

Transcription: D.S. Freeman

Good morning. Today is Friday, November 30, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. D.S. Freeman. We're at the Courtney Home in Temple, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today.

D.S. Freeman: You're certainly welcome.

It's an honor. Sir, the first question I always start with is please just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military. Where were you born?

D.S. Freeman: I was born in Selma, Arkansas. S-E-L-M-A, Arkansas. Birthday, December 4th, 1921.

1921. So you've got a birthday coming up soon.

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir, a few days from now.

Happy birthday in advance. Did you have a lot of brothers and sisters growing up?

D.S. Freeman: It was the six of us. Six brothers. Only two of us living now.

So you had five brothers.

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir.

What did your folks do? Were they farmers?

D.S. Freeman: My father was a railroad man. My grandfather, he was doing farm work. He got a home down there. A place called McGehee, Arkansas, during his lifetime.

You said you were born in Selma, Arkansas.

D.S. Freeman: Selma. That's a small town west of Selma. Not too far. About 15 miles from there, I think.

West of . . . ?

D.S. Freeman: Desha County.

Okay. Where is that in relation to Little Rock and Memphis?

D.S. Freeman: Pine Bluff is 52 miles.

Fifty-two miles from Pine Bluff?

D.S. Freeman: Yes, and 102 miles from Little Rock.

Okay.

D.S. Freeman: Southeast, on Highway 165.

So you're getting kind of closer to the Mississippi then?

D.S. Freeman: Yes, I'm on that border there. It used to be a farm but they don't do no farming. Only farming they do there now, they're raising rice and beans.

Yeah. A lot of that down there.

D.S. Freeman: And the work. A lot of railroad and construction work, the levee work. That was the main object there. But right now they're going in the rice business now.

Because they irrigate it and everything. You said your dad was a porter? Was he a Pullman porter?

D.S. Freeman: My father? No, he was a railroad man. He worked for Missouri-Pacific for about 32 years. He worked as a railroad man, him and his brother. My grandfather, he's the one that ran the farm, and we would go down there during the summer months and work. He'd buy us, he'll give us our clothes for school. For the school term. Go fishing and things like that.

How was it growing up in Arkansas at that time? I know it was segregated.

D.S. Freeman: Well, it wasn't too . . . Well it was, you know, as long you had a companion with some of the people, as long as you were on, you know, have personality that you get along with people. I never had any problems in that lifetime like that. If I see something, you know, that wasn't right, you know, I can always move on. But other than that, it wasn't too bad. No sir.

When the war started, I guess you had just turned 20 years old. You were born December 4th, and Pearl Harbor was bombed December 7th of '41, so you were just 20. Do you remember that day?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir.

Tell us about that.

D.S. Freeman: During that morning, President Roosevelt, he was the president. During that time when they hit . . . The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, they said on the radio. That was 1941. They started calling all people to give them a two-year training. Two years military service, you had to serve during that time. Matter of fact, I didn't serve that time, but I did have a brother that stayed for two years there. But I was called up in 1942.

1942. You got drafted?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. October 7, 1942.

Where did they send you after you got drafted?

D.S. Freeman: Well, I went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I got some of that basic training there.

Fort Jackson. So you were drafted into the Army?

D.S. Freeman: Yes. And then I went to down in Little Rock. They had a base there. Went there for a year two training. After you do your military training, they go into marching and . . .

What was your specialty in the Army? Did you have a particular trade or MOS?

D.S. Freeman: For about 15 years I worked with . . . Just a regular man. I was in a platoon.

Infantry?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. I worked in infantry. In my last term in the Army, when I retired, I was 12 years I was a first sergeant E-8. That's what I retired from the military. Yes sir.

When did you retire? What year was that?

D.S. Freeman: I retired November the 1st, 1972.

November 1972.

D.S. Freeman: In Fort Stewart, Georgia.

So you served 30 years.

D.S. Freeman: Thirty years.

Did you ever expect that you were going to serve that long when you got drafted?

D.S. Freeman: No sir. I did not because I was . . . My intention was to get on out and go back to school again. After I stayed there so long I adjusted myself and things like that, well, I just . . .

Just kept on going.

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir.

That's great. How did your family feel about your getting drafted? Were they worried?

D.S. Freeman: Well, they were. My mother, my mother, she was worried, you know, because she was tending to be like that all the time. But my father, you know, it didn't worry him too much I don't guess. You would never know, you know, he never did let on to like everything you had. Why he just kept it inside of himself unless it's something serious, you know. He just wanted to tell you, "Go on and serve your time and come on back." Just like that.

