

Transcription: Fred Alvarado

Today is Tuesday, April 26, 2011. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Fred Alvarado. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas. Mr. Alvarado is at his home in Haskell, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us. It's always an honor to interview a veteran. I guess the best place to start is to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you entered the military.

Fred Alvarado: Well, I was born on March 7, 1947, in Corpus Christi, Texas, the gulf coast area. Beautiful beach and all that. So as a boy, I spent a lot of time fishing and a lot of time there, you know. I went to Roy Miller High School there, graduated, and right after that, I joined the Army. That was June 1967. From there, they sent me to boot camp. That was Fort Polk, Louisiana, basic training. That was an experience.

Sure. Let me ask you, sir. Did you have any family that had served in the military?

Fred Alvarado: I had a brother in Air Force, and I had another brother in the Navy.

Now were you drafted into the Army or did you volunteer?

Fred Alvarado: No. I volunteered. It was one of those high school join before you, early volunteer, how did they call it?

Delayed entry program.

Fred Alvarado: Yeah.

What was it that made you want to sign up for the Army?

Fred Alvarado: Well, I went into the recruiting offices. I went to the Marines, I went to the . . . I really wanted to join the Air Force. My brother was in it. But they didn't offer me anything, you know. They wanted me to be Air Police, but I said, "I don't want to be Air Police," you know. So I took my T-test, or whatever it was in the Army, and I qualified for electronics, you know. I scored high on the electronics, mathematics and so on. So they guaranteed me, they gave me a written guarantee, that I would be in this signal school, 31J20, which is teletype and crypto and fixing those machines, you know. So I said yes to the Army. The Navy didn't offer me anything either.

In 1967, I know the Vietnam War was well underway. How did that factor into your decision?

Fred Alvarado: Well, a lot of my friends had joined the Marines. You know, I did a lot of research on a lot of this stuff. Surprisingly I did. I was young and I had nobody to advise me what to do and how to join, but I read a lot. The Marines were really getting hammered in Vietnam, and I knew I was supposed to go to Vietnam, you know, well eventually. I was hoping to go to Germany, you know, or something like that with the different field that I was in. Needless to say that, after AIT, I was sent straight to Vietnam.

What did your parents and your friends think about you signing up?

Fred Alvarado: Well, I wanted to join the Air Force Academy but my father had just passed on and my mother was not quite there at the time, and I had no guidance, but my friends thought that, like I said, my friends all joined the Marines. They thought I was crazy for joining, but I didn't care. I wanted to make a better person of myself and get educated, and maybe get a GI Bill and maybe go to college or something like that, you know. I had all these goals that I wanted to do, and the Marines didn't offer me that, and the Navy didn't offer me that, you know, and the Army did.

So you graduate from high school in June of 1967 and shortly thereafter you're on your way to Fort Polk, Louisiana?

Fred Alvarado: Yeah.

Tell us a little bit about your memories of Fort Polk.

Fred Alvarado: I was very . . . it opened my eyes and I learned a lot from a lot of that, you know. Fort Polk was not an easy place to be. It was around June, you know, and it was really hot and muggy, and you're going down the road and you're just . . .

Kind of out in the middle of nowhere .

Fred Alvarado: Yeah, and I mean, poor kids. Some of the kids were from the northern part of the States. You know, they were falling left and right because of the heat, you know, and that sergeant of ours was really . . . he was really strict about doing the stuff, you know. We did push-ups, we did all kinds of stuff. I got into an incident while in boot camp and it was a fight, but it happened. Because I'm not a fighter. I just kind of go with the flow. But this kid, we were in line-up, you know, in boot camp, and he hit me in the ribs with his elbow, and it threw me back, you know. I was off just a little bit. Off the line, you know, formation, and out of the blue sky, I punched this guy and I knocked him down. I mean, it was just a reaction. I didn't think about it, it just happened, you know. From that day on I was in trouble, doing everything, fire guard, polishing trash cans, KP, night guard. I did it all. That guy, they let me until I got out of there, I didn't even go on weekend passes. He just tore that thing in front of my face—"You're not goin' nowhere." Jeez, but it taught me a lot of things. Discipline, it taught me discipline. It taught me. I mean, I was just a skinny little guy when I went in, but after all that exercise that I did in boot camp, because I was obviously in trouble, I ended up to be 160 pounds. It wasn't fat that I was. I was built because they worked me to death doing push-ups and pull-ups, and, you know, all those things. I learned a lot from that, you know.

