

Transcription: Ralph Edwards

Today is Friday, October 23, 2009. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Mr. Ralph Edwards. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Edwards is at his home in Temple, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us. Usually the first thing we always start off with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

Ralph Edwards: My life started out in Melrose Park, Illinois. I grew up as a general kid in the 50s. Back then, we luckily changed schools, like we had one school for every grade. My father owned a pharmacy. I still went through high school, Proviso Lease, in Maywood, Illinois. I was lucky enough to get into a military academy after that. I tried to learn how to be an officer, but I figured what the heck. And I went on from there into the Marine Corps in June of 1968.

So you had gone you said to West Point?

Ralph Edwards: No, of course, it was a military school.

OK, was it for high school?

Ralph Edwards: Yeah, basically just after high school and prior to service. I had two uncles from World War II in the Marine Corps. I was lucky enough to be the guinea pig for both of them. One worked at Proviso Lease as a general instructor, and the other one worked at Purdue as a general instructor, athlete instructor. I was used as a guinea pig for both of them. It kept me alive in 'Nam.

And you said the town you grew up in, was that kind of a suburb of Chicago?

Ralph Edwards: Yes.

OK, so you went ahead and you enlisted then in 1968.

Ralph Edwards: Oh yeah.

Tell us about that. Where did you go to basic training?

Ralph Edwards: MCRD, California, and about 3:30 in the morning, yup.

I guess at that point you realized you were in for something, right?

Ralph Edwards: No, you have no idea what the heck you are getting into, when you get off the bus or off of those cattle cars, then you see those yellow footprints in the middle of the night, and back then they put you in for that haircut that didn't cost you a thing, and you didn't have any hair or any idea. They put you through, you brought whatever clothes and they said nope, send 'em home.

Yeah, they still do it the same way.

Ralph Edwards: No, not the same way. They changed a heck of a lot.

What's changed?

Ralph Edwards: Well, they don't wake you up as much. They give you at least 15 more minutes. They're a little bit more polite in the sense of the word, and they charge you for the haircut.

Oh that's right, yeah, they do debit it out now. But they still get there though late at night and the yellow footprints and the shaved head and all that stuff.

Ralph Edwards: Oh yeah.

So what were some of your memories about MCRD San Diego?

Ralph Edwards: Oh, you can remember everything from the Quonset huts, those old chicken coops, to the concrete floor, to the middle of the morning where you either did calisthenics, you ran around the football field, either the Navy woke you up or you woke them up, because the Navy trained right there, too. In other words, you just do all the morning exercises and then you get ready for those green eggs and ham and all that good food that you have 15 minutes to eat, and you're not used to doing that, and either the drill instructor says you're going to have more if you're skinny, or you're going to have less if you're fat.

That's right. When you had signed up for the Marine Corps, did you know what your MOS was going to be at that point?

Ralph Edwards: Oh, nobody does. The thing is, see back then they didn't have those kind of tests that they do now. They do have an idea, you know, when you take the test, they just say well, you know, of course and my luck when I was in the induction center, where the doctors were and everything.

Yeah, the MEPS.

Ralph Edwards: They had thousands of us, because Vietnam was in full force, and sergeants were coming along counting them, and I just got lucky enough to be the last two in the Marine Corps, and they shoved about 100 of them over to the Navy right behind us. The guys wanted to be in the Marine Corps, but they said nope, we're going to put you in the Navy. They didn't really have any, in other words they couldn't figure out why I'd have to join the Navy instead of the Marine Corps, so that's sort of what is it with Shanghai-ing?

Sounds like it.

Ralph Edwards: Oh yeah, they were good at that at that time. But they did aptitude tests and they figured I was good for radio. Of course, I was lucky. I grew up with radios, CB's, things like that.

So you graduated basic training and they assigned you the MOS of radio man. Where did they send you to next?

Ralph Edwards: Let's see, I stayed at MCRD, and then we went through the same training for 29 palms, rifle, this, that, and the other. Of course that was an M-1 back then, and right off to 'Nam.

So you were at 29 palms then for your radio school?

Ralph Edwards: No, radio school was in San Diego. They still had all the schools up in that area. The one in 29 palms was combat training, rifle, find out how good you shot things.

So once you got shipped over, had you been assigned to a unit yet at that point?

Ralph Edwards: Right off the bat, you sort of just do your thing over at MCRD before you get orders, and it was either walking up and down hills or learning how to do guard duty, this, that and the other. It depends on what your MOS was, and when you got 30 days' leave, hello mom, hello dad, goodbye, and right off to war.

To answer my question, when you got shipped to Vietnam, had you been assigned to a unit yet?

