to harvesting the crop, wait for the corn to ripen up where you could pull the blade harder, pull it apart, you know. A lot of times in the field, you know, I wasn't tall enough to reach the top of the stalk of corn. I'd bend it over to pull the blade off, you know. But I was seven years old and I had to work in the field like the rest of 'em. I was only seven years old. And then about three years later, my daddy hired me and two more of my brothers to gather crop for a guy. I was 10 years old, other brother 12, and older brother 15, and we gathered a crop for a guy only two miles from us, you know, and I was 10 years old, other brother was 12, and my older brother 15. Only time we would see the sunshine at home was on Sunday. It was harvest time to work.

Lot of work, hard work I imagine.

Elmer Allen: That's right.

Did you get to go to school at all?

Elmer Allen: Yeah, I went to school. I made the sixth grade while I was there. When I learned how to plow, my school days was over, see. I finished high school in the Army.

Really?

Elmer Allen: When I went in the Army, every chance I got, I'd go to school.

What year did you go into the Army, because I see you're a Korean War vet?

Elmer Allen: Yeah, I went in the Army the 29th of November in '48, when I went in the Army.

The 29th of November, 1948.

Elmer Allen: That's right.

And the Army had just been desegregated at that point, I think, by President Truman.

Elmer Allen: Well, it really didn't integrate it but the outfit that I was in, they didn't integrate until, let's see, integrated in '53.

In '53, so quite a while. What unit were you with?

Elmer Allen: When I first went in, I was in the 367th Infantry in Fort Knox, Kentucky, and then from there to the 450th AAA in Fort Stewart, Georgia, and then went to the, let's see, 53rd TC . . .

Sir, were you an infantryman? Was that your . . .?

Elmer Allen: I began in infantry but wound up in artillery.

Okay. Were you drafted?

Elmer Allen: Drafted, that's right.

What did you think about that when you got the notice you'd been drafted? Was it something that you were excited about or did you not want to go or . . .?

Elmer Allen: I really didn't want to go but, I mean, you had no choice. I got drafted on the 29th of November in '48. I was drafted. I was staying at Chattanooga, Tennessee then. I got drafted in the Army and I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for basic training. Took basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Was your basic training segregated?

Elmer Allen: Oh, yeah. It was segregated. They didn't integrate until '52. It was in the fall of '52 they integrated. I was in Fort Stewart, Georgia, but our outfit didn't integrate until in the spring of '53, 'cause we were fixing to go from Camp Stewart, Georgia, to Fort Monroe, Virginia, and so they just didn't integrate until they got to Fort Monroe. When we got to Fort Monroe, they took half of the colored guys from Fort Monroe and sent them to Fort Meade,

Maryland, and took half of the whites from Fort Meade, Maryland, going to Fort Monroe. And that way they integrated.

How did integration go for your unit? Was it pretty easy or was there a lot of conflict over it?

Elmer Allen: Well, at the beginning there was a lot of conflict.

That's just unimaginable to me. I'm in the Marine Corps, and when you go to basic training, everybody you treated the same, background, and it's just different times.

Elmer Allen: You know just about what's you's talking about. You was thinking just like it was. That's right.

So when your outfit started to integrate, did you feel like that was going to be the way of the future? Did you think things were going to start to slowly get better at that point?

Elmer Allen: At the beginning, it started off, it was pretty rough at the beginning. But our company commander, last name was Zelzak. He was from New York, you know. And so, he was acquainted with integration, you know. So he told them, said, "A soldier was a soldier regardless of what color he was. He was a soldier," you know. And so he straightened it up, yeah, Lieutenant Zelzak. He got the company straightened out, you know.

That's great.

Elmer Allen: But, I'll tell you, he was, before that happened, he was rough on us, you know.

Really?

Elmer Allen: No kidding, he was sure enough rough 'cause it was me and four more soldiers went AWOL one time, you know.

Oh, you went AWOL?

Elmer Allen: Yeah, we went AWOL one weekend because we checked the roster before we went, you know, and so we wasn't on no duty for the weekend, and they give so many of 'em a pass, and so me and this other three white guys, we went AWOL, you know.

This was at Fort Stewart, Georgia?

Elmer Allen: No, this was in Fort Monroe, Virginia.