What were most of the other guys in your platoon like? Do you know if many were draftees? Could you tell the difference between draftees and enlisted?

Fred Alvarado: Yes. I was one of the few that volunteered along with drafted. In fact, they stayed there at Fort Polk and did the advanced infantry because they had north and south Polk, and I believe I was in the northern part of Fort Polk. The southern part was, they call it Little Vietnam Village. Reenact the training they did in Vietnam, they did it there at Fort Polk.

Was it pretty obvious in your platoon who had been drafted and who had volunteered? Was there kind of a division between you guys over that?

Fred Alvarado: I was always in trouble so I really didn't . . . I was always away from everybody else because I was doing everything else that they were, you know. But, no, I didn't think it was any different. They treated us all the same.

I just didn't know. You hear stories of people being drafted that didn't want to be there and trying to fight back against the drill instructors or just not getting along as well as those that had volunteered, and I was wondering if there was any of that going on.

Fred Alvarado: The only thing that I noticed, and they were really strict, but, no, they were all disciplined, you know. They were all, except for one of these guys that was refusing to take showers, you know, and the acting sergeant took him to the bathroom and, in fact, it was a couple of guys took him to the bathroom and bathed him with brushes. I always thought that was cruel but it was part of the discipline I guess, you know. But, other than that, no, we all got along fine, and we all, we're all young and stupid, you know. We just did what we were told otherwise get yelled at all the time. Who wants to get yelled at all the time, right? But that was the discipline we did. And I can look back on this and I say, wow, I'm glad I did do this because it taught me a lot of things, you know, how to work with people, how to deal with people, and I even learned how to do the finances on my own, you know. In high school I wasn't even taught any of that basic stuff. How to live, you know. But I really enjoyed it. I look back. I mean at that time I was, I can't wait to get outta here, you know. But once I got out of there, I can look back now and I can say, wow, it was a good experience, you know. And from there they sent me to Fort Gordon, Georgia, the signal school.

Tell us a little bit about that.

Fred Alvarado: Pardon me?

Tell us a little bit about signal school, what that entails.

Fred Alvarado: I know I did a lot of fire guard there too. Did the light up of those fire ovens for the coal during the winter. But most of the time we were in classes. We were, I mean, we did electronics, and I think we were one of the first in our unit that did the first computer that the armed forces had. They called it Dusty, and they taught us how, the first electronic, that's where I learned the electronic gauges, you know. Main gauge, lower gauge, all this stuff, you know. It looked like a keyboard, the computer thing, but it had all these different _ that did certain things. And then, of course, we had other teletypes, and we had to break 'em down and put 'em together and all kinds of other stuff, you know.

How long was your schooling for communications?

Fred Alvarado: Oh, long, yeah. Six months, somewhere in there, you know. Because I went, also the crypto. They put you in this cage and they started the crypto equipment and trained you on some of the equipment. So I had to get a clearance, a top secret crypto clearance, and I believe it took about six months to get that clearance.

What did you find to be the most difficult part of communications training?

Fred Alvarado: Well some of the instructors were really, I mean, some people grasp the electronics training real quick. I had problems with the mathematics, that I had problems with,

and I needed a little bit more time and they were really strict about, get it done, but I stayed up late and did my homework and studied, and I passed, you know, the signal. But all those guys were real proud after they got out of signal school, but we all knew that we were all hoping to go to Germany, you know, our whole classroom. But our unit, our whole classroom, went straight to Vietnam.

Tell us about that. Once you found out you were going to Vietnam, how long was it before you actually arrived there?

Fred Alvarado: Well I was sent home for a week before I went to Vietnam, and I told my parents and they weren't too happy about it. I mean my mother. My dad had just passed away about a year ago. My mother wasn't too happy because I had a bunch of siblings and they were young so they didn't know too much about it. But I got their blessings, you know, my mother's blessing and my brothers' and went off and came out to . . . , I remember going to, San Francisco? And taking the big flight over to the Philippines. And from there we went to Vietnam.

Tell us about your memories of arriving in Vietnam.

Fred Alvarado: The first day we got in Bien Hoa, we were being shelled. We landed and we ran to the bunkers, and I mean, it was like a big dream, like a movie. It's not happening to me, I kept saying to myself. It's not happening to us that we're on the bunker, we're being shelled by the Vietnamese. And then we were, after a few hours of that, they took us over to the hutches. They weren't barracks. They're just like a hutch, and they had, I don't know how many guys, we had a whole bunch of platoons and stuff.

You were put with a bunch of other signal men?