Ralph Edwards: We had to wait five days at Freedom Hill, and wait for orders, leave your stuff there, wherever the heck it was, and then when I got mine, I was straight up north somewhere. We got out on a good old C-130, and they flew you somewhere, and when you landed, they said well, you're gonna go here, you're gonna go there, wherever the heck it was, and you don't know where it was, and you just arrived.

And what were your thoughts at that point?

Ralph Edwards: Basically you were told back then that the radio operators had three seconds to live if you did, and you were worth three bowls of rice if you got captured. In other words, if the VC ever got you. I wound up five miles north of the DMZ, or in other words way up, in I-Corps, 3rd Marine Division. Goofy Golf 312.

Was that artillery?

Ralph Edwards: Artillery unit, yeah.

And tell us a little bit about that unit.

Ralph Edwards: 105's, the old rubber tire, just a crazy setup. Usually you always get the pranksters. They figure if you are new in country, I had a lieutenant, a young guy, but he came by and said I've heard new radio operator for being part of a gun unit, and he said we have a break in the gun line, in other words trying to figure out ha-ha and all that stuff. Well I fooled him and I sort of knew where the break in the gun line was because being radio and all that, I knew that guns don't have radios, not like these days they are radio controlled. So I fooled him there and nobody ever played any pranks on me after that. We had sort of scary moments, things like that, but I mean we had a lot of fun, too.

Were you basically operating out of a firing base?

Ralph Edwards: No, I was backpaker, a 31 mike. I backpacked a radio from here to north, down south, wherever I was used. In other words, I didn't sit in the rear with the gear. I was out pumping with the grunts and anything else that we were asked to do.

So they took guys from your arty battalion and dispersed you out into the infantry units?

Ralph Edwards: Well, if you want to call them infantry, but no, we just, I was with the artillery as per se, but I was the one going out, calling in where, when, how, who, pinpointing. In other words, basically a forward group.

So you were going out with the FO's. How many of you would go out when you would operate as a unit? Was it just a squad-sized element when you'd go out as FO's?

Ralph Edwards: Yeah, just me, an officer, and about 8-12 guys, to 15, depending on what we were going to do, snooping, pooping, or killing or in other words search and destroy, whatever it was.

Describe for us what it was like the first time you went out on one of those patrols.

Ralph Edwards: That's hard to say. It's a nightmare. There's no way to describe it, not unless you've been there. We just wished and hoped that nothing showed up and you learned to shut your mouth, not smoke or not try to, because anything that disturbed the air, or when the noise went, like they had crickets or some noise going on, and then it suddenly stops, you better kiss the ground and hope the heck it didn't blow up on you, or you with it.

So that's what you did at least early on with your unit there in Vietnam, was going out with the forward observers and then calling in strikes and that sort of thing?

Ralph Edwards: Yeah, and there was fun parts, too. We played pranks on some of the guys that were like oh yeah, I'm better than you and anything else. We almost blew up the first sergeant one time when he got a little cocky, blowing up class 3 ammunition. I don't know if you know what class 3 ammunition is.

No, go ahead and tell us about it.

Ralph Edwards: We were up on hill 6, that's the mountain that got blown off of 691. We had a bunch of old, well they were dents or cartridges, canisters that had dents in them that couldn't fire through the weapons, so the old bags of powder, once the weight, one track was smaller, and that's how we shot the rounds off, in other words, and took all the powder out of it, but you still had the primer in there, and class 3 is what you do, you take a 2-lb. hammer and a tank screwdriver, which is about 2 foot long, and you line 'em up about 30 in a line, and started popping the primers so they wouldn't start a fire and whatever, so nobody could use 'em as a bomb or whatever, and we were in the back of them packing paper in three or four of them, so when he hit 'em, the back blasted and scared the heck out of him. Well, the one we overpacked somehow, and when he hit it, the hammer disappeared somewhere, in other words when he swung it, and when the back blasted on him, it broke the screwdriver in half and he still couldn't find out who did it. Everybody just laughed their butt off. The thing is, in other words, pay attention, well when you do explosives, you just don't goof around like that without checking. I mean we've got all sorts of stories like that, but as a radio operator, I got into many different

MOS's. I learned artillery explosives, demolition booby traps, radio, I mean I've got like 32, 33 different MOS's per se. It's like master of all.

What were most of the Marines like that were in your unit? Were they all pretty young guys?

Ralph Edwards: I think the only oldest one was the colonel and he was about 28, 30 something like that.

In your unit, how many of them were draftees, do you know?

Ralph Edwards: Oh, we never asked.

Never really knew?

Ralph Edwards: See, that's the funny thing about 'Nam, no friends, in other words we learned real quick – you don't know anybody, don't care about anybody except if it's OK, it's gone, or you pushed a dog tag and his teeth kicked it and disappeared. You didn't want to know because it hurt so much.

And so there wasn't any discernible difference between guys that had voluntarily enlisted and those that were there because they had to be because they had been drafted that you could tell?