Fort Monroe, okay.

Elmer Allen: And so when they got us, the MPs caught us, and never did have a pass, you know, so all of us, we had to wait there, get a Article 15 back to the company. They give you Article 15, you know.

Yeah.

Elmer Allen: And that's extra duty, punishment, you know.

Sure.

Elmer Allen: And so this lieutenant, he was from, I forget where he was from. Let's see, Lieutenant Wallace. Rex Wallace, that was his name.

You've got a good memory.

Elmer Allen: Yeah. So they give us all extra duty, you know. So there were four of us. For the three white guys the extra duty was soap and water and rag washing windows, and my extra duty was an old building tore down out in a field, with my dirty pick and shovel digging up them bricks, you know.

So you got harder punishment then?

Elmer Allen: I sure did. I was out there in the field, out in the hot sun with a pick and shovel, and the white guys, they was on stepladders washing windows.

Where was that Lieutenant Wallace from?

Elmer Allen: Lieutenant Wallace, he was from Georgia someplace.

So he was from the south?

Elmer Allen: Yeah, he was from someplace in Georgia.

Because the other lieutenant you mentioned had been from New York, and was more fair treatment.

Elmer Allen: Yeah, he was straight, that's right.

So probably some sort of bias there.

Elmer Allen: That's right, that's right. Exactly the way it was, see. Yeah, some of them outfits I was in were real good and some of them wasn't.

How long did you serve in the Army?

Elmer Allen: Twenty years and five months.

So you retired from the Army?

Elmer Allen: Retired from the Army, yeah.

When did you think that you might want to make a career out of it?

Elmer Allen: Well, I decided I'd make a career out of it in February of '49. See, my daddy died.

Pretty early on then?

Elmer Allen: That's right. I hadn't been long in the Army but when my daddy died, my mother couldn't get his social security. They told her they wasn't taking out social security. He worked for a lumber company there in Camp Hill, Alabama, and they told her they wasn't taking out no social security on him. And so she took the check stubs to the social security place and showed it to 'em, and they told her that they was taking it out but they wasn't sending it in so she couldn't

get nothing. And so I said, "Well, somebody's take care of this." Stayed in the Army, worked to take care of mama, you know.

That's great.

Elmer Allen: And then when they found out about 16 years later, my mother moved to Cleveland, Ohio, my older brother in Cleveland, Ohio, she went there so she got that back pay and everything.

Good they finally got it. Unfortunately took 16 years to straighten it out.

Elmer Allen: Sixteen years, that's right. Nothing you could do about it.

You said, sir, you were in the infantry and then you went to the artillery at some point.

Elmer Allen: Right, basic training in the infantry, and then went to artillery. And when I went to artillery, you see, they checked my vocation record. I went to vocational school before I went in the Army, and they checked my record. They saw what I went to school, you know, different jobs I could do. I could do carpenter and mechanic, and just several odds and ends jobs I could do so they found out I could do that so they assigned me to the outfit, utility company 'cause I could do just about anything. If and when the break, something over there breaks, I'd fix it, you know and all.

Sure.

Elmer Allen: Every time we moved to a new outfit, you know, I'd build a bulletin board and things for outside and everything. I went to carpenter school a few years before then so . . .

You had the skill set to do that sort of thing.

Elmer Allen: Yes, I was just a utility in the company, you know.

That's great.

Elmer Allen: Just little odds and ends, you know. And Major Pitts, he seemed more like an enlisted man than officer, he did. He was captain but went up and made major. And he was just, you know, he counted on me for anything.

He got along well with the troops I guess?

Elmer Allen: Oh yeah, he got along well. And everybody in the company knows me, you know. They'd come up with some kind of work. You see I went to carpenter school for 16 weeks at __, Alabama, and we built houses. We built . . . You probably heard of Henry C. Beck, the construction company. The one headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, and one in Dallas, Texas.

Okay, big company.

Elmer Allen: Yeah, Henry C. Beck. And what it was, see when the war ended, the soldier barracks where the soldiers were staying in then, they traded them to housing projects, and they remodeled for housing projects, and I worked on that for, oh, I guess about five or six years on that, you know.

Did you go to Korea and Vietnam later on at some point too?