Fred Alvarado: Yeah, yeah. Most of them were signal with the 44th Signal Battalion. That's what we were. We had a lot of guys from all over the country, you know. Guys from Georgia, guys from California, and they were real friendly. We all got along just fine. We had our differences at times but usually just worked those things out, you know.

What was a typical day like for you in Vietnam as a signal man?

Fred Alvarado: Well, I was there during the Tet Offensive, so they gave me a rifle. Well, a typical time I would go, my routine was to, you know, do a little bit of KP. From there we'd drive us over to the base which was, I was stationed at Long Binh post, you know, which is the headquarters for the Army, and we were in the brick bunker type because we're in crypto communications. We would go there and spend our, sending communications to Washington from there, you know. Everything came through there.

Were you working shifts?

Fred Alvarado: Yes, we were. We were working. Some guys were working days, and some guys were working nights. And I did 'em all. I went from days to nights, and the problem we had was we didn't have the proper equipment or a place to repair some of this equipment. We didn't have ink. We didn't have ribbons. We didn't have stuff we needed to. We used to soak those ribbons with ink, whatever ink we could find so we could put them back on the teletype. We had

flanks made in teletype, and we had the old-fashioned stuff, and then we had this crypto equipment.

And this was in the days before the ARPANET or the Internet, so basically all different types of message traffic, I imagine, would come through where you were, is that right?

Fred Alvarado: We were, everything classified came through us. We saw everything. It was debrief and brief before we went in and out of that cage, you know, not to tell or not to leak. We were told not to talk to anybody about it, and we never did over there but it was horrible the things we had to type and send out, the things we saw or the things we did. You know, we knew ahead of time what was gonna happen, we knew ahead of time what was happening, and all the, you know, if a guy went down, we'd have to know to where to write the unit. The bad thing was that you had to, whether he was complete or missing an arm or a head or whatever, type it all out and send it out to Washington, you know.

Yeah. I imagine then you guys really did know more about what was going on than the average soldier ever would have.

Fred Alvarado: And it became a routine for us. It was like, we didn't, it was just a job, you know. We just didn't sink into the things that we saw and things we read. Anybody would say, wow, this is horrible, if that happened, you know. But after a while you're just numb from all this stuff, you know. And then during the Tet Offensive we were hit pretty bad there. Bombs came in there real bad. They gave us a rifle and I remember running up this hill to my bunker, you know, and I had an M16 with me, and my M16 and the rounds for it and some ammo pockets for me, and then the other side. I had my M16 and I'm running up this hill to get into the bunker, get up there and set up my M16 with the ribbons of M16 rounds in there. Flipped on that thing, and I'm, well, there was about three of us in that bunker, and here they come, and we just, all I can remember is smoke and yelling, and _ I was frightened. I thought I was gonna die with the rest of them. A lot of people were dying left and right, you know. But thank God that nothing happened to me, you know. _ , you know, picking up the bodies, body bags and all that, something that I'll probably never forget, you know. But I was there about a year.

About a year. Were you in the base the entire time? Were you ever able to venture out?

Fred Alvarado: Yeah. I was in Bien Hoa and Saigon. I was in Bearcat, Hanoi, and then they got hit pretty bad, but we were their support. We were also the life interest support for some of these little town villages there, and they told us, "You're an infantry man first before a signal man." Well, they trained us for that. I was trained on the M16, M14, and M60, you know. They came real handy up there in the Tet Offensive, you know.

When you were back at the headquarters, were you working seven days a week there as well, or they ever give you any time off where you could go out into the town, that sort of thing?

Fred Alvarado: Sometimes we would get a day, you know. Some people would go to Saigon, and Saigon wasn't that close to where we were. Sometimes I'd fly in there or take a convoy into Saigon.

Describe Saigon for us. What are your memories of Saigon?

Fred Alvarado: There was a lot of kids bagging for GIs. A lot of prostitution. A lot of, I remember a lot of kids that there were, and I felt so sorry for some of these kids, you know. Some kids were half Vietnamese and half American, you know. But I don't know. It was, I mean, it was basically just, you go to Saigon, you buy yourself a steak, you know, and go to the bar and have a few drinks and then head back, you know.

You never felt like there was any hostility towards you from the people there in the city?