Ralph Edwards: Well, all they were worried about was not dying. It's not easy to explain.

So how long were you with 312?

Ralph Edwards: Mostly all of the time, but I was with 1-9, 2-5, I mean I went all over the place with just about anybody who needed an extra radio operator. Basically you have one unit, but I hardly ever stayed with them.

How long ultimately did you end up spending in Vietnam?

Ralph Edwards: The paperwork says three months, but it was a little longer than that. I had to go back a second time, but trying to get the government to verify it. I went from Okinawa to the Philippines, back up to 'Nam. In between that, shrapnel, bombs, boom, I had to go to the hospital. I almost lost my left leg for jungle rot. I had shrapnel in the left leg. Since I was a radio operator, I was trying to help, when we set down hill 691, I was the only actually headquarters operator with all the gear. All the rest of them had like short antennas. I had the only whip antenna which carries five more miles than what everybody else could reach, and stupid me, faced a helicopter trying to get 'em in, and I was looking at his front wheel when he pulled up on the back side of the mountain. I just caught him and he blew me off the mountain, boom. So I saved 83 guys from being blown up and the helicopter but nobody knows anything about that.

So you were saying you got hit by –

Ralph Edwards: Well what happened was we had our artillery outfit up on hill 691. We were just tearing it down. In other words, we spent the whole day tearing down. Everybody else pulled out. There was 8,200 guys sitting up on this hill tearing this place apart and hey, anybody hear us? Then all of a sudden we hear that our ride, our double eggbeaters, were down below

cloud level, and everybody was sucked in and raining. We were up dry, you know, sitting on the side of the mountain, and everybody else is sucked in downstairs as we said, and we were waiting for the whole day. I mean the VC could've come up and wiped us out and nobody even would have known we were alive, or dead. And in between that, we finally got a hot meal after three months, give or take, and we were sitting on the side, back side of the hill, and these funny looking F1-11's decided to fly over. Well, you know doggone well somebody had to say hey, guess what, if one turns left, one turns right, just kiss your whatever goodbye because they're going to be laying a bunch of bombs on you. And sure enough, these jokers flew down about two miles and one took left, one took right, and man, we just threw up our trays and everything else and started waving, saying hey, it's us, don't even bother, we're not the VC. You talk about scary. The Air Force has some small bombs. Of course we had the New Jersey offshore, and that thing sort of made a small whistle when it went over us and we were going like what's going on? Oh, guess what, the New Jersey is in town. Yeah, in other words, everybody was going hope, hope, hope, no short shells. It was a mind blowing, like whatever you were taught as a kid, forget it.

So the F1-11's flew over and dropped ordinance on you guys?

Ralph Edwards: No, that's what I'm saying, in other words if they flew on, they didn't see us. But sure enough, we were on the back side of the mountain and they flew over us without seeing us except the back side, and sure enough, they caught a glimpse of us, and by the time, in other words if they just flew on, we were safe, but if one turned left, one turned right, they're coming back on us, we just signaled them. In other words flashing trays, waving, hey, we're down here, like the VC is gonna do that? Hey, here we are. And they just flew over, came low, flew over us, and didn't see them again thank goodness.

But you had said something, too, about having gotten blown off of a hillside.

Ralph Edwards: What happened was that, well this was during the afternoon, but at night just about 5 o'clock, all day long we're waiting for our rides, the helicopters, but when they were sucked in, we had to wait, and I was the only one that could communicate because they're five to six miles away from us because everybody had a radio, the rest of the guys, but they could only go about two and a half miles, and everybody was six miles away from us. So lucky me since I worked out of headquarters, I had the long extensions, or in other words, whip. So I'm the only one trying to stand on the highest point. The captain's order, can you get communications, this, that, or the other, and while everybody else is sitting up on the upper LZ, I'm trying to call these guys and figure out where the heck. Then I get a call that says hey, we finally cleared up, OK, fine, this is about 5 o'clock at night so it's just starting to turn dark. Where are they, this, that, and the other, and like I'm talking to you, I thought I was talking to some of the pilots, but ground, air to ground, but I was talking back to our area to communicate to the pilots where we are, like left, right, up, down, are you too low, too far off, this, that, and the other, north, west, south, whatever the heck it is, and I'm standing away from all these guys like half a football field away, and when I start hearing them, I yell at the captain, hey, we got 'em, and he starts getting the guys ready down there, and I'm standing in this little park, and all of a sudden, one's left, one's low, this, that, or the other, and out of the corner of my eye I see a double eggbeater just coming up over like he was too low and he's hugging the hill. I just look at him and I'm looking right at him and his front wheel is coming, he could've just killed me right off the bat there, and I just fell backwards, and I could actually reach up and touch his wheel. That's how close he came to ripping my head off, and/or falling, him hitting the ground or me, or wiping out the rest of whatever because he was low, they were high, and the captain was about 30 yards away from me