Elmer Allen: Yeah, that's right.

Tell us, sir, about your memories of Korea.

Elmer Allen: Korea. Well, see, actually I was never on the ground in Korea.

Okay.

Elmer Allen: But I went over it several times but I was never on the ground. But Vietnam, that's where I was. I hauled bombs in Vietnam driving an 18-wheeler.

An 18-wheeler in Vietnam. What are your memories of Vietnam?

Elmer Allen: I hauled bombs and it was scary all the time there because, you know, you get up in the morning. Every day you get up and wonder will you live to see the sun set. At night, you wonder if you'll live to see the sun rise the next morning.

Were you on convoys carrying the . . . ?

Elmer Allen: Hauling ammunition, hauling bombs, that's right, yeah. I hauled bombs. Really dangerous job. I was hauling 15 tons at a time though. And when they would hit one of them trucks, you know, you can imagine about what happened when 15 tons of bombs go up at a time.

Yeah, you're driving an explosive vehicle.

Elmer Allen: When they hit one of them trucks, all you would find, the truck was scrap iron and the driver was hamburger meat sticking up on the bushes around there. That's what it was.

Yeah.

Elmer Allen: And they told me, I stayed scared too. I stayed scared. The whole 16 months I was over there, I was scared.

Do you remember what years that was?

Elmer Allen: Let's see, it was in, I came over there . . . I was over there in '63, I believe it was.

So pretty early on in Vietnam then, so '63, '64 time period?

Elmer Allen: Somewhere along in there.

Yeah. Were you married at that point? You were single?

Elmer Allen: I got married in '55 I believe it was. I believe '55 when I got married.

So when you went to Vietnam, you were married then?

Elmer Allen: Let's see, Vietnam, yeah, '55, that's right. I think, let me see. Yeah, I think so. Yeah, I was.

How did your wife feel about you being in Vietnam? I'm sure that had to have been tough for her.

Elmer Allen: She did all right. She was staying with her mother and dad, both were living. So she was staying with them.

That's good. How did you get to be assigned as a truck driver? Is that something that you wanted to do or they told you you were going to do it?

Elmer Allen: They would check out, take a bunch of soldiers and check 'em out, see what the best fit for. That's what they'd put them on, see.

They taught you how to drive a vehicle, and the next thing you know you're driving explosives in Vietnam.

Elmer Allen: That's right. What are you best fit for, that's what you do. I was driving 12 hours a day, seven days a week. I was over there 16 months. I missed five days of work.

That's a long deployment too, to be over there 16 months.

Elmer Allen: That's right. I missed five days of work out of 16 months. Weren't no such thing as Sunday or holiday. We got paid on the fly. The _ room was the side the road, and the platoon sergeant would tell us when we passing by the _ room, if there were less than a dozen in line, pull over the shoulder of the road, get out of the truck, go get paid and get in that truck and road, you see. We had no time off.

Yeah, every day's the same.

Elmer Allen: Yeah, wasn't no such thing as Sunday.

Or holidays or anything.

Elmer Allen: No holidays, nothing.

That's the way it is. When did you retire from the Army?

Elmer Allen: I was staff sergeant when I retired.

Do you remember what year that was?

Elmer Allen: I retired in '63, I believe it was. I think it was '63 when I retired. But the main thing, remember what they tell ya, do what they tell ya.

Remember your training, sure.

Elmer Allen: That's right, you'll do better.

How did you come to be in Texas?

Elmer Allen: We came, we were in the 2nd AD. The 2nd AD was in, let's see . . . I came here with the 2nd AD.

At Fort Hood?

Elmer Allen: Came to Fort Hood with the 2nd AD. I don't remember what year it was. That's when I came back. See, I was in Germany when President Kennedy was killed. I was in Germany. I was on CQ that night, and I came back shortly after then, and then I came to Fort Hood.

So I guess you liked Fort Hood and the central Texas area enough that you made it home then, after you got out of the Army? Stayed here?

Elmer Allen: Oh, yeah. I just stayed here after I got out of the Army. After I retired at the Army in '63, '62, somewhere along there.

So you got out and then did you live in Killeen or somewhere in the area?

Elmer Allen: No, I lived in Temple.

In Temple.

