

Transcription: Claude Norman

Today is Tuesday, October 28th, 2014. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'm interviewing Mr. Claude Norman. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Norman is at his home in Bandera, Texas. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us. It's an honor for our program.

Claude Norman: It's my pleasure.

Yes sir, the first question we always start with is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Claude Norman: Well certainly. I was born in Florida and pretty soon right after I was born, we moved to Tennessee, and I grew up in Tennessee. Occasionally lived in Arkansas, but mostly in Tennessee, and the main town I lived in was a little town called Ashland City which is about 25 miles out of Nashville up in the hills.

Growing up, did you think that going into the military was something you wanted to do?

Claude Norman: It was the furthest thing from my mind. I was mostly interested in having fun, girls and having fun, and that interest led to me not doing very well in school. In fact I was asked to leave the school in the 10th grade, and ended up in front of a judge. I wasn't in a lot of trouble, just a lot of little things, and the judge back then like they used to, he said in a month and a half you're gonna be 17. You either are going to reform school or you're going in the military. And so I wisely chose the military. That was like in December, and then January 3rd of 1966, I boarded a bus, went to Memphis, got on a train, and went to Fort Benning, Georgia.

OK, what did your parents think about you going into the military?

Claude Norman: Well my mom, she was glad I wasn't going to reform school, and my dad when they told me I was going to have to join the military, I told him I wanted to join the Marines like him. He said no way. He said been there, done that. He was a former Marine and served in World War II over the Pacific, and he said you really need to go into something other than the Marine Corps. So I joined the Army. And they both were supportive of that. They were supportive of me all through life even though I was a pretty wild child.

So what were your first impressions then of the Army? I guess you had to go in for your indoctrination, your physical, all that sort of thing.

Claude Norman: Yes, my impressions of the Army started right away. Again, I was raised up in the hill country of Tennessee and so when I got to Fort Benning, I got in late that afternoon. They picked us up on a bus, put us in a barracks, and we were still in civilian clothes. So the next morning, bright and early, a drill sergeant come in and got us up and put us out in formation, and we did what was called police call, which I had never heard anything, and we were down on our hands and knees picking up anything that didn't grow, and cleaning up, and all this time this drill sergeant was just picking on me for whatever reason, at least I thought that was. So when we were standing in formation, I was kind of getting enough of it and I told him that I needed to see his supervisor. And he said why? I said black people don't talk to white

people like this. And he said oh really? He said tell me about that. So I explained to him that where I come from, I didn't know how it was everywhere else, but I just didn't think this was right and they needed to get me, get us a drill sergeant out there that was white to deal with white folk. And so he said well why don't you come with me and I'll take you and introduce you to my supervisor. So another drill sergeant took charge of the platoon, or actually it was a bigger platoon, and he walked me around behind the barracks and he introduce me to his supervisor, and after a good butt whipping, which was by him, him and I came to an understanding that in fact that there was no black, white, blue, purple, green, yellow people, that we were all the same. And that was my first and probably the most valuable lesson, one of the most valuable lessons I learned in the military. His name was drill sergeant Davis, and I'll never forget him. He was a great guy and he started changing me from a wild child to a soldier, and I have more respect for him than could ever be.

That's great. Tell us then a little bit, sir, about the other guys that were in your platoon. Were any of them draftees or there because they were told to be there, or were there some that had chosen to sign up for the Army?

Claude Norman: The best I remember, I'd say it was probably about 70 percent draftees and 30 percent volunteers for whatever reason. We were mixed up. We were finally put into our particular platoons. We were probably about 70 percent white, 80 percent white, the rest black, and oddly enough, my best friends, there was there of us, one of them was Michael Pinkston, was a black guy, and him and I turned out to be really good friends. Then James Meadows was another guy from New Orleans, and we became great friends. Basic training at Fort Benning during December, January, and February was an interesting thing. Fort Benning, you could wake up in the morning, it would be 30 degrees outside, and by 1 o'clock it's 75-80 degrees. So you went through all the different gamuts of temperature – rain, we even had snow one time, so quite interesting.