down off to the right, and I'm waving my arms and I could see the pilot gunning power. He just gunned that thing and he put so much pressure to move that cotton picking thing up, and I just got flung right off the side of the mountain, and 30 yards down the bricks, stones, whatever you want, but I got a back injury from it because it blew me backwards, not forwards, like everybody could roll forward. My head hit the ground, the radio hit the ground, and my feet hit the ground, but my radio, you know how you bend backwards? Or like a back flip? Well the radio didn't give, my back did. So I wound up with – of course my back's never been right ever since. I have to wear a back brace, this, that, and the other, and I'm totally disabled, but that's another thing.

So did you remain in the field after that happened?

Ralph Edwards: They couldn't do anything. I mean there was no way to tell if it was really damaged or anything. They just picked me up, or the captain went and got a couple of guys and they picked me up slow, and after three or four helicopters, they put me on the floor of one of them and flew us back. About three days later, the colonel called me in the office and said such and such, hey, do you want a medal, or a chest to pin it on, ha-ha, and I said well, it's up to you, whatever. He said you saved these people, that people, the helicopter. I said well hey, it's just a job. Of course nobody could figure out there was a terrible back injury to it. I could still move but it was sore. It's like breaking a bone. I got two fused disks, and some other things. I had a metal bar stuck in my neck, a hole through my right arm.

And all from that one accident?

Ralph Edwards: Well one accident was like stoving broken teeth, hole through my arm, stone ripping out – it's hard to explain. I mean there's no way to tell, when you back flip you hit into stones and rocks and then all of a sudden you bounce and then you go face forward and you're still sliding, so it's just another injury, like OK, fine. You try to put yourself together, but slower.

So how much longer did you end up spending there in Vietnam after you'd been injured?

Ralph Edwards: Between the shrapnel and everything, OK, fine, it's a hole, and they don't realize, it's no big deal. It's not like I got blown, everything is internal and there's no way to tell. They just basically can you walk? Yeah. Hobble, whatever the heck it is. And they just kept you there until whatever, either you couldn't do much of anything or your orders showed up. We basically sat on the low boy with eight rounds, you're going to be going north to south and clearing out everything, and you're sitting there as a cotton picking target. This was when they were cutting back.

So you were in the Marines, on the card you sent us you were in from '68 to '76, is that right?

Ralph Edwards: Right.

And then you switched over to the Army?

Ralph Edwards: Right. The Army took me. Everybody said how in the hell did the Army take you when you were so beat up? I said hey, I didn't have to go through a physical. They just looked at my records and said hey, you don't have to go through basic to do this, that, or the other, all you have to do is learn to get up at 3:30. I mean there's more stories to that, but I

wound up going from there to the Philippines, or what is it Okinawa, Philippines, things like that, and then back to 'Nam.

With the Marines still?

Ralph Edwards: Right.

What made you decide to switch branches of service like that?

Ralph Edwards: Well, when I wound up coming back to the States, I wound up going to MAB 26 which is Marine Corps Air Base, Marine Corps Air Wing, and I still had about a year to go, which was '72, and they shipped me off to Europe, or in other words the Med cruise. So guess what, dummy me got a head injury from one of the fuse boxes that got flung up on a wing nut went into my skull and I got hung there for a few seconds, and the guy hopefully picked me up off the deck said what happened? I said well, the fuse box bit me. He took me down to the hospital down on the ship. It was the USS Inchong, old World War II flat top, and just one thing after another, and when I got back to New River, that was May 26, and the time was up, I wanted to re-enlist but the Marine Corps said well, we'll give you a day extra, in other words they let me out a day early because I was supposed to get out on a Saturday but they let me out on a Friday. The only thing is they said well, you didn't have an education. I said what, what do you mean I don't have an education? I said I got four years of high school, things like that. They said well we don't find any records of it. I said read the paperwork. It says four years academic high school down on the bottom. They couldn't, paper pushers or something else, so they just said bye. So I came home just literally like forget it. I tried to make civilian life, and it wouldn't work.

So you went back to Chicago area then?

Ralph Edwards: Well, it's the only family I had. I mean I was married at the time, too, but all through 'Nam and everything else. That was another thing when you came home you got spit on, thrown beer cans at, baby killers, this, that, and the other. It just couldn't work because the parents basically didn't have anything to do with me and said get lost. They said we don't want you around anymore. They threw you away because they were too scared of you. In other words you're crazy or you don't act right anymore like our son, this, that, or the other, basically threw you away.

Do you think you had changed during Vietnam?

