

Transcription: Charles Oman

Today is Tuesday, December 1st, and my name is James Crabtree, and I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and I'll be interviewing Mr. Charles Oman, and he is at his home in Gainesville, Texas. This interview is being done 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 us today. I guess the first question we always start off with is just to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your background before you went into the service.

Charles Oman: Well sir, I was born and raised in Stanley, Ohio, and that's in Hancock County. It's right south of Toledo, Ohio. I was born on a farm and we had hogs and cattle and everything else an old farm boy has to do. I played football and basketball and everything else, and got out of high school and of course Vietnam was going on and everybody ended up going to Vietnam whether it was Army, Marines, Navy or whatever, and I chose the Marine Corps.

I understand you had family members that had served in the military as well.

Charles Oman: Yes sir, my dad was in WWII, and he was a plane mechanic. I don't remember, he was a tech I believe what they called it, and he done pretty good and he taught other guys how to fix airplanes. He was pretty mechanically inclined.

What caused you to want to sign up and join the service?

Charles Oman: Well at that particular time there was a lady back there running the draft board in Ohio. Her name was Golding and she was kind of dismayed at everybody in the world that turned 18 years old, and I wasn't gonna let her get me, so I joined the Marine Corps.

Around what timeframe was this? The year or the month?

Charles Oman: I went in the last part of '65 and first part of '66.

At that time did it seem to you like most of the rest of the nation was paying a lot of attention to Vietnam, or was it kind of at that point kind of a forgotten conflict?

Charles Oman: I think it was just starting as a conflict and it was just the beginning of the war and what they called a police action, but it was the starting of it, and that was the only thing on the front page of the newspaper every day. It was like so many Army guys, so many Marines, Navy and Viet Cong this, and Viet Cong.

So after you signed up, I guess you went to San Diego for basic training?

Charles Oman: Yes sir, I went to San Diego, then Camp Pendleton up, down the coast of California out there.

Tell us what MCRD San Diego was like the first time you saw it.

Charles Oman: I don't know, it's indescribable. You just have to see it when you get off the bus and are told to stay on that footprints up there and you think the good Lord done put a wrath of beating on you because here it comes.

Did you arrive at the Depot – what time of the day was it? Did you come in at night or the day time?

Charles Oman: 2:30 in the morning.

2:30 in the morning. So it's dark and I guess the drill sergeant gets on the bus and starts screaming at you and then it all starts. What were most of the guys like that were in your platoon in boot camp?

Charles Oman: Most of my guys was in my platoon was from Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and New York. There was a couple of guys in there from Texas also.

Were most of the guys volunteers or draftees, or was it kind of a mixture?

Charles Oman: It was a mixture more or less. Probably 50/50.

So you were there for I guess up to a certain point you did all your training in San Diego and then you went up to Camp Pendleton for the rifle range and that sort of thing, field training?

Charles Oman: Yes sir. We was in the Quonset huts at MCRD there in San Diego, and after getting done with boot camp, you go to your school battalion, wherever that may be, artillery or infantryman or whatever, radio man.

What MOS did you end up receiving?

Charles Oman: Well, everybody was an 03-11 to start off with, then I become an artillery man was 0-44, which is a cannon cocker what you called us.

And that was something that was just assigned to you while you were in boot camp, because when you went, you didn't have a guarantee of what your MOS would be, right?

Charles Oman: Yes sir, you didn't have no guarantee because everybody was in the Marine Corps was a rifleman, infantry, and you just end up doing school battalion, and very interesting.

So you go through your basic training, then you go to your MOS school, and all this time I guess you know that the likelihood is that you're going to be going to Vietnam? Did you think the odds were pretty good you'd be going?

Charles Oman: About the third week at boot camp, they started telling us you're all going. He said I can see they're drawing circulate today, he says, you're all going to Vietnam, so you better learn how to take care of yourself and take care of your buddies.