At that point in early 1966, Vietnam was really just escalating for the U.S. forces. Did you think that you'd be going to Vietnam, or were you tracking on that sort of thing at all?

Claude Norman: Well, I wasn't really thinking I was going to go to Vietnam when I joined. I was able to choose my MOS and choose also my first duty station, so I chose – just before I joined the Army, about a year before I'd been a Sunday morning disc jockey on a local radio station, and I wanted to go into Armed Forces radio. My recruiter, you know, they never lie to you. And he told me that he would make sure that after I finished basic training, they would send me to signal school where they would teach me how to be a radio disc jockey for real, and then my second choice was, my location, was I wanted to go to Germany. So I had no idea that I was going to go to Vietnam. I figured everything was just fine.

So you thought you were going to go to Germany and be on Armed Forces radio network.

Claude Norman: That was my thoughts as to that's where I was headed. Now on the fourth or fifth day when I was in basic training, they put all of us in this great big auditorium and all we'd done for the four days is get clothes, haircuts, fill out paperwork, go to another room, fill out more paperwork. It was just nuts. So we were all sitting in this auditorium and this guy came in. He must've been, at the time I thought he was 8 foot tall, looked like John Wayne. He had medals everywhere. He was in his dress greens. He was a lieutenant colonel, and he talked to us about Airborne. He said that was the best of the best and by now we had all seen that in the military everything is paperwork, paperwork. He said this is one time when you get over on the

Army. If you think you'd like to be Airborne, we're passing these cards around. All you have to do is check you want to go to Airborne school, put your name at the bottom and turn them in. At the end of basic training you will be in the best shape you've ever, ever been, and we'll bus you right here in Fort Benning from, I was out of Harmony's Church, we'll bus you from Harmony Church right to main post and in three weeks you will be an Airborne qualified soldier, the best of the best. And so we was all kind of talking, wow, yeah, and I raised my hand and stood up, I asked him, I said well sir what if we sign it now and decide later at the end of basic training we don't want to go? He said that's fine, we're gonna call you all back in, and if you don't want to go, you just sign up on a card that you decline and that's it. He said this is just all volunteer. All you're doing is volunteering. I said well shoot, that might be a good idea. So I signed it and sent it in. Well, seven weeks went by and I plum forgot about it, absolutely forgot I'd signed it with everything else going on. In our seventh week, all us idiots that signed those cards, they put us back in the same auditorium. Well, the same lieutenant colonel showed up and he's in fatigues and a black hat, and he wasn't talking real nice anymore. And so he was telling us that we were graduating next week and that we needed to tell our families we weren't coming home, that they had a cycle starting and they was going to put us in the cycle and we'd be going in three weeks before we go to AIT, advanced individual training, once that was settled. Well, by that time after seven weeks in the Army, I decided no way in hell did I want to go to Airborne. So I raised my hand and I said sir, last time we talked you said we could opt out and I want to opt out. Can I do that? He said oh yeah, this is all Airborne, if you quit, I want you to know that contract you signed says that I can move you to any branch of the service and put you anywhere I want. All you guys that think you're going to opt out of this, go ahead and sign it and I'm going to move you to infantry, send you to Vietnam and I'm going to personally get you killed.

Geez, he said that?

Claude Norman: Yeah he did.

Wow, that's horrible.

Claude Norman: No, that was great. That's the way -

He was a lieutenant colonel?

Claude Norman: Uh-huh. And so I thought about it about 20 seconds or so and I went on and just turned the cards in without signing it. So sure enough the following week, we graduated. We went back to the barracks, turned in our weapons, did all that, loaded up our duffle bag and they took me across to main post and the next three weeks I learned how to jump out of airplanes and run like crazy. So at the end of Airborne, they got us, I graduated, I made five jumps, and so at the end they were asking us - I guess it was two or three days before graduation - they were asking us if we wanted to go to Airborne units and I said are you crazy? I have jumped five times, I'm a five-jump chump and that's all I'm doing. You can send me to Vietnam, you can send me anywhere you want, I'm not doing this anymore. I didn't like it by the way.