Fred Alvarado: I'll tell you one thing. They would cut your hair during the day and kill you at night. I mean, I didn't feel no, I mean, I was careful, you know. But we was young, you know. We didn't fear anything at that time, you know. We tried to keep as a group, you know. Three of us at a time, sometimes four of us together. We all went together as a group. But yeah, you see people, some people did hate us, dislike us, but most of the people, they were glad that we were there because we helped them a lot. You know, we gave a lot to the churches. We gave a lot to the kids, you know. We helped others. But, I mean, we were Americans. We'd never seen anything like this. We were raised to treat people well. And we were raised to help others and we did. A lot of us helped the orphanage homes and, you know, the temple in Saigon too. It's not all party, party. Not for me any way. I didn't do that stuff, you know. I would try to just be around and help others. But now, it's something that, it was an experience for me at that time I was there.

Were you able to get much news from back in the United States? Did you have a pretty good idea of what was going on back home?

Fred Alvarado: You know the impact that I had when I saw, what was it, Detroit? Wasn't it Detroit that had the riots? That was an impact to us. That people were dying in Detroit because of the riots. They had fires and cars turned over. I said, "Oh my God, that's happening in our country too, you know." It's like, God, it was quite dramatic. And to see this in the newspapers, you know.

So you feel like you had a pretty good grasp of what was going on back in the United States in terms of all the unrest and the protests and assassinations?

Fred Alvarado: We didn't see a lot of that until we got back, you know. Especially when we're getting off the plane. I mean it was very depressing to see this because they were yelling at you. You're getting off the plane, you're in uniform, and here you went to Vietnam and you did your duty, and people died, and people got wounded, and you come home and they dislike you. They had 'em right there, you know. They spit at you. They'd throw you stuff. I kept saying to myself, "Why are we getting treated like this?" I mean we just came from this horrible war that we had no choice being there. Just why are they treating us? They didn't wanna, I don't know what it was. They hated the war. They hated us.

Was that in San Francisco where you got back to?

Fred Alvarado: Yes. We came in through there. So I couldn't wait to go to the bathroom and take my uniform off because I didn't want to be bothered with all that, you know. Finally got home because I was sent home right after that. And got home and it was too quiet. Didn't feel good, you know. It was, I couldn't sleep because we always had rounds in coming in all the time one way or the other so we knew about a certain time we would be close to a bunker or

something, there'd always be another incoming. So when you're home and it's so quiet, nothing's going on. No shooting or nothing. Wow. It took a while to adjust to that, you know. But I was glad to be home and I was glad to be alive.

I'm sure your mom was glad that you were back as well.

Fred Alvarado: Oh yeah. They were all happy that I made it, you know. They're always very into God and always praying that I'd come home. I guess their prayers were answered. It could have been, a lot of times, it could have been me too instead of the next guy next to me, you know.

How about your brother? I know you'd mentioned he joined the Air Force.

Fred Alvarado: Oh, he had it made. He was in London. He was a firefighter, you know, and he did a good job. He did the tour of Europe.

So he never had to go to Vietnam then?

Fred Alvarado: No, but my other younger brother was in the Navy. I think he was in one of the destroyers. He was, I'm trying to remember what he did. I think he was a boiler in one of those destroyers. I forget, but I don't think he got close to the, he was there in Vietnam I know, but he wasn't out there in the, I don't think he came that close to being, I'm not sure, those big destroyers had, what is it, 8-inch guns, and actually they did help a lot. I recall that in Vietnam, I mean it was so great to see the firepower we had at that time. We had the pulverizer and boy it was so cool to see those things come in, you know. They'd come in and just spray that stuff and it was just gone. And they had those mini-guns. And at night, when they came in, they would just spray that stuff and you could see a straight red line coming down, and you know those guys were _ for every flare. You know that thing was just doing a lot of damage out there. Yeah, but if it wasn't for the air support, it would have been a nightmare. But I thank God that we had all that air support and everybody was all working together to get by and get out of there, you know.

I know, sir, that you'd mentioned at the beginning of the interview that a lot of your friends from high school had gone into the Marine Corps. Were you able to keep in touch with them at all or know how they did in Vietnam?

Fred Alvarado: Well, about half of them died there, you know. And the other half were quite, I mean they had wounds, you know, arms or legs or something.

Did you know how they were doing while you were in Vietnam or is this information you got after you got back?

Fred Alvarado: No, I went to my class reunion. One of my first _ when I found out a lot of these guys didn't make it, and they told us. All the guys that graduated with us, and I knew some of those guys that was trying to get me to join the Marines, and some of those guys didn't make it home. And I felt for them, you know. Every time I, because I went to DC and I saw the wall, and I would look up some of my friends on the wall. It was sad to see some of those people. It was very moving to see the wall.