And so you graduate, you get done with your training, do you have any time before you have to go to Vietnam? Did you get a boot leave or that sort of thing?

Charles Oman: After school battalion, we were supposed to have gotten 30 days, but they cut us short. We got 20 days at home. That was the quickest 20 days of my life I think. Now the airplane strike was on and my mom said I was coming home, so somehow mom got me a first class ticket on an airline and I sat in the front row and I got to go home for 20 days.

That's great. Then once that time was up, did you report back to Camp Pendleton?

Charles Oman: Yes, we went back to Camp Pendleton, the staging battalion.

OK. And how long were you there before they sent you to Vietnam?

Charles Oman: Staging was supposed to have been 28 days if I remember right, but we only was there about 17 days or 16 days, I forget now exactly. It wasn't very long and they had us saddled up and we was on another airline and on our way to Vietnam.

And when you were sent to Vietnam, before you were sent, did they tell you how long you were gonna be there? Was it a one-year tour?

Charles Oman: No, the Marine Corps was 13 months. Everybody else was 12, but the Marine Corps has to be 13.

And I guess something that was different in Vietnam and today is you went over as individuals and joined a unit that was already there, right? You didn't go as an entire battalion.

Charles Oman: Right.

So what was that like being out of boot camp and off of boot leave and being a new guy and joining a unit that had already been operating in country?

Charles Oman: It was first thing whenever you get to Vietnam, you're thinking every bad thing in the world is gonna happen to you when you get there, and nine times out of ten, it usually did, so you first got off, you were assigned to an artillery battery or a forward observer, or a ground company or whatever your MOS was, they sent you in one.

And you were assigned to a group with the forward observers, right?

Charles Oman: No, at first I was assigned to artillery battery.

OK, artillery, that's right. And I think you had mentioned to me before that you guys kind of operated out of a firing base at that time?

Charles Oman: Yes sir.

And describe for us sir if you would if there was a typical day, what a typical day was like operating in a firing base.

Charles Oman: I was on 24 hours, 24/7, and if somebody was out, then they would be receiving contact they need artillery and sound the alarm and we just had our guns and they called in a fire mission and we delivered ammo, artillery rounds.

And I guess that was pretty common then, getting the firing missions and supporting troops out in the field.

Charles Oman: Yes sir.

Then I guess you said at some point, about a month or so into it, you were moved from the firing battery and put with the forward observers?

Charles Oman: Yeah, a little bit longer, like a couple two or three months, and then I went to a ground company. I was Mike Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines.

What was the main difference having been in an artillery unit and having joined now an infantry unit?

Charles Oman: Instead of getting shot at every once in a while, you got shot at most every day or just always something going on, you were always moving. You was here today and gone tomorrow. You'd come back here in a week or you might just stay there for three or four days and run low and fire team missions out of one area.

So you basically went from being a new guy with the artillery unit to now being a new guy with Mike Company 3-1. Is there anything that stands out about any advice or anything you were told when you got to Mike Company?

Charles Oman: You just, there was another FO there and you had a second lieutenant who was the guy that you were, it's your boss that tells you what to do and operations to go out on patrols. So you're with him and the other scouts might have been there longer than you, and so you're not just, they just don't put you there and say here's your map and here's your compass, your job. It's a learning process.

Do you remember what your first mission was like going out as an FO?

Charles Oman: I'd been there probably three hours and they started telling us saddle up, we're going here, and we'll be gone and be on a night patrol ambush or whatever. So about three or four days into it, you was pretty well in with your guys that you know what was going on and you had a pretty good idea of where you was goin' and learned your maps and studied them and learned the territory.

I guess you mentioned you were always on the go a lot. What were some of your thoughts when you were there? Did you try to just focus on day to day, or were you thinking there were certain things you did that helped you get through the days like in terms of what you focused on? Was it just a minute to minute type existence?