Yeah, I was going to ask you, sir, what it was like the first time you went out of a plane.

Claude Norman: I was about middle of the stick, and I had guys in front of me where I really couldn't see. I was scared to death and then I had guys behind me who were pushing forward, so when I got to the door, the jumpmaster assisted me on the way out. I won't say I was really scared and it was, the jumping was not bad. What really scared me the most were the towers. I

hated the towers. I don't know if you're familiar with them, but they bring you up to the top and you sit there and hang. Before that, I wasn't afraid of heights. Even today, I'm still a little leery of heights.

Those towers are what, 150-250?

Claude Norman: 250.

OK, very tall towers.

Claude Norman: Yes they are, and you get a great view of Fort Benning main post.

So they take you up there and you're harnessed in, and you're practicing doing your static line jumps from up there, right?

Claude Norman: Well, you have a deployed chute that's in a ring, and they take you up there and it's a very controlled situation. So they take you up and then they release you, and of course since the chute is already deployed, it catches you right away, and you get to float down at about 900 mph and you hit the ground. That gives them a chance to make sure in a very controlled situation if you do get hurt, they can attend to you. If you're doing something wrong, you've got the jumpmaster right there who can see what you're doing, and correct you. So you have a ground week where you're getting in shape. You have a tower week where you start out jumping off a little bench and then you end up at the towers. The third week is jump week.

Did you have any trouble with your landings? I know that's a big concern about breaking a leg or ankle or something of that sort.

Claude Norman: I didn't. I was very fortunate. We had some guys that got injured. What I know now is, almost every cycle they do have guys that get injured. But no, I was lucky. I didn't get hurt, and so I got through it, just like anything else. So anyway when I told them I wasn't going to go to the Airborne unit, they went on and sent me to Fort - I went home for a week and then I reported at Fort Gordon, Georgia, for signal school which is what I thought was going to be Armed Forces radio announcer. Well, he had, the recruiting officer had put me down as a 72B20, which is a comm center specialist. Now I knew that, but I figured, well OK, that sounds like something you work in a radio station, communication center, I got that. When I got there, I found out that's actually a cryptologist, a crypto telegraph operator, or a telegraph operator with crypto. So they started top secret clearance on me. I didn't know how to type, so we learned how to type, and I went through, it seemed like to me it was 21 weeks of school.

That's a long school.

Claude Norman: It's a long school.

And that was there at Fort Gordon?

Claude Norman: Fort Gordon, yup.

That's a long school.