Ralph Edwards: Oh, everybody did. In other words, your values just went out the window when you blew off somebody's head or took a bayonet to somebody or well of course my job, plant booby traps and explosives. You didn't worry about it. If you really go like gee, this is a lot of fun, forget it, you better get out of that work because that's why you just don't really want to be around anybody or can be around anybody because you are never sure. Unfortunately it proved its point. I tried to get married again and unfortunately, you tell them constantly don't do this, don't do that, don't wake me, don't shake me, don't get close to me, if I don't see you and everything else, and one of my ex-wives tried that once, she came up too close and I almost killed her. I was sleeping and I just yelled at her basically, you know, quit being so damn stupid, excuse my French, but it's just constant. Even today like how can you get close to somebody and they say well, it's been 40 years. It never goes away. You just can't get close to anybody

because you don't know how you're gonna act. If they think it's funny, we don't. Not necessarily that they will, but we try to evaluate ourselves and forget about those evaluations.

So after the Marines you went into the Army and you were there until '82. Did you work in radios as well during that time?

Ralph Edwards: You sure you want this story?

Well it's up to you.

Ralph Edwards: No, I mean from '72 to '76 I did radio. The Army in its infinite wisdom put me back through radio school to learn how to do radios. Now when you have ten years of radio training and everything else and the Army decides to put you back in your MOS, it's not that you go straight to your MOS, they have to train you. So can you imagine ten and a half years of radio school and then I have to go back to radio school in Georgia, Fort Gordon, Georgia, and I fell asleep mostly in every class. Why? Because I couldn't get it interesting enough to where I could tell the instructor what's going on and what to do, and sure enough, the same thing. You go into this classroom and it's about 30 yards by 30 yards because they got all these radios lined up one side and radios lined up on the other, and to learn how to adjust and set your radio for transmit and receive, signals. He walks up to everybody in there and nobody has any rank so you can't tell, and gives you two pieces of paper, one with receive signals, with transmit numbers, and as he's walking down the line he hands me the papers and I instinctively just turn the radio on, click everything in, boom, I'm set, because you have to peak the numbers on both, and you're set. He goes down the line and I'm just sitting there like OK, wait, because you are sending signals, you're trying to talk to the guy across the way. Then he says begin, and I'm going whoops. I'm supposed to look like I'm doing something, and I've got to sit there and going like well, I'm done, what am I gonna do? I'm trying to look busy and sure enough he loos and says well aren't you going to start? I said I've already done it. Yeah right, sure. So he gives me two other things, turns off the thing, whatever, show me. Boy, did he walk into it. So I flipped the radio on, boop-peak, what's wrong? Where'd you learn that? I said ten years in the Marine Corps. He says what the hell are you doing here? I said, I gave him the whole speech, this, that and the other, I'm a Vietnam vet, blah-blah-blah, he says get out of here. What do you need to be here for? I said because the Army sent me. And that was all the way through school and everything else, and believe it or not, you know how you make people feel, you get these guys that you are working with, or in the same classes and all, well they didn't know that there's two prior service, one guy was in the Army and me in the Marine Corps. They put us up in Georgia up on the third floor, only two of us. We had the whole floor to ourselves, because they didn't want us to mingle with the new ones on the bottom floor. So we went through school. We didn't have to go to this, that, or the other. They said well OK, all we want you to do is show up for morning, you're here, and we want you to show up for the night roll call. Basically like you're there. That's all we did. In other words, us two, we reported in the morning, reported at night. During the day we just took off and went wherever we wanted to.

How long was that school for?

Ralph Edwards: Six weeks.

OK.

Ralph Edwards: Yeah, I mean talk about paying good money for bad. But anyway, that was part of it. Then unfortunately my mom died, so the class that I had to go to, I had to go home and they couldn't put me back in the same class because of the loss of time, in their words. So I had to go through some of the rest of the school with another class or the one behind them to graduate and get the paperwork. So I got back, met a bunch of other new people. The other ones were like two weeks ahead of us. I still had to go through some of the classes but I didn't really have to do too much to it. OK, fine, and the day we had to graduate – now you know how happy everybody gets to where they wear the greens and their little national defense ribbons, they graduate. Well you got to realize that I had six rows of ribbons, this guy had five to six and he was already in the Army with the cords and everything else, with the beret and all that good stuff, and with the purple heart ribbons, combat action, everything else, but no rank. So in the Army you have to have patches on the sides on the uniform, so I had one on each shoulder, one for the combat and one for whatever the Army was. We were upstairs and we were packing the day we were supposed to get our orders and we just had our civilian clothes on. We figured well let them have their fun, and do whatever for graduation. We don't want to be bothered. Well the sergeant comes up and says now you have to be in your greens and you have to be with the group to graduate. Aw, come on sergeant. He said no, regulation. We had to unpack our uniforms. We looked like two Christmas trees. OK, so we had to put on our dress greens, go down and I have to stand on one side and he has to stand on the other of about 80 people, and we're going like we know what's going to happen. Questions are going to be asked, they are going to wonder why, because they've never seen us in anything else, and sure enough as the guy said dismissed, everybody just said how come you got this, where'd you get that? We're prior service – OK, fine. And wouldn't you know, everybody had to wait for orders. This guy and myself, sergeant comes up and says you graduate? Here's your orders, you're going to Europe. Like what? Yeah, OK.