Charles Oman: Well, you lived for the hour. It was different. I really can't say how I felt because you just, you're thankful every morning you wake up and they had a show out Good Morning Vietnam, well that's not the way it was. It wasn't where we'd get up in the morning and we'd holler around Good Morning Vietnam, and you'd go around and high five and shakin' hands and glad to see you're here today because you never know.

I know one of the people we interviewed not long ago was Pastor Floyd Perry who was in the unit with you, and I know he spoke a little bit about your nickname. Tell us a little bit about your nickname and how you got that.

Charles Oman: After a while, I was kind of tall and pretty strong and big, and so I don't know why but they ended up calling me Water Boot. Water Buffalo didn't have any sudden ____, a

bad disposition and didn't like nothin' and mean and ornery and smelled funny, and I guess I qualified for all that, so they called me Water Boot.

So they always called you Water Boot.

Charles Oman: Yes sir.

And do you remember the first time you met Floyd Perry?

Charles Oman: Yeah, I tell you what, he was my brother and I loved him to death, but he was kind of a smaller guy, so a small guy go, you were lookin' to hang around a big guy in case something happens and he gets in trouble and he has a place to hide, and I don't know, he was just a moment of, you know, you forgot about everything going on and he was a joy to be around and a good friend of mine, my brother today and I love him to death.

That's great, and I know that you guys as well as quite a few members I guess of your unit still get together for reunions, which I think is awesome. Tell us a little bit about some of those guys that you still see at these reunions and some of your memories of them from your time in Vietnam together.

Charles Oman: Well, my first reunion was up in Washington D.C. and I forget how many years ago that's been. I can't remember right now. And they all thought I was dead. I got shot in the head and the last time they seen me I was carted off, and Donny Smith who lives in Alabama, he was a good friend of mine, and he thought I was dead, and Robby Roberson up in, he was just, I hadn't seen 'em and we just are constantly in contact, Dick Smith, Robby Roberson, and Captain Woods, even my captain. We don't see each other a lot, but we talk on the phone.

That's great. So these guys thought that you had died in combat and so when you showed up, first time you showed up at the reunion, it was a good surprise for them.

Charles Oman: Oh yeah, it was wonderful. I was in California and Captain Woods called me the first time and he said you know who this is? I said no. He said do you remember Captain Woods? I said yeah, he was the last guy I talked to before I got shot.

Wow, how did he track you down?

Charles Oman: There used to be a magazine, a Vietnam, I can't even remember the name of it, but it was like a newspaper, a Vietnam memorial deal. I read about the deal and somebody knew Captain Woods and somebody else said hey, well here, walk with him, so he finally got around and he called me and I think it was Robby Roberson up in Flint, Michigan that went and told him about me, I was still alive.

Well that's good to hear. Well I think I'm a little biased but I think a lot of people would agree that the Marines have a really good sense of brotherhood, and it's neat to see that your guys and your reunions demonstrate that, still have that. It's amazing.

Charles Oman: Oh yeah, it's wonderful and if you drive down the road, I have a Marine Corps sticker on my truck, and you see somebody else has got a Marine Corps sticker, you go by and it's thumbs up, and I don't care where you go, everybody talks about their college fraternity this and that, but we are the largest fraternity, the Marines.

I would agree with that, absolutely. Well sir, you had mentioned Captain Woods was the last person you talked to before you were wounded. I wonder if you might share with us some of your memories about that, because I've got to think that's indescribable, but those of us that have never been wounded, kind of tells us what if anything that was like.

Charles Oman: Well, the day we'd been out and another company got hit real hard and about 2:30, 3:00 in the morning they'd come down and we was gonna go out as I remember correctly, and we finally got there and I was on one of the first helicopters to get there, like 7:30, 8:00 in the morning. I don't remember what time it was. There was all kind of bad things going on and we got off, and there was just a lot of chaos going on and it was just unreal.

And this was against I guess the North Vietnamese Army Force you were going up against?