Claude Norman: And so finally I graduated, and all the time during school I said this is not what I wanna do, I don't like this and I don't want to do this. Of course they didn't, I fell on deaf ears. So sure enough, I ended up graduating and so I went home for another week, and then reported to Fort Dix in New Jersey and caught a flight over to Frankfurt, Germany, to be assigned in Germany. So when I got into Frankfurt, they had a military group there that picked you up off the plane and take you to the Casern downtown, and that was the replacement barracks, and I stayed there about three days, and finally they had me assigned to a site in, it was Zweibrucken in Germany. Now I'm still 17 years old, only been out of Tennessee once and that was to Fort Benning, and so they marched me down by myself, gave me a train ticket, and sent me to Zweibrucken. That was an experience. I was on a train, these folks weren't speaking English, and remember, this was in '66, not too long after the war, and there were still some folks over there that were still a little hostile and resentful of all that went on. And so none were too happy, and finally the conductor came over and he knew where I was going, the train pulled in, and he put me off, and off the train went and I'm standing at like 8:30 at night in a train station, just empty, and nobody's there at all that would speak English to me. So I was there about four hours before finally some MP's came through to make a check of the station, and I told them what was going on they took me to the Casern I had to work at. Well, I stayed there a few days and they kind of indoctrinate you into being in Germany, how to act and those kind of things, and they started putting me to work. And my job was in a small room, at the time I thought it was about a 4-foot x 4-foot room, and in reality, it was probably a 15- or 18x18 room. It had all of this cryptology and telegraph equipment. We would receive messages and encode, decode and then send 'em back out. We were just passing messages back and forth. And I didn't like that. I just, I didn't like being cramped up in that room, I didn't like what I was doing, I was mad about everything that happened, and so finally I went to report one morning and I just told them, you can put me in prison, do whatever you want, I don't want to do this. So that didn't do any good. They still escorted me down and put me to work. So when I got off that afternoon, I went down, I was gonna go talk to the first sergeant again and just ask him if there was anything I could do to get out. Well, when I got to the orderly room, he was out and I was sitting around waiting and there was a jeep sitting up front. So I thought what the heck. And so I got in the jeep and took off and went downtown. Now you could go through the gate out without being stopped. You didn't have to have a pass. They just checked you coming in. so the gate let me through and I went downtown and got thoroughly drunk. Well, they came down and got me. And so they were going to court marshal me. And at that point, I got to tell you, I didn't really care. Whatever you want to do. During this time there was something going on that was called Operation Treeloft. A lot of people don't remember, but in '66, Charles De Gaul threw the United States out of France. They told the United States, get all your stuff, leave our country, and one of my favorite quotes was from one of the generals reportedly, I imagine it was a joke, he said well do you want to sedate up all our bodies and take them, too? But nonetheless, they were doing that, and they were looking for truck drivers who had top secret clearances to haul the missiles out and other classified items. Well, the commander was aware of that, and he was also aware that I had a top secret clearance, and he also knew that I knew how to drive 18-wheelers because my dad was in construction, I grew up in construction, and I drove them with him at work. So to make a long story short, he offered me an opportunity to go to transportation and haul classified stuff out of France into Germany, and I jumped on that like a duck on a June bug. So I went to Kaiserschlattern, went through transportation school. Actually I think it was in Premisanz. I went to transportation school, and for the next 13 months, I hauled stuff out of France into Germany and all over Germany.

So at that point, do you think you were glad then to be where you were? Did things get better getting to drive like that?

Claude Norman: Well, I enjoyed it but we worked six days a week. It was a big rush, and in fact, the good part was we lived on the economy a lot, which meant that I only reported back to Kaiserschlatern and had my truck serviced, get fresh uniforms, pick up some pay, and then on Sunday or whatever day it was, the next day I'd head back out and I just kept running back and forth. Honestly, I was getting tired of it. Now one other thing that happened in my life during that time, when I was at Fort Gordon – again, remember I was a bit of a wild child – I'd been there so long and I wanted to move off post and live off post, and by then I'd made E3 and those guys that were married could live off post. I had met a girl downtown and her and I had talked and she wanted to move away from her family and I wanted to move off post, and so we thought it would be a grand idea just to get married and then we could live where we wanted. So I had married this girl. When it finally came to pass that we got married, and we were only married maybe three weeks when my orders came in. So I'd only been married three weeks, but one of the things that happened is she got an allotment. Now I didn't think this thing through at that time. I was still a little young. So when I ended up in Germany, she was getting half of my paycheck, and my paycheck was like \$90 a month. So after all that time, I was very disaffected with the whole thing and so I couldn't get a divorce from her because I was there, she was there, over in the States, so I went and I talked to a chaplain and told him what I wanted to do. I asked if I could get a leave so I could go home and get this thing straightened out, and he said no, that you're mission essential, can't let you go right now. You got to just keep driving and get this job done and then you can take care of it. Well, he talked to me and said well I got a way for you to get home. He said anybody can volunteer for Vietnam, and if you volunteer for Vietnam, you can go home for 30 days, and then you'll have to go to Vietnam. I said sign me up. So I signed up, volunteered for Vietnam, and sure enough I got a reenlistment bonus which was the first time I'd seen any money, and took off and flew back to the States, and by that time my parents had moved to Texas. That's how I became a Texan. So I went to Texas and he was aware of what was going on of course and he'd already had a lawyer signed up and when I got back, we got started on it and actually it was pretty easy to get it done once I was there. So I spent 30 days enjoying myself, not really giving a lot of thought to where I was headed next. But that was over, took off, and I was a free man, took off and flew into Saigon.