What about some of your five brothers? Did they get drafted too?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. I had one brother, he was under me. He was in the Navy. Then I had another brother. He was older than I am. He came in in 1941. Give him two years training. He trained at Fort Riley, Kansas, in the 10th Cavalry. During that time, you only had two Black units, the 9th and the 10th Cavalry. He was out here down next to the coast in 1942, early. I'm thinking it was June, he came out here on maneuver. Brackettville, Texas. I don't know if that's west.

Brackettville? Yeah.

D.S. Freeman: A camp there. My brother went out there. He said it's like a 102 in the shade there.

Yeah, it's bad.

D.S. Freeman: It's bad. He was out there several times. He and the cavalry. That's when they had those horses. That's where he trained. He said the main thing, why they had such a rough time, watching snakes. Taking care of those animals. And pulling guard and everything. Make sure that snakes and things don't bite or nothing happen to them, they take off.

When you got to Fort Jackson, you went through your basic training, did they send you anywhere during the war? Did you go overseas?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. I went to Southwest Pacific. That was July 1942. They sent me to Southwest Pacific. Southern New Guinea. That's where we landed. Militant Bay.

Describe what your memories are of New Guinea during that time of the war. It was kind of rough, right?

D.S. Freeman: During that time, you know, there wasn't nothing but Japanese and Australians. Australia had armies there too. The people there, during that time, it was just a strip. They always kept them fenced in but you never get too close to those people there. They did work with some of the units, you know, all the time out there, but the womens, they always kept them away from the Army, military.

Where you were, was it getting bombed much by the Japanese?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. We had Bougainville, Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands, and I went from there on into Okinawa. That's when the war ended.

So you went to all those spots? Those were all major battles during the war.

D.S. Freeman: Southern Philippines, I was in the place, and we had an airstrip away from the station. We had various 'toons. They had the 'toons, you know, scattered from each combat places where the infantry continued. I was in southern New Guinea. Not New Guinea, Philippines.

And being in infantry, did they have you out there fighting or were you on guard?

D.S. Freeman: Oh yeah. We were with the line. We joined up with the 93rd Division. I never forget, Bravo Company. That was infantry. An infantry company. The 93rd Division. You only had two. The 92nd and the 93rd. Those were the two Black divisions. The 92nd, they were in Germany, and the 93rd was in South Pacific. Asia.

Describe for us, tell us a little bit about your fellow soldiers and your officers and your NCOs, staff NCOs.

D.S. Freeman: Well, during that time, we had all Black units. It was all Black unit. We had a Caucasian personnel. There was a company commander. We had Black officers, you know. But the commander was a Caucasian, White officer. That lasted up until, you know . . .

In '47.

D.S. Freeman: Because I went to, during that time, I was in the Korean conflict. When we went in there, they had . . .

Integrated at that point. I wanted to ask you because you're one of the few people I've met that lived through . . . You went in the service when it was segregated and desegregated. What was that like for you? What was the typical treatment?

D.S. Freeman: Well, you know. It was a distance between us. We had different training places and different eating places, places like that. Being down to the military, doing down for doctors and units and things like that, everybody was treated the same. We got the same treatment.

Did you get a lot of hostility from White soldiers and stuff?

D.S. Freeman: Not too much. They didn't allow all that stuff during that time. Right now, I mean, it's pretty well triggered even now in the Army, you know. They got all these womens and things in there now. It is a lot different now. The training and everything. Peoples is more educated now. We have different personalities.

To someone like me, I'm in the Marine Corps. I'm in the Reserves now. I went to basic training, everybody. That was the thing that was so great about, I thought, about going to boot camp, was everybody was treated the same. We got our heads shaved and it didn't matter if you were a poor kid or you're a rich kid or where you're from, everybody was treated as the same. As a recruit, and what you got in terms of rank is what you earned. So, to me, it's just a foreign concept, especially in the military, that people would be divided by color. But you hear all these stories about the mistreatment and that sort of thing. I was just curious if you saw much of that, you know, the racism, especially when the forces are finally desegregated.

D.S. Freeman: But you see, during that time, like those companies during that time, there were Caucasians as commanders, but you had your Black first sergeant, platoon sergeant, mess sergeant, motor pool sergeant, mess hall sergeant. All those was Black. In that particular unit, you know. We had separate units before they desegregated us.

And once they desegregated it, did they dissolve those units or just kind of disperse everybody out?

D.S. Freeman: They dispersed them out to various units. They'll send some to different types of units, you know, they send them to. They called it two-year MOS, you know. During that time, you know, the MOS variance. If you was a mess steward or something like that, why they'll send you to another company, you know, maybe nothing about . . . It was mixed, you know, all the units were just about mixed, you know, fifty-fifty. Sure was.