So you did another six years then in the Army?

Ralph Edwards: Yeah, but that was sitting over in Europe and just – we were basically just put on a shelf because they forgot all about me. I did radio transmitting relay, and since all the injuries and whatever, they used everybody else for everything for whatever, but I was just an extra.

When you finally got out, did you get out medically?

Ralph Edwards: No, I got screwed out of that. That's what I've been fighting with the VA and the military. They screwed up my paperwork, they falsified the paperwork. I'm still fighting them with it, and they said well, I'm two different people. In other words, here's what happened. In the Marine Corps, my birthday is '49. The Army put me down as '59. So I'm ten years younger.

Yeah, that's quite a difference.

Ralph Edwards: Well, it's nice to know that I'm ten years younger, but I can't the military, and the Army, because we had a little racist captain in the sense of the word, he's one of those southern I don't like blacks and I don't like this, that, or the other, and he didn't, he tried to screw me out of my medical which he did. He put me down as something else because I couldn't continue, the sad thing is I asked for because of my injuries, I just couldn't continue anymore. I was hurting too bad. And he didn't care one way or the other as long as he can get rid of Vietnam vets. When they put the paperwork up, it's got all the stuff, has my ribbons and

everything. It's marked Army instead of Marine Corps, and this was 1981, in other words, two 14's, and I'm going like how can I get these medals in '81 when we weren't in 'Nam, and I was in 'Nam with the Marine Corps, not the Army. And it's back and forth the way they mark the things, I'm two different people, and I can't get anybody at all, they look at the paperwork and say well everything's fine, but they don't call me or ask me what is wrong with it, what's marked wrong, what should be changed. And until this day, I still don't get my correct pay. I should be 100 percent disabled since 1982.

And so you did ultimately 12 years, 6 in the Marines and 6 in the Army?

Ralph Edwards: Basically, well it varies because Marine Corps I had to do from '68 to '76, and then basically from '78 -

So 8 years in the Marines and then '76 to '82, so 6 years -

Ralph Edwards: It should've been to '84. I got screwed out of the last two years because I couldn't do it and they were supposed to put me out on 100 percent medical, but they didn't.

What was your rank when you got out?

Ralph Edwards: Sergeant.

E-5?

Ralph Edwards: E-5, and an E-5 in the Marine Corps. I had to give that up to get in the Army.

Oh, so you had to enlist as a private?

Ralph Edwards: Yup. They said oh, you could be a sergeant again within a couple of months. We'll give it to the kid who graduates the highest. I had 99.99, but they gave him the private.

So your time in the military hasn't been a good one then.

Ralph Edwards: Oh boy, well no. But the thing is, there's a lot of good points to it, too. I traveled around the world eight times, I learned eight different languages, I got freebies like nobody else would be. I've been to secret places that I can't talk about. I've been to places that most civilians don't even know we've got. Did you ever work with ICE or SHAPE or all these funny looking secret places that the government doesn't tell you about? Well, I've been to a lot of them being a radio operator. And they always say well if you can't talk about it, we'll kill you. Well, I can only talk about it that I've been there. I can't tell you where, when, how, and I mean I've seen some really wild things.

How did you end up in Temple?

Ralph Edwards: Well, after I got put out of the Army, well I lost my family and home and everything else, our kids. I wound up living in the gutter out in the fields, no way of getting help one way or the other, and the government was kind enough to give me \$100 a month to live on, and that's when I had a family, five kids, a wife and they gave me \$100 to live on, not able to work. They figured well, you could survive. Yeah. And that's where all the trouble began. Then everything such and such, and I wound up just in poverty, whatever. I wound up finding

somebody who wanted to get rid of an old church bus, and old school bus, so they gave it to me because they couldn't use it anymore because of the restrictions – it had to have seatbelts and this and that when they were changing over to everybody had to be safety conscious, so I lived in that for 8 years, fixing it up. It had no heat, this, that or the other, so I lived on somebody's old part of land or whatever, and just like I did in Vietnam, I survived.

How did you end up in Temple, it wasn't because you were at Fort Hood or anything like that?

Ralph Edwards: Well, there was it, in other words when I got back from overseas, they shipped me down here to Fort Hood.

OK, so that's how you ended up in Temple.