What year was this, do you remember?

Claude Norman: This was in last of March, first of April of '67, and I just turned 18. And so I flew into Tonsenut and they took me to the replacement center, and of course by now I have a transportation MOS and I thought I was going to a transportation company. At the replacement center, of course they interview you and found out what's going on, what your history was. Well they found out also that I had extensive explosive experience. Part of my dad's construction company that my dad had was boring and tunneling, and in Tennessee it's a lot of rock, so we'd have to crawl in those boring holes, set dynamite charges and back out and do that for all the rock. Well when I told the guy that, one thing let me say, don't tell anybody in the Army anything. Anybody that's going in, just tell 'em you don't know nothing, you don't know how to do anything. But anyway I run my mouth, and he said you don't need to be a truck driver, you need to be a combat engineer. And I said well, but I like driving trucks. He said no, no, you're definitely a combat engineer. So I ended up with the 588 Combat Engineers, in Kuchee, Vietnam. I worked there for oh I guess we were there for up until November of that year. Well during that time is when I hit, I was driving a dump truck of all things after I got there, and I hit a land mine.

Geez.

Claude Norman: Well, I was lucky. It blew me out of the truck but I didn't have a scratch on me. Couldn't hear anything, but it kind of shook me up a little bit. So my company commander in his infinite wisdom said well, you need some time away from all of that so I'm going to move you to the mess hall. I said what? I want to go back to driving – he said no, you need to calm yourself down and you need to be out of that after all you've gone through. So they put me in the mess hall and changed my MOS to cook.

Geez, so they moved you around a bit here.

Claude Norman: And so I stayed there for I guess it was two months, three months cooking. I was doing breakfasts, and I hated that, too.

Sure, that's a lot of work.

Claude Norman: Oh it is, that's one of the worst jobs that I ever had. And God bless the cooks that feed the soldiers. But finally I just told them I'm not doing this anymore. You can send me to jail, firing squad actually sounds pretty good. I'm not doing it. So they put me back into a line unit and right after that we moved, this was in probably November, I went to a line unit and we moved to Tanan. And went out on an operation, came back in, and then at the end of January 10 of '68 came, and the worst action for me came – I'd seen a lot of mortar patch, little skirmishes here and there, but nothing really big. But on February 10th of '68, in a little community called Fenyan which is right on the Cambodian border, we were scheduled to clear the road between, we were building a special forces base camp there, and about three clicks down the road there was a small little stream, river, and we were mining laterite which is kind of like clay, and we was using it to build the air strip. Every morning we'd have to make a clearing run to get any booby traps, any mines, and make sure there was no ambushes and that kind of stuff. Well that morning, I was scheduled to go with the first convoy, and a friend of mine named Steve Mesa came up to me and he said that he wanted to go down that morning because he had a little girlfriend down there that he wanted to go see. And I told him Sergeant Moss would just kick my butt if I allowed him to go when I was supposed to go, and he talked me into it. So Steve went on it, and I was hanging around the base camp, and five minutes after the convoy pulled out heading down to the laterite pit, all hell broke loose. There was RPG's going off, machine gun fire, everything was going on, so sergeant grabbed us and we took off across an open field to try and go to respond and we got pinned down in an open field, couldn't move. I mean if you raised your head, it was all kinds of machine gun fire coming and this lasted for it seemed like forever, but probably 10-15 minutes, and finally we were able to clear and get up and move and we moved in, and as we moved up the road toward the ambush site, there were vehicles burning, there were bodies everywhere, there was an ATC that was just blown up, and guys were burning inside, and when we got there, Steve was laying in the road with a bullet in his head. And I guess they call it survivor's remorse or survivor's guilt, but I've always felt like that should've been me and maybe if I'd have been there, it wouldn't have been me on the ground. But anyway we lost Steve. I think that day we lost maybe 10 or 12 and so anyway we cleaned up and I was really upset about Steve, and Sergeant Moss who was my platoon sergeant, told me to go over and get Steve, put him in a body bag and load him up on the duce and a half, and I told him that I just, I couldn't do that. I'd do some other guy, I can't do Steve. And he grabbed me by the collar and just about drug me over where Steve was and he had a body bag in his hand and he threw it at me and said that's nothing but a chunk of meat there. It's not Steve, it's not anything else, and I told you before and I'll tell you again, you don't make friends ever because this is what happens. Either they die or they leave. Now you put his ass in that bag and

get him on that truck. So I loaded Steve up and got a couple of guys to help me and we put him in the back of a duce and a half, and that stayed with me for 40 something years. It's still with me.