Was it a pretty seamless transition in 1947?

D.S. Freeman: It was. It was sir. Yes sir. It was. Right now some of 'ems having problems now, but seems like they're solving 'em pretty good right now.

Every unit I've ever been with, I've never seen any racial disharmony or discord.

D.S. Freeman: If something occurred like that, why, it was always taken care of right on the spot, you know. The first would go get the company commander or you could go up to the battalion commander, something like that, where they'd work on these things. If you went in there and did the job, mostly everything, why, you would could get along. You'd get along.

So you said you were in Korea then? In the Korean conflict?

D.S. Freeman: Yes. I was there when the 3rd Infantry was backed up. 1950. Remember when the Chinese had that?

Down to the Pusan Perimeter?

D.S. Freeman: Pusan Perimeter. We were picked up. That's when the president started calling all units, all reserve units. During that time, anyone had a 111, that was an infantry MOS. During that time, it was 1950, I was down in Fort Benning, in the infantry school down there. So I got hooked up with a unit from Montgomery, Alabama. We went over there. We had all those units. That's the only thing. When they started out again. During the Korean Conflict, you had these reserve units, and see they was already filled up. But they did fill 'em with slots, you know, where there was need. But both of those units, you know, they had cousins, brothers, and things like that. Well it was pretty hard to get promoted unless they went up in combat, infantry like that, it was taken care of. Some was missing but they definitely had to have that MOS.

What are your memories of Korea?

D.S. Freeman: Korea, you know, it was kind of bad, you know. Because when they sent us in there, it was wintertime. We didn't have no winter clothes, nothing like that. They just dumped us right in there, you know. This is where the war started. Started escalating afterward. There's so much pressure too. Those Chinese are something else.

You were, I guess, in the Pusan Perimeter when MacArthur made the landing at Inchon.

D.S. Freeman: Oh yes, I was.

Do you remember, after that happened, being able to pretty quickly push the North Koreans back?

D.S. Freeman: Oh, they pushed them back, to that line, Demarcated Line, they moved them back there and held them. We lost a lot of men. It was a lot of personnel, you know, lost during that time. But during the war, you can expect that, you know. You're going to have casualties. You going to have one of those things like that.

Were you married at that time?

D.S. Freeman: No sir, I wasn't. After I finished my tour, first time I came back, then that's when I got married.

After Korea?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. After Korea.

Where did you spend most of your time assigned while you were in the Army? What different bases? I know they move you around a lot.

D.S. Freeman: Well, I was at Fort Campbell. I was in Fort Stewart. I was in Fort Benning. That's where most of the infantry's inside that. And over at North Carolina, the 82nd.

Fort Bragg?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. I'd go there. Pretty well, I made all those units.

So you stayed at kind of a lot of the east coast bases?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. That's where I went most of the time.

Were you ever assigned here to Fort Hood?

D.S. Freeman: I came in here one time and got assignment. Bought a home and everything. Bought me a house. But I was never able to get back here. I'd come back, it was, my MOS was always filled. I can look up again, I was on orders, well, that's when the Vietnam War was going on. After everything cleared.

Is that how you came to be here at Temple, though, because you had been at Fort Hood?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. I tell you how this all began. We started from Kentucky. We started from there, the 102nd. That all the units were getting them and bringing them down to Fort Hood. See they had to build that place. It wasn't built yet.

Yeah, there wasn't anything there during World War II.

D.S. Freeman: They brought all those peoples down. Different soldiers with different MOSs and things like that. Then that's where the things started progressing down in that area like that, see. Then they finally . . . Because when we first went in there, if you had a family during that, it was hard to get a place to stay because they didn't have no places there. I think they had the -. They had the places there. Another building they had, the Simmons Building, they had a few rundown shacks down there. But you had to go to Belton if you had a family. You had to go to Belton or either Temple. You could move from there back to fort during your workday. That went on for quite a while but the commanders and everything, everybody started getting complaints, you know, and the Department of the Army started visiting and things started getting better.

Started building some residences, I guess.

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir.

You said you retired in '72 from the Army. Did you go to Vietnam during that time?

D.S. Freeman: I made three trips to Vietnam.

So you did World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. There's not a lot of folks who can say that.

D.S. Freeman: Check my record, yes sir.

Where all did you go in Vietnam?