Charles Oman: The NVA, the regular reinforced battalion. They had on the little hard helmets and the little khaki uniforms and all that, they had machine guns and everything else. It was full.

So when you came into your landing zone, it was already as they say a hot LZ, it was already under fire.

Charles Oman: Very hot.

What do you remember about that battle after you got off the helicopter? All the chaos that was going on -

Charles Oman: It was just there was Marines falling everywhere and everybody was trying to run to get to a position, and last the Captain Woods told me to go on out a little further up a rice paddy dike, and just to call in some artillery, and a tree line over there, it was just wild the stuff they was throwing at us from out of there. There was one man, he kind of looked like John Wayne and whatever else was shooting at one. He'd shoot at me a while and I'd shoot at him a while, and I guess just finally I ran out of gas.

Do you remember getting hit?

Charles Oman: I was laying up alongside a rice paddy dike and I looked back and I seen a machine gun coming at me, and next thing you know I woke up in Chicago.

Wow, so I guess having interviewed Pastor Perry, he described to me his memories of that event, and he thought that you were for sure dead, and I guess the other members that you met at the reunion, they thought you had passed away as well. What did they tell you when you finally woke up in the hospital?

Charles Oman: When I woke up in the hospital, Miss Rosenquest, I remember her, she was the greatest lady in the world I guess at that particular time. I was 20 years old and playing football and everything else and there all of a sudden I woke up and I was paralyzed left side and all that good stuff, and I laid out in the rice paddy for 18 hours before they ever finally got me because fire was on down the road and I guess they were loading me up and I moved my arm or something and somebody hollered, see, I told you Water Boot wasn't dead.

Yeah, because it was such a hot LZ they couldn't get to you, couldn't get you out for that long, is that right?

Charles Oman: Yeah, it was just wild, it was super hot.

Wow, and I think Pastor Perry had also said to me that he thought that your helmet had helped save your life because it kind of kept your skull in place, is that right?

Charles Oman: Yeah, my helmet had four holes in it and I only got hit with one, and a friend of mine now, his brother was on the helicopter that was supposed to Medivac me out. He was in the Marine Corps also, and he said well take his helmet off, and the guy said no, you take his helmet off, his brains will fall out, and he laughed and said let me take that off and he started to take it off and he said put it back on real quick.

Wow. So that's just a miracle that you made it. Do you remember were your parents able to be there at the hospital when you woke up?

Charles Oman: They informed them that I had been through, well we don't have all these modern conveniences, computers and all that stuff, but we had telegrams back then, so my mom and dad kept getting telegrams telling them about the way I was progressing at that particular time and they said I was going to be shipped to Great Lakes Naval Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, USA, so they told them when I was gonna be there, and then he told them not to come up until the next day. So I got a little oriented a little bit I guess. The next day my mom and dad was there, so that was -

Yeah.

Charles Oman: I was unconscious for, I got shot the 21st of April and didn't come to until May the 1st.

This was 1966?

Charles Oman: '67.

'67, yeah, wow. But I guess, I just can't imagine what your parents were going through during that time, and so the only real contact they had in the Marine Corps was just sending them telegrams, keeping them updated.

Charles Oman: There was a colonel in Lima, Ohio, he got the message first and at that particular time they always sent a military guy to the house to tell the parents whether they were deceased, wounded, or whatever.

So same thing as it is today with the notifications.

Charles Oman: Yes sir, I'm sure.

So tell us then, you were in the hospital, what did you think at that point? Did you expect to be able to recover? Did you think you were gonna be stuck there? What were your thoughts?

Charles Oman: I really didn't know. I had to learn how to walk all over and I contribute half of my rehabilitation to an Army guy by the name of Bill Ryan, and he used to just heckle the hell out of me all the time, because I couldn't talk very good and I didn't have much control of my face, and he just, I don't know, he's the reason I'm where I'm at today I think.