I imagine.

Fred Alvarado: But, no, I'm glad that I was able to come back. I got back and I was stationed, with the clearance I had, I was stationed on an Air Force base on the SAC. The SAC command was part of the Air Force, and then they put me on the STRATCOM which takes care of communications. We were the support of the SAC command, so wherever they went, we went with them, you know. Our unit was only about 30 guys, you know. We had it pretty easy. We were stationed there in the Air Force bases, you know. We didn't have to do much rough like they do with the Army on this job. And we're all E-4s when we got out of Vietnam, you know, so we had over-ranked a lot of the Air Force guys, you know. But I was at the second region Army Air Defense Command STRATCOM. I was stationed at Selfridge Air Force Base in Michigan.

Okay, I know where that is. Yeah, way up there.

Fred Alvarado: Oh yeah. That's when I got out, back in the '70s.

Were you there in the wintertime?

Fred Alvarado: Oh yeah.

Was that part of the reason you wanted to get out?

Fred Alvarado: Yeah. It was a lot of snow. In fact, I stayed there. I stayed in Michigan for 20-something years. I got married and raised a family, and I think I used my, I used the signal corps and got a job with Western Union communications, you know, at that time. And then I went back to college and got an associate's degree in electronics engineering with the GI Bill. So it did help me a lot I think. Then I worked for all these different companies, MCI, Sprint PCS, and I was making a pretty good living from all that signal corps stuff that the Army trained me in, you know.

That's great.

Fred Alvarado: It was an experience that I'll never forget, you know.

Sure. Well I know everyone here at the General Land Office from Commissioner Patterson on down is very thankful to you for your service to our country, and this interview is just one small way of saying thank you for that. I don't know if I mentioned to you before or not, but we have here at the General Land Office archives that go back to the 1600s and 1700s. We have a lot of original Spanish land grants. We have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. We have Stephen F. Austin's original registro that he kept in his own hand, that sort of thing. And our goal is to add these interviews into that archive so that potentially hundreds of years from now, people can listen to these interviews and learn firsthand what it was like to have been a veteran at different times. With that in mind, I was wondering if there is anything you might want to say to anyone listening to this interview years from now about your service or anything else?

Fred Alvarado: I would proudly serve my country again. I mean, if I had to I would. That's what these guys are doing out there right now. They're there too for their country. They're dying for their country right now and I know what they're going through. I just wish that we'd quit fighting these wars that don't, we shouldn't be into, you know. But I know if we don't do this,

we don't want this war being in our back yard either. But all my prayers go out to these guys, young guys out there and young ladies out there. They're doing it right now for all of us, and I thank them too for doing their job. I'm proud to be an American.

Yes sir. Sir, we're proud of your service, and again thank you very much for it, and for just letting me have a little bit of time today to interview you and record your story. As I mentioned previously, we're going to send you in a week or so copies of this interview on CDs along with a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson, and if there are any photographs or anything you want us to add to the archive . . .

Fred Alvarado: I have some, yes.

Yes sir, if you have anything like that, you can always just send us copies or you can send us the originals and we can scan and make copies and send them back to you. I'll have my card in there with the CDs so you'll have the address how to write to us if you want to do that.

Fred Alvarado: Well thank you. Thank you so much.

Yes sir, well thank you. It's been an honor, and you know how to get a hold of us if you need anything. And like I said, in a week or so hopefully we'll be able to get these CDs in the mail to you.

Fred Alvarado: May I ask you a question?

Yes sir.

Fred Alvarado: Who would I talk to to escalate the status of one of my claims?

Okay, are you talking about a health claim?

Fred Alvarado: Yeah, PTSD.

Sir, the people to talk to would be the Texas Veterans Commission, and they have a 1-800 number. It's the same as the Veterans Land Board's 1-800 number. It's 1-800-252-VETS, what's that 8387? Just call them and tell them what the situation is, because the Texas Veterans Commission is there to assist veterans in Texas with their claims. In fact, they have a, Texas Veterans Commission has an on-site representative at every VA facility in the state, and that's their job, is to help Texas veterans with their medical claims and that sort of thing. I would call them first, sir, and then they can tell you if you need to go somewhere to do paperwork. They can tell you where the nearest location would be.

Fred Alvarado: Yeah, okay, all right. I'll call them up and see what . . .

Absolutely. All right sir, well again, thank you very much.

Fred Alvarado: I thank you.

You have a good day. Take care. Bye bye.

Fred Alvarado: God bless you. Bye bye.