D.S. Freeman: Pleiku. That's a long way. I won't forget that trip. I stayed the 1st and the 12th. That's when they got wiped out, in 1967, it was. That's Christmas Eve. That's when they started moving a bunch of troops there. We lost lots of men. At the first of 12th Cav, they were in that during that time. Then you had others. Other units along the side of them.

You were a first sergeant at that time, right?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. I was first sergeant.

For folks listening who don't know, a first sergeant is like the senior-most rank after sergeant major.

D.S. Freeman: The first sergeant, he runs the company, and the company commander, he commands.

So really, the first sergeant runs the show.

D.S. Freeman: And the company commander, he commands.

How many men were in your unit when you were in Vietnam?

D.S. Freeman: In an infantry company, you run about 300 men. But most of the time it was about 200. Two hundred men. Before we had different _.

It's definitely a difficult job and a hard job. You're showing me a photo here.

D.S. Freeman: That's me when I retired.

What was it like being a first sergeant?

D.S. Freeman: Bad. It's bad. You got to stay on the ball all the time because if something goes wrong, the company commander looks right to you for it. Because the battalion commander going to call him and he looking for the first sergeant. He's the one that he's depending on to run that company.

Tell us about some of the young men that served under you, especially in places like Vietnam when you were a first sergeant. You're kind of a father figure to a lot of those guys.

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. We had . . . Some of them, you know, they'd never been in a situation like that, you know. It was pretty hard because, you know, drugs, you know. They're starting to get on some drugs and things like that. That was a difficult time that we had. Or else when you went in combat sometimes like that, you know, you would . . . Under fire, you know, it takes a brave person to stay in the foxhole and things like that. When those rounds start coming in, you've got to be able to answer. If the company commander, the field commander, he'll want to say, "Well, I want Bravo Company to move forward." _ Then you start moving out. Then the first, the company commander, he breaks them down in platoons. He might send a whole platoon out but he'll send a reconnaissance out _. Send him out for reconnaissance. Come back then a platoon will go out and start working like that. Eventually, they'll move the whole company

when they get situated when they get the headquarters, the station. It wasn't too light, but you know.

When you were in the Army during the Vietnam period, could you tell who the guys were that were draftees and those that were there because they'd volunteered?

D.S. Freeman: Oh yes. Because the discipline, you know. The discipline was pretty . . . It wasn't too bad. It didn't take long, you know, once you get 'em settled down and let 'em know where they stand at and just start training, then he'll finally come around. He'll come around. Because you got some of those platoon sergeants, squad leaders, you don't . . . You do or you don't. They works _ . Because the first sergeant, he gonna look to the platoon sergeant if something goes wrong, if John Doe is not there. He gonna call, "Where's John Doe? What time did he go out? He's supposed to been in the motor pool at a certain time." Maybe the battalion commander will go down around the PX, around there somewhere and sees somebody from Bravo Company and they know him. The first thing he's gonna do is he's gonna call the company commander. Then the company commander will call the first sergeant.

Sure. It rolls downhill. I was just curious because you hear all the stories and read the histories about Vietnam and the guys burning draft cards or dodging the draft and I've always wondered what it was like once some of those guys actually got in the service.

D.S. Freeman: After a while, once they go through that basic. They give 'em that MI, that basic training before they send 'em out to the unit. When they get there, they get to the company again, the get the orientation and they gonna give 'em some training, you know, before they send them forward.

So you never saw any problems, then, as a first sergeant, with any guys telling you, "I don't want to . . ."?

D.S. Freeman: Not too many. Not too many problems. We didn't have too many major problems. Mostly, when time off duty, sometimes we had some problems, you know, like if you got one start smoking them weeds or trying to get into the villages and things like that, which is off limits like that. I don't care where you go to such unit or that, you're gonna have some of those guys going to try to go to those places. They know it's off limits but some of 'em try to give it a break anyway.

So you retired in 1972 after 30 years. What did you retire to? Where did you go after you retired?

D.S. Freeman: I went home. I went home during my mother's lifetime. I helped her with the work there around the house and helped her. Then I came here to Killeen. I had two houses there. So I came back and they were pretty well messed up, you know, from renting like that. And I got rid of one of 'em and one of 'em is one which I got now. It took a lot of work to get it done because people don't take care of your property, you know.

Sure. When it's not theirs, they don't take care of it like it's theirs.

D.S. Freeman: First thing he says, "Well, it's not mine. I'm paying so much." Then you have trouble collecting from them, things like that. So it's difficult. Difficult situation.

So you've been in Killeen since '72?

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir. I've been there since '72. See we came there for training, to set that place up in November 1955. 1955 when we came to set that place up. But that's one of the modern units in the United States Army now, that's Fort Hood.