I'm sure, yes sir.

Claude Norman: So anyway we went back and about three days later, I was on the convoy again and we got hit and we lost 13, 14 guys more. It was getting pretty sporty up there, it really was. This was still during the TET offensive, and about three or four days after that, I came down, I woke up, I was sick, I had a fever, I couldn't hardly see, and come to find out I had malaria. So they Medivac'ed me out to the hospital in Kuchee, stayed there for about a month and a half recovering, and while I was there I signed up for another tour.

What was it that made you decide to sign up for more?

Claude Norman: Well probably in retrospect it was Steve. I was still glowing on that, I was angry. It doesn't make sense that you're mad you're not dead. I know that, too. I'm smart enough to know that the average person doesn't understand that. But I just was fixated that I let Steve take my place, he's dead I'm not, I didn't follow orders. If I'd followed orders, Steve would've been alive. And I felt like well, I needed to do something. And I felt like I had to stay there so I signed up for another tour. And when they let me out of the hospital, I went back to my post at Tanan, and right away they sent me to home and while I was there I met a girl.

So you came back to Texas?

Claude Norman: I came back to Texas in the old Hobby airport in Houston, and stayed with my dad, had a good R&R, and then flew back to Vietnam. Now something really funny did happen on the way back to Vietnam. By then, I'm a sergeant. And when I got back to Oakland waiting for my manifest to fly out, every morning all the troops had to show up on the freight field and they call your name off the manifest, and you go get your stuff and report for flight. Well my name is Claude Milton Norman, and it's not the first time that it happened, but they were calling out Sergeant Claude, Milton N. They had my name reversed. Well I'd been in the Army long enough to know that they weren't calling my name because I'm Sergeant Norman. So I'd show up, they'd call it, I wouldn't answer and then they would tell everybody if your name wasn't called, you are released for the day if you're an E5 or above. If you're E4 or below, report to the detail sergeant. Well I was E5 or above so I was able to go downtown, party and have a good time. I rode that for I guess seven or eight days.

That was a pretty long time.

Claude Norman: And finally one morning early just as we were getting up, orderly came in, came up to me said what's your name? I said Sergeant Norman. What's your full name? Sergeant Claude Milton Norman. He said you come with me. Captain wants to see you. So I went up and actually it was the first sergeant. He was hot. He said have you been to formation? I said yes sir, every day. He said why didn't you answer your name? I said they never called my name. He said I got it right here, and he read it out – Sergeant Claude Milton Norman. I said no sir, that's what they were calling, Sergeant Claude. And I said I'm Sergeant Norman. He said you knew who the hell they were calling. I said well, what I knew or thought didn't matter. They weren't calling my name and I was just following the rules. He said well this orderly is going to escort you back to your barracks, you're going to get your bags, you're on the next

plane out of here. So I sure enough jumped on the plane and off we went. So anyway, got back to Tanan and nothing really significant to talk of, and we had mortar attacks, launch attacks, and working as a combat engineer you do a little bit of everything, but I completed my service there and when my rotation came up I flew back and was assigned back at Fort Benning. So got back to Benning, but still after two tours in Nam, stateside duty and me did not mesh, and so I got fed up with it and I decided, one thing I had learned when I was in the hospital, that education is important. I only had a 10th grade education at that time. And so there was a priest that took an interest in me and he helped me work toward getting my GED. So when I got back to Fort Benning I decided I was going to go to college. And so I got out, went to college, and was missing the Army, missing everything about the Army. So I went back and reenlisted after four years, and they wanted to know if I wanted to go back to, because then I had a combat engineering MOS, and I said no, I want to be an MP. Those guys wear clean uniforms, ride around in air conditioned cars, and they don't go camping and hiking. And so I went into the military place and did four years there at Fort Benning. I went through MP school at Fort Gordon again and then back to Fort Benning, and got out, and that was kind of my military career.