Elmer Allen: I drive me . . . There's about three or four of us carpoled together in the Army, you know. One would drive a day, and the next would drive another day, and make it rotate that way.

That makes sense. That makes a lot of sense.

Elmer Allen: Yeah.

What did you do, sir, after you got out of the Army and you were in Temple? Did you work in Temple?

Elmer Allen: When I got out of the Army, I went to work at VA Hospital.

Here in Temple?

Elmer Allen: I worked at the VA Hospital, then I retired from there.

Great. So you retired from the U.S. Army as well as the Veterans Administration.

Elmer Allen: That's right.

That's great.

Elmer Allen: Wasn't nobody gonna give me nothing. If I keep on living, I'm gonna be too old to work in a while. You know how that is, you know.

You said, sir, you're 90 now?

Elmer Allen: Ninety, that's right.

You look like you're doing great.

Elmer Allen: I'm doing pretty good, you know.

Yes sir.

Elmer Allen: 'Course when I got back here, they sent me . . . I stayed scared so when I got back here they sent me to the, let's see now, the VA here in Temple, you know. And they said that my main heart artery was 95 percent closed up. I get five percent blood to my heart, that's all I was getting. So the chief medical surgeon, he called for an ambulance in Marlin to take me to Audie Murphy in San Antone. Only getting five percent of the blood to my heart I was supposed to be getting.

They got it fixed though I guess?

Elmer Allen: They got it fixed.

That's great.

Elmer Allen: Yeah, and they told me then just to be careful. Don't do any heavy work or anything like that 'cause I was only getting five percent blood to my heart I was supposed to be getting.

Sure, yeah, had the blockage.

Elmer Allen: That's right. You might could see a pretty little wire running along up there with a piece of wire here at the end of it.

I'm glad they were able to get it fixed for you.

Elmer Allen: Yeah, they got it fixed up.

How long have you been here at the Courtney Home?

Elmer Allen: Oh, about, let's see. About a year now I think, close to a year. Yeah, about a year. I can't remember too well but it's about a year, I think.

Are the folks here pretty friendly?

Elmer Allen: Oh, yeah.

How's the food?

Elmer Allen: It's fine.

That's good. Sir, did you and your wife have any kids? Do you have any children?

Elmer Allen: I have one daughter. She's living in Temple.

Oh, great.

Elmer Allen: She's living there. She's living in my house in Temple.

Oh, that's good.

Elmer Allen: My wife passed away last year.

I'm sorry to hear that. It's nice that your daughter is close then.

Elmer Allen: That's right. She's living in our house there in Temple.

That's great.

Elmer Allen: I was just trying to wonder what kind of problem would it be. See, I'm in this here veterans home here. I wonder if I could get to a nursing home in Temple where I'd be at home, right by where my daughter stay now. And I could be close to her. I'd be in walking distance if I could get in Temple.

Well, this home is in Temple. Maybe another home that's closer you mean?

Elmer Allen: Uh-huh.

I'm not sure if there are any closer but this is in Temple.

Elmer Allen: Oh, yeah.

So that's good that she's in the same town. She can drop over here and see you.

Elmer Allen: I used to live, let me see, here in the back here. See that road, that street that go up there?

Yes sir.

Elmer Allen: I lived . . . See them red signs there? That was my back yard, where that red sign is.

You can walk to it then? That's great.

Elmer Allen: I'm doing pretty good but I tell you, many times when I was in the Army, I wished I'd never been born.

Really? Just because of the long days?

Elmer Allen: I tell you, I've seen some hard times in my day.

I imagine. At least you got that behind you now. Don't have to worry about that any longer.

Elmer Allen: That's right.

Yes sir.

Elmer Allen: Well, I'm doing pretty good but the main thing I look at, I said, "I never tried to do anything other than to help somebody."

That's good.

Elmer Allen: That's right close to my heart. Daddy always told me that as a kid coming up, say, "Always look at another person like you wanted to look at you."

Sure, that's the golden rule right there.

Elmer Allen: “That way,” he said, “you won’t ever mistreat nobody.”

Yes sir.

Elmer Allen: You probably see the scar there on my chest where I operated on.

I believe it.

Elmer Allen: I had five bypasses, three catheterizations and five bypasses.