That's amazing. So he basically kept you motivated. He wouldn't let you stop.

Charles Oman: Oh no, he was in a, he got blowed out of an Amtrak and had a broken back, so he was in what we call a turtle shell, he was in a cast from his chin down to the top of his toes and first day I was able to walk, I got my cane, I walked over there and I just beat him like a bass drum. I said now _____. Me and him's very good friends.

So how long sir ultimately did you end up spending there in the hospital?

Charles Oman: I spent in the hospital six months, 21 days and 14 hours.

Wow, you know the exact amount of time.

Charles Oman: Yes sir. We played Rummy. We didn't play 500 Rummy, we played 5000 Rummy. But we had plenty of time.

Well that's amazing that you made it though, and just I'm awed by it and I'm awed by the fact that you were able to overcome it like you have and that you stayed in such good contact with folks like Floyd Perry and others that were in your unit. I guess how long did the Marine Corps keep you in until I guess you were medically retired at some point?

Charles Oman: Yes sir. After my, I had to wait six months for them to put the plate in my head. That way they made sure there wasn't no one touching it, and they put the plate in November the 20th and November the 27th they took the stitches out. I went in front of a board. They retired me from the Marine Corps, and I took 'em. So I have the privileges as if I had stayed in the Marine Corps 20 years or whatever. I have a green ID card and all that so I basically was just everywhere. After they took the stitches out, they said hey, thank you, goodbye, we don't need you no more.

At that point, what did you do? Were you worried about what you were gonna do? Were you gonna go back to Ohio? What were you thinking?

Charles Oman: I didn't know. My dad had a farm and I went back and I remodified the clutch on the tractor so I could use the clutch with my leg and started farming again and it took me a while to get adjusted back to living again, which I think today they're not giving a, the guys get handicapped or rehabilitation, I don't know, they should have helped us out a little. I'm not complaining, but guys today shouldn't, I don't know how they're treating them, but I hope they treat them better.

I agree, I think so. I've read about some of the stuff they've done like at the Center for the ____ down in San Antonio and places like that where they really go all out and do some pretty amazing things. I guess that leads me to another question, it seems like Vietnam timeframe, a lot of our veterans weren't treated that well, and I was wondering if you experienced that yourself in terms of the treatment the civilians had towards you from your service?

Charles Oman: 60's, you know the Beatles was wild and heavy and everybody had long hair, and I went home from boot camp, of course the last thing you do before they let you go on leave, they give you a very close haircut. You go back home and everybody was calling you a baby killer and all that kind of stuff, and I was home for 20 days and I got in a couple two or three fights over being short haired and going to Vietnam and all that kind of stuff. Of course, I was in the Marine Corps and everybody thought they would try to whip a Marine, which is not a good idea.

That's horrible. I think that's changed a lot, at least from the experience that I had, a lot of my Marines had that people I think are pretty supportive of the military now and especially our veterans, those that have been wounded. So you got back home to Ohio, how was your family? I imagine they were just relieved that you were back home, right?

Charles Oman: Oh yeah, I had three aunts and my grandfather was very supportive of me. They'd come up to Chicago and seen me I don't know how many times, but it was a very small but close family, and I'm very proud of 'em and they helped me out a lot mentally and physically by standing by me.

I'm sure that was key having a strong support base to help you overcome everything. So ultimately I guess how did you, just jumping ahead a bit, but how did you end up making it to Texas?

Charles Oman: My mom was raised up down here and I never got to come to Texas so after I got out, I come back from Vietnam, I come down here and it was colder in Ohio, and it was warm down here.

Well that's good. So how long have you been in Texas then?

Charles Oman: First time I come down here was '72 and I stayed for about four years, then I went back home for about two years and said I gotta live down here. Here I am and I'm not leaving.