Yeah, Fort Hood's getting bigger now. They're really growing the size of the base.

D.S. Freeman: Oh, Lord. That's something. So much improvement, I mean for the enlisted men. You got room for two.

Oh, sure, yeah. They don't live in the squad base anymore.

D.S. Freeman: No sir.

And the food's a lot better, and just . . .

D.S. Freeman: See they got a separate . . . If you go through the regular chow line, then they have another one if you just want a sandwich, they got the line over here for you.

Yeah, I agree. I think they've got pretty good standard of living now.

D.S. Freeman: Just like the thing now. They don't even have to pull guard. _ Roster, I mean a company roster anymore. During that time I was there, you had a company roster. You had your guards, your KPs, and your peoples like that. You had to see all that done. Burn the oil sometime all night trying to get that thing, and if you ain't got a good company clerk, you have to pull your own to get something done.

Company gunny, gunnery sergeant.

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir.

That's all important. You said you've been here at the Courtney Home for about eight months now.

D.S. Freeman: About eight months. I came in April.

Do you have any children?

D.S. Freeman: I have one daughter.

One daughter.

D.S. Freeman: She's in Columbus, Georgia. She's the one who takes care of everything.

That's great.

D.S. Freeman: She was here in July so she'll come back again during the Christmas holidays because we got to do something with the house, you know. Tenants complaining, you know, that it run down. I got my neighbor, he taking care of it but . . .

That's good. One thing that we'll do and hopefully I can get it done quickly is, after this interview is done, we're going to make copies of this interview on to CDs and we're going to send it to you. My goal is to get them done before Christmas so that way you can give a copy to your daughter or friends or whomever, and we'll also include with it a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson in a commemorative binder. It's just a small way of the State of Texas saying thank you to you for your service to our nation. So, my goal is to try to get that to you before Christmas so when your daughter comes, you can give her a copy as well. What we do is we save a copy in our archives. We have archives that go back to the 1700s. We have the original land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. We have the registro that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand of all the settlers that first came to Texas. So our goal is to add these interviews to that archive so people can listen to this interview well after you and I are gone. With that in mind, is there anything that you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview many years from now?

D.S. Freeman: I could tell by some of the young men now because they coming in and making a career at it, and some of 'em is doing well. I noticed during the holiday, Veterans Day, you know. You got a different caliber man. They are more educated and everything now as they were during that time. Right now it's pretty hard to stay. You got to keep a clean record to stay in there right now because they're cutting the Army.

Yeah, all the forces. Yeah, you can't mess up. You can't . . . You do drugs and you're gone, and that sort of thing.

D.S. Freeman: Them _ out there getting them _ and can't get along with the unit like that.

I think you're right, sir. I mean, education level of the forces today is the highest ever.

D.S. Freeman: That's pumped up high now.

It's an all-volunteer force now. It's been that way for like 30 years now. So everybody's there because they volunteered, and it's a good-caliber force.

D.S. Freeman: So what's so great about it now with the enlisted man, he don't have to pull KP. He don't have to pull guard duty. All that's done by civilian people.

That's true.

D.S. Freeman: During my time, you had to . . . The unit did, GIs did that.

Yeah, you're right. They've done a lot of that.

D.S. Freeman: A lot of improvement.

Yeah, a lot of bringing in the civilians to do those types of jobs and allow the soldier or the Marine to focus just on their individual skills.

D.S. Freeman: I see a warrant officer now, they even got a warrant officer in the mess hall now, in the kitchen now. They even E-9, you can go up to E-9 in the mess, but during that time the highest you could get was an E-7, and he had to be in charge of a mess hall. During that time

they had to be out of the battalion commander to have that. Most of the time you had was a staff sergeant.

Yeah, that's right. Now that they have a lot of civilians in there, it's definitely overall, just everything. You can go into the PXs on base or it's a base housing, they're all vast improvement over what it was just 20-30 years ago.

D.S. Freeman: It's amazing to go look at that, go through that place out there at Fort Hood, you know. You wouldn't believe it's a military _.

Well, I think even though a lot of the rest of the Army is going to get smaller, Fort Hood is going to keep getting bigger because they're bringing in more units as they do the realignment and that sort of thing. So it's a growing base. It's a big place. Well, sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to let me interview you today.

D.S. Freeman: Appreciate talking with you.

It's an honor for us, and again, thank you for your service to our country. I know I say that on behalf of everybody at the Land Office and the State of Texas.

D.S. Freeman: Yes sir.

Thank you for your service and your time.

D.S. Freeman: Appreciate it.

Yes sir.