Well, you look like you’re doing great, sir. You look like you’re doing great.

Elmer Allen: Pretty good, but I tell you, it was rough. Boy, messed up my knees and ankles too. We were in Alaska, Christmas Eve of 1950. I was walking guard in port of Whittier, Alaska, and the temperature was 40 below zero with 50 mile-an-hour winds. I had to walk guard. Put us out there at five o’clock Christmas Eve, and came back at 10 o’clock Christmas morning.

That’s pretty miserable. Miserable conditions.

Elmer Allen: That’s right. But I’m doing pretty good.

Excellent. Well, sir, I want to thank you for taking the time to let me interview you today. But even more importantly, I want to thank you on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone at the Land Office. Thank you for your service to our nation, your long service, not just with the Army but also with the VA. In a couple weeks, we’re going to send you copies of this interview on audio CDs that you can give to your daughter or friends or whomever along with a nice letter and certificate of appreciation from Commission Patterson. It’s just a very small token of our gratitude, the State of Texas, to you for your service to our nation.

Elmer Allen: I will always be proud in the country. If you don’t stand up for your own country, who else going to do it? You stand up for your country.

That’s true. We need good people to do the tough jobs sometimes. Otherwise, somebody doesn’t, things could go bad. We appreciate you for all your years of service.

Elmer Allen: It was rough but I’m glad now that I did it. It was sure enough rough but I made it ’cause I wouldn’t tell some people some things I had to put up with. I would hate for anybody to know that a human being would do another person that way, see.

Yeah.

Elmer Allen: Some things I wouldn’t tell nobody what I had to put up with.

I’m sure you had to deal with a lot of adversity just in the years of where you were born and the circumstances that you were surrounded by, and hopefully a lot of those days are gone and getting better.

Elmer Allen: That’s right. Yeah, before I left home, I was a kid coming up. I had worked from Monday morning until Saturday night for three dollars, 50 cents a day.

Yeah.

Elmer Allen: That's no kidding, and I mean, track behind a mule. You've seen somebody plow a mule, haven't you?

Yeah.

Elmer Allen: Track behind a mule from sunup to sundown.

That's hard work.

Elmer Allen: Monday morning to Saturday night for three dollars. I was around, since I started plowing, I was about 12, my other brother was 14. We went up, both worked together, we made six dollars from Monday morning to Saturday night. Wasn't no such thing you go if you want to, it's you have to. We had to go. That ain't no kidding. We had to go. But I got drafted in the Army. I said, "Well," I was gonna get out of the Army and go right back. I was on construction work. You probably heard of Henry C. Beck Construction Company.

Yes sir, you told me about that. And you told me, too, you were able to finish your high school degree in the Army, too?

Elmer Allen: Sure was, that's right. I finished high school and sent my papers to Madison, Wisconsin, and got my high school diploma.

That's great. So I think in a lot of ways, the Army kind of helped you.

Elmer Allen: It did, that's right.

Get out of some bad, kind of a tough circumstance.

Elmer Allen: That's right. It sure did.

That's good. Well, sir, again, it's been my honor to be able to interview you today, and, again, we thank you for your service to our country. I hope you've enjoyed this interview as much as I have.

Elmer Allen: You said it. I have, that's right.

Good. Because you didn't know what the interview was for, right, when you came in here?

Elmer Allen: That's right. I see you really understand and know what you're talking about. So I just listen to you talk and I see you ain't no wondering about nothing or guessing about nothing. I see you know what you're doing.

Thank you. Well, I've done a lot of interviews and I also, I serve in the Marine Corps. But I've also done a lot of reading about history so I can appreciate in your 90 years, the changes that you've seen and the adversity that you've gone through. And that's the whole reason we do these interviews, is to save these stories for future generations so people don't forget, people don't lose sight of the history and the sacrifice and the service that people in our military have made. So that's why we do this.

Elmer Allen: Yeah, that's right.

Hopefully hundreds of years from now people will listen to an interview like this, and learn something from it that they might not have learned otherwise. That's our goal anyway.

Elmer Allen: That's all right.

Yes sir. Sir, it's been my honor. I appreciate it very much.

Elmer Allen: Nice talking with you.

Yes sir.