Ralph Edwards: Oh yeah. After I came back from Europe, of course there's another good story to that, I was supposed to be over there for like three and a half years. Before I got back from Europe, going back to when I got my orders from the Army to go to Europe, I went over there, now you remember the people who were two weeks ahead of me. Well, when I was over in Europe, I was over there for about two months, three months maybe, so I had to go collect some new people coming over from I was in Vicennes, Italy. Well, I wound up in Germany and they said do you want to be here? I said no, I want to be in Italy. They sent me to Italy. That's another good story about the Germans. But I don't know which one you want to talk first. I'm backtracking, my mind's just not working. You ever try to get to Gestapo headquarters?

No, I don't think, I never met the Gestapo.

Ralph Edwards: Well OK, let me backtrack because I do this because I have to think forward to go back. When they gave me my orders, the Army sent me to 21st replacement which was in Germany, the old Kaiserhoff, boy that was a beautiful building and the dumb asses tore it down. They put us on a train to go south. At the border, you have to get off one train to go to another one if you're going to Italy. That was back in '78, somewhere around there. When you were in Kaiserhoff, they issued you a rifle and you had to clean it and do that if you're sitting waiting for orders because everybody had to be issued one. I was hungry that day so I had peanut butter and crackers, and you get to cleaning and talking, and hey, I got some food. If you're traveling you've got to have crackers and peanut butter, there's no getting around it, something to munch on. So I finally get my orders, I packed up my bags, made sure that I put one can of peanut butter or whatever it is in each bag which I had three, and crackers so if one bag got somewhere that I wasn't, I always had something. We get down south to the border technically, we unload all our stuff, put it in one room, and then they say OK, fine, wait until we call you, go wander around, look around. I get a call over the PA and they want me to come over to a platform whatchamacallit, and I don't know why. So I get over there, and here's a five foot three, black hat, black overcoat, exactly looking like the Gestapo, and four Doberman pinchers, four guys in black helmets, black boots, machine guns, the Nazi's. You couldn't put this in any more perspective. This is a security police. The dogs picked out my three bags from a hundred and some odd people. I said how come? The guy just points, open, open. The dogs are scratching at my bags and I'm going like what the heck's going on? And believe it or not, they stopped the train because of this. I had to empty all three bags. They couldn't find a thing. And I'm going like they're wondering what the heck's going on, and to embarrass them is like, you know, big time. And I'm going like no problem, I can understand. I said I used to be a Chicago cop, police, Chicago. They asked me well do you have a gun with you? I said no.

Were you in the Chicago police?

Ralph Edwards: Yeah, a long time ago.

Was that before you got in the Marine Corps?

Ralph Edwards: No, that was after. See, there was a split time after the Marine Corps to the Army.

OK, how long were you a Chicago cop for?

Ralph Edwards: Two years. I got to go back because I got out of the Marine Corps in '76 but that was Reserve from '72 to '76.

OK, so you were a Marine Reservist during that time.

Ralph Edwards: Yeah, some people want to just how long you been in the Marine Corps? Well from that time to that time, just I was in the Reserves between then.

So as a Reservist you were a Chicago cop.

Ralph Edwards: Yeah. And then unfortunately they did a last hired first fired type of thing there during the Recession way back when, luckily before the riots of Chicago. Anyway, that was just a job. But we couldn't figure out, there was no drugs, no nothing in the bags. And they couldn't figure out why. Well believe it or not, years later, it hit me. The dogs were after the peanut butter, not because they were hungry. Remember I said I was cleaning a rifle? OK, I had gun oil on the peanut butter jars and these dogs were so good at it, they found every peanut butter jar with the gun oil, but they figured it was peanut butter and they were hungry, and they blamed the dogs for not doing their job. But then I wound up in Italy OK, fine. Like I said three months later I had to go get new people. These were the same people that were two weeks ahead of me in school, my original class. They couldn't figure out why and how I got to Italy before they did, or Europe. Wouldn't you know, I had to be there three years. Some girl decides he works the ID. So what did the Army do? Throw me back home real quick. In other words, criminal investigation division. In other words, what happened was I helped CID close a case that they were trying to figure out. I just happened to be lucky enough to wind up learning how it was done. The Coke machines were being ripped off of money and sodas, but there were no break-in's. I got lucky, one day I was sitting in the barracks day room watching TV, and this kid comes in, one of the boss's kids, he should've been in school but he was ditching, and we were the only two in the thing, and he said, I mean he's 13 or 14, something like that, and he comes in hey, do you want a couple of sodas? I got money, things like that. OK, fine. And figuring he wouldn't have that kind of money as such, he just went and got the sodas, came back, such and such and all this stuff. Come to find out that one of the 101st Airborne guys made a bunch of keys, got a hold of them and gave them out to the kids, and said hey you can have whatever, just open the things when nobody's around, you take the money or whatever, I get so much of it, OK. Hey great. So I told a couple of friends that I knew in CID such and such, what's going on, yeah, we got this going on. Oh heck, blah-blah-blah. So I got the kid aside, I said you're not going down but the thing is you better talk to these guys and I left him. Sure enough somehow or another word got around and one day in the morning call, this broad stands up and says he's working for CID. Oh, that's really nice to tell somebody. So back home. And then out. Or not so much as out that they sent me to Fort Hood. And I get to Fort Hood, and you know how