So you got out in 19-

Claude Norman: '77. Oh, one other thing when I went back in, if you'd been out more than three years you had to go through basic again, all eight weeks of it. So I did basic twice. First time at Fort Benning, and the second time at Fort Lidderwood.

That's horrible. Yeah, that's really bad you had to do that twice. That would be I think a nightmare.

Claude Norman: Honestly it wasn't that bad. The drill sergeants the second time, they knew who I was, of course they knew the service I had been in, and they treated me, I mean I had to do the duty and I had to do the marches and all of that other stuff, but they didn't mess with me like they did the young recruits.

Did you start over with your rank being back to E1?

Claude Norman: Yes I did.

Wow, OK.

Claude Norman: I made E2 immediately upon graduating basic. I made E3 immediately finishing AIT at Fort Gordon. I made E4, I was an E4 by the end of the first year. And then a year later I made E5.

That's horrible you had to do that again, because like you said, nowadays prior service recruiters and stuff, they would bring you in at your previous rank and that sort of thing. Boy, that's rough.

Claude Norman: I could've done that if I hadn't been out, at that time if you'd been out less than three years, you could come back and one grade under your previous rank, and you had to go through two weeks of basic which was just to make sure you're physically fit, orientation, that kind of thing. But if you was out three years or more, you had to do the whole thing and come

back in as E1. But the second time I was a little overweight, and I lost almost 50 pounds in two months.

That's a lot.

Claude Norman: It was. In fact, people didn't know me that saw me when I came back out of basic. I looked, I was lean and mean again. Tired, but lean and mean.

Yes sir, so let me ask you, going back to you were talking about Vietnam and your service there, did you ever keep in touch with any of the men you served with or contact any of the families of those that were lost over there that you knew?

Claude Norman: Well I didn't for 43 years. 43 or 44 years, I went into my shell after that. I recognize now that I had PTSD. I didn't know what it was and wouldn't accept it for a long time. And so I always remembered what Sergeant Moss said that day. You don't make friends and you don't play nice and you follow the rules. Somebody tell you to do something, you do it. If you tell somebody to do it, they do it. And so when I got out of the military, I went into law enforcement, and all of those things worked to my benefit. I mean that's what you want out of a cop is a guy who follows the rules, does things right, and doesn't make friends and get in trouble. So for 40 something years I did just that, and did not really talk to any, I didn't want to talk about Vietnam, I didn't want to make an issue of it. My wife finally recognized that something needed to be done. And so she got me involved in a thing called Run for the Wall. I don't know if you're familiar with that or not.

I'm not familiar with that one, no.

Claude Norman: Every year about a thousand or so veterans and other people who ride motorcycles end up in Rancho Cucamonga, California, and we ride our motorcycles from California to the Vietnam Wall. Well she found out about that and she said you ought to do this. I said no, I don't want to be around a bunch of soldiers, I don't want to be around a bunch of people, you know how I am. Well she convinced me that this is something I should do. I said OK, I'll do one day. We'll meet in Dallas and I'll ride to Monroe, Louisiana. One day, we'll do it, and then you'll get off my back about it. So we rode up, met 'em there in Weatherford, and the first day rode, and when we finished, I said well I'll maybe ride one more day. Ended up in Washington, DC, at the Vietnam Memorial. And that changed my life. The reason I'm telling the story, you asked did I get in touch with folks. After that and talking to other vets, and having them help me heal a lot of the wounds, I started making friends. I never had friends before, and I made friends on that trip. So after that I got interested and yes, I got in touch with other guys. Most of us are dead, I mean let's face it, we're getting old. But I'm in touch with probably a dozen guys I served with.

That's good.

Claude Norman: I still ride the Run for the Wall every year all the way.