That's great. Well we're glad to have you here. Well sir, I guess the goal of our program with these interviews is to save them for posterity so that future generations can listen to 'em and hopefully school kids and historians and that sort of thing, and one of the questions that I like to ask, well first of all, in our archives here we've got documents that go back to the Spanish Land Grant days. We have signed paperwork here from Stephen F. Austin and we have the discharge paperwork or the Land Grant that was given to David Crockett's widow after he was killed at the Alamo, so we have all these things that have been here for hundreds of years and our goal is that these interviews will be here for hundreds of years as well, hopefully, and one question I like to ask is if you were talking to somebody that was listening to this a couple hundred years from now, what if anything would you want them to know about your time in the service or the Marine Corps or anything like that?

Charles Oman: The only thing I could truthfully say is God bless Chesty Puller and John Wayne.

Yeah, I agree with that. Well sir, I tell you it's an honor to be able to talk to you just as a fellow Marine and Commissioner Patterson, the Land Commissioner, is a Vietnam Marine veteran and a lot of people that work here are veterans and even the people at the Land Office that aren't

veterans are very appreciative of your service and sacrifice. I know that's really cliché and a lot of people say that, but that's really what this program is about is trying to help preserve these memories and honor our veterans by preserving these stories, and something else we'll do is we'll make copies of this interview onto CD's that we'll send to you so that you can give them to your family or whomever to listen to.

Charles Oman: All right, sir.

And also if you have any photographs that you want to share with us, you can feel free to mail those to me and I'll send you my card with my address and everything on it, but if you have any copies or even if you wanted to send us the originals, you can. We can scan those and send them back to you because what we try to do is put a lot of these interviews on our web site. So I don't know if you've had a chance to look at it, but ultimately we'll have, like Pastor Perry is up there as well, and so it's kind of nice because we get a transcript done of the interview and we actually post the audio of the interview and then any photos that the veterans send us so that a person can go to it and it's listed alphabetically and they can click on that name and see the pictures and listen to the interview and read the transcript and that sort of thing.

Charles Oman: That's super. That's really great.

Well, we're trying to do the best we can with it, and then also if you know any other veterans here in Texas that are interested in being interviewed by us, please have them call me because we'd love to interview them.

Charles Oman: All right, and I've got a couple of buddies I'll give your phone number to.

Yes sir, please do. Let 'em know because that's really how this program works is through word of mouth. We don't have money for really an advertising budget or anything like that. We've got some brochures and occasionally some of the stations will run public service announcements and stuff, but it's really word of mouth and that's how we found you. When we found Pastor Perry by one of our people that works in Houston recommended him, and so it's all kind of word of mouth of how we're able to track down folks to interview. But if you know any, yes sir, please send them our way.

Charles Oman: I've only got one thing I'd like to tell you about Pastor Perry.

Yes sir, please do.

Charles Oman: What a man. He's my brother and I'm proud to say I've known him and he's a big smile.

I really enjoyed interviewing him. In fact, he just sent me the other day a couple of photographs and also some inspirational pamphlets that he and his wife have written and I really appreciate that. He was definitely a fun person to interview as well. It makes you proud to be a Marine when you're able to interview people like him and yourself.

Charles Oman: Yes sir. I tell you what, I can think about him and I just, he's wonderful.

That's great, yes sir. Well sir, I don't want to take up too much more of your time, but I do really appreciate you letting me interview you today because it is an honor, and I think you've got my number.

Charles Oman: Yes sir, I got it right here on my phone.

Yes sir, so anytime you want to call, anything we can help with please give me a holler and it shouldn't take us too long to get these CD's or this interview burned onto CD's. As soon as we have that, then I'll be putting those in the mail to you.

Charles Oman: All right, I'll send you some pictures.

Yes sir, that's sounds great. Well sir, again, thank you very much and I'm sure we'll talk again soon.

Charles Oman: All right, thank you sir, appreciate it.

Yes sir, take care.

Charles Oman: All right, semper fi.

Semper fi, hoo-rah.

[End of recording]