people love food. You know, the 21st replacement, you get over to Fort Hood and they give you, they said hey, the mess hall's open. Oh, thank goodness, food. Meat loaf, potatoes. You know how the Army is on regulations and everything has to go by the book? First day I get here, I go into the mess hall, I mean anybody can remember good old meat, potatoes, things like that, whatever. So what the heck, I go to the mess hall, get a bunch of potatoes, get a bunch of meat loaf, I sit down and I start to stir the potatoes, and I find a piece of paper under the potatoes. I pull it out and it says "ingredients, 1. Stir potatoes, 2..." I'm going like what, they're giving on manuals on how to stir potatoes? And they're on the plate, if you understand, they give you manuals for everything for Pete's sake. I'm laughing my head off, and I go to the mess sergeant and I ask him are you handing out training manuals for your food? He says what are you talking about? I said well I just got, blah-blah-blah, I found this in my potatoes. You're lucky that roof was attached. He hit the ceiling, he screamed all the way across the mess hall on what's going on. I mean that's the good side of the military. Then I wound up in 27 maintenance. There's more stories, but the thing is, I get into one of these where we finally get one of these little captains and find out that he's a racist, and he'll do anything to get rid of blacks, he'll get rid of any Vietnam's, I mean he just doesn't want them in his group. And sure enough, after he got rid of me and a few others with falsifying the paperwork which I've been trying to get the military to read but they only read copies, the Army actually talked to him but it didn't do me any good. The thing is, he had one of these target guns, like a '45, pressure. He shot a black female in the ass with it, but it didn't hurt, it just stung her. But he was laughing at her and I happened to be right there to see it, and who are you gonna tell? I mean who is going to listen to you? The captain or me? But it didn't hurt her any, she just thought she got stung by a bee or something.

So if you had to do it over again, would you still go in the service?

Ralph Edwards: Oh heck yes. I'm a Marine no matter which way you look at it. Even at my age, you don't lose the training, you don't lose the jokes. I mean there are thousands of days you've got of humor, even if like 3 o'clock in the morning you've got to get up, you've got to do this, and then generators blow up on you, or I've been bombed, rocketed, mortared, shot at, I've got shrapnel, I've got more stories than you wouldn't believe, but it's hard to put it all into one hour.

Sure, I understand. Well we really do appreciate though you taking the time to talk to us today and everybody here at the Land Office appreciates your service to our country, and so that's what this program's all about is just a way of kind of preserving some of those memories.

Ralph Edwards: I wish the VA would say the same thing. They owe me for 28 years of back pay.

Yeah, I don't have any control over them.

Ralph Edwards: I know, but the thing is, if I could get somebody to listen to my story and/or go through the records with me and say hey, this needs to be changed, this needs to be changed, because it shows that I'm not two different people, and I am disabled and you're only paying me so much, and they think I can work. I said I've never been able to work since 1982, or actually 1969, but I try, and it just doesn't work, I can't. Back injury, leg injury, I'm wearing braces like you wouldn't believe, and a few plus teeth.

Yeah, understood. Well sir, I really do, I've got to conclude the interview now, but I really do appreciate your time today and if we can do anything to help out, feel free to give us a call.

Ralph Edwards: What kind of help can you give me?

I don't know, not a whole lot probably.

Ralph Edwards: Well, I don't know, what kind of help can you – I mean I've been trying to build a barn and I've been trying to get a tractor so I can dig up a hole so I can build a barn so I can put the rest of my stuff in it. I need extra hands. I need a loan. I mean I'd like to pay for the house or the land that I've got, and I just can't do it. I can't even live. I mean I'm lucky I get enough just to survive.

Yeah, understood. Well all right, sir, well thanks again for letting us interview you and I hope you have a good weekend.

Ralph Edwards: I'm trying to hide from all the cold and/or the water, boy, it finally rained.

All right sir, well take care.

Ralph Edwards: Well if you decide you want the rest of the silly stories, you can call me back and I can give you the rest of all this, I mean like I said there's a lot of funny situations.

Sure, understood.

Ralph Edwards: But the real sadness is there's no way to talk about it unless you really want to creep somebody out.

Yeah, understood. All right sir, well thanks again for your time.

Ralph Edwards: Thanks for calling and listening a bunch.

Take care.

[End of recording]