That's excellent. Was that your first time seeing the Vietnam Memorial?

Claude Norman: No, it wasn't. Actually I'd been to it three or four times before, and I got to tell you it didn't mean anything to me. I didn't get it. I went to it, I looked at it, I went to where all of my friends names are only on about two panels, so it's one section right there. I went and

looked at it and I saw ‘em. I couldn’t even really remember the events clearly. And it didn’t mean anything. I know that sounds terrible, but I just, I couldn’t connect. That first year with Run for the Wall and all my brothers and sisters I made on that trip, they were there with me, their arms around my shoulders, I walked up to it and I had a meltdown. Just everything came out, and I finally got it, I understand it. I thought when they first built it, that was the most ugly thing, it was just another slap in the face to us, who had gone over and just did what we thought was right. And I finally got it. I got the whole thing, and I love the wall now.

That’s great that your wife was able to talk you into doing that.

Claude Norman: She’s a wise woman. But yeah, we talk, and one of the things that I had talking to my friends is, I have a real bad memory. I have trouble remembering things that happened. I was over there for two tours, and with the exception of the two big ambushes, and the night that started TET, everything else is just, there’s jumbled pieces like a jigsaw puzzle, I can’t put ‘em together, and by talking to my other friends that were with me, I’m starting to be able to put those puzzle pieces together, which is I don’t know if it’s important or not, but it kind of is to me.

That makes sense to me. I think it probably helps to remember certain things and be able to make sense of it if you can.

Claude Norman: Yup, so anyway, that was my military experience. It was a good one. Started out as a bad boy and because of the military I retired as chief of police. What a difference.

And you’re in Bandera now, were you a police officer in Bandera?

Claude Norman: No, I actually after I got out of the military, I was a police officer in Columbus, Georgia, right there in Fort Benning, and then I moved to Albin, Texas, and I was a police officer and a detective there. Then I went to a town called Taylor Lake, Texas, which is right down there, I don’t know if you know where that is. By Clear Lake.

OK, I know Clear Lake.

Claude Norman: OK, it’s right there in that area, and I was chief of police there.

Oh that’s great. Well sir, I really do appreciate you taking the time to share some of your memories and your stories with us. At this office, we have archives that go back to the 1700s. We’ve got the land grant that David Crockett’s widow received when he was killed at The Alamo, and we have the Registro, which is a big huge leather bound volume that Stephen F. Austin kept of the Anglo settlers that came to Texas. And so what we’re doing with these interviews is we’re putting these in the archives and we’re hoping that people, hundreds of years from now, will have a chance to listen to them and study them and perhaps learn from them. So we really appreciate you adding your story to this archive. Commissioner Patterson is a Vietnam veteran as well, but I know on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everybody here at the Land Office, we want to thank you for your service to our nation.

Claude Norman: It was an honor.

Yes sir, and like I mentioned to you before we started recording, in a couple of weeks we’re going to send you copies of this interview on CD’s, so you’ll have that to keep but also to give to

any friends or family that might want it. We'll also put that inside a commemorative binder that has a letter and a certificate from Commissioner Patterson, and it's really just a small way of the State of Texas thanking you for your service. So we thank you for that. You've got my phone number as well, so if you need to get in touch with me at any point, please do.

Claude Norman: Are ya'll located in Austin?

Yes sir, we are. We're just two blocks north of the capitol. We're in the Stephen F. Austin Building which is an 11-story state office building.

Claude Norman: I know where it is.

And also, I will send you my card when I send the CD's. It has my email address and everything on there. If you have any pictures that you want to email us for us to put on our web site or in our archive, please do that, too, because we love to get pictures of the veterans anytime we can as well.

Claude Norman: OK, I'll be glad to do that. I've got a few I'd like to include.

A lot of veterans don't have pictures or they've lost them, but anytime we can put some photographs with the interview itself, that's always a nice thing. Well sir again, thank you very much for your time and we'll talk to you again soon.

Claude Norman: You bet you, you take care sir.

Yes sir, thank you.

[End of recording]