

Transcription: John Savage

Today is Friday, March 12, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'm interviewing Mr. John Savage. Mr. Savage is at his office in Houston, Texas, and I'm at the General Land Office in Austin, 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 us today, and I guess the first question that we always like to ask is to tell us a little bit about your background and your life before you went in the service.

John Savage: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Crabtree, for even considering interviewing me for the Voices of Veterans. I am certainly humbled by this opportunity. I joined the United States Air Force at the tender young age of 17, and before that of course I finished high school at 16. I was an early graduate. That wasn't of course because I was so smart. My brother was getting in trouble all the time and I just went to summer school with him a couple of summers in a row.

Where were you from? Where did you go to school?

John Savage: Actually I went to school in Galena Park. That is a small town just outside of Houston.

Sure, I know where that is.

John Savage: Yeah, we actually lived in Galena Park and was raised right there, just a small town and very fun of course. I graduated at Galena Park High School in 1973. I just kind of, my dad was a military man. He was in the Army, and I just kind of thought that was a good opportunity. I kind of figured that I finished school a little bit too early because I did have a lot of friends that had been out of school along with me that I was very familiar with, and we were sort of a close knit family, so I was kind of hanging out not doing a whole lot, and some of the guys that I had worked with, and I went to work right away. In fact they allowed me to work at 16, and this was a plastic company where I was working, and some of the older guys kind of took me under their wing and said man, you're too smart of a guy. You really don't want to do this for a living, and they had been around for years and they weren't growing.

What type of work were you doing?

John Savage: Actually it was at a plastic company where oh my goodness -

Was it one of the big plants?

John Savage: Yes, right there in Galena Park, and they didn't keep me on the ground very long. They kind of asked me to run one of the machines, and the machine was called an extruder, some sort of a plastic extruder machine, so I had a title of Plastic Extruder Operator. Compared to what the older guys were doing, that was a pretty significant job, well sought after, and even at that, and it was easy for me, I knew I didn't want to do that forever. So I had gone downtown Houston to view some of the videos and what not as the recruiters have them set up. You can go to various recruiting stations and I kind of enjoyed what the Air Force was offering. So I had taken some preliminary testings and what not, and they had qualified me for an air traffic controller. So when I turned 17, I was going to go in and I was all prepared to go and had said all my goodbyes, and most of my relatives at that time and actually still are, most of them are

from Louisiana, so my parents and I, we traveled to Louisiana and all of our other relatives in Houston saying our goodbyes, and I had this particular date that was already set up for me to go in, as an air traffic controller, the school. When that date was closely approaching, they called me back to say that I could not go in as a guarantee on that particular date, but my school had been canceled and pushed back for another couple of months. But because I'd said all my goodbyes and I was ready to go, and then they say well you can actually still go in on that date but you'd have to go in under the general AFSC and you would probably be able to get into the class for the air traffic controller, but it wasn't guaranteed. And so I said OK, I'll go ahead and do that since I'm ready to go and all, and one funny thing about that, Mr. Crabtree, is that my mother, you know at 17 you have to sign, your parents actually have to sign for you to go in. Well my dad signed for me because he was a military guy and I had to talk him into signing my mom's name. He actually forged her signature for me.

So you had to have both parents?

John Savage: I did, yes, and my mother said you know what, you can go in if you want, if your dad will sign my name, that's all right, but I am not signing my child off to anyone. And she was very serious about that. And so my dad, being a military guy, he went ahead to do it for me, and so that's how they would go in at 17. But what I was going to tell you about, one of the funny things, too, that occurred, because I did go ahead and say I would go in as a general criteria, and thinking that by the time I finished basic training, the opportunity for me to go into air traffic controller would be available and they said they could not guarantee it but it was possible, I went in and the two things that I did not want to do as a military guy was to be either a cook or a police officer, some kind of a military cop. Well I wind up becoming a military police officer and I learned to cook and I do both of them, that's what I do for a living, so we have a catering business and I also have been 35 years in law enforcement. So that's been the story of my life.

It kind of opened a door for you that was unexpected.

John Savage: It sure did, but a lot of fun. I think the military police officers probably had more fun in the military than most any other. I know it did for me. We had a good time.

So tell us sir, where did you go to your basic training?

John Savage: I did basic at Lackland and in San Antonio, Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

What was it like, you know, 1973, the Vietnam War still going on, it was pretty unpopular at that point, that sort of thing, or '74 is when you went in, we know that they didn't pull out of Vietnam until '75, what was it like going into the military in that situation or those circumstances?

John Savage: It was kind of strange and I've told this story many times, what occurred while I was actually in the Air Force, basic training, there was some sort of an eruption going on over there where they needed some troops, and they contacted Lackland I suppose to gather a few of us up. Now I was just about finished with basic and not quite, I mean my six weeks, at that time it was six weeks, it may be a little bit different now, but we had been pretty far into our training, but some of those guys came in and they began to throw equipment at us, extra clothing and gear, and loaded us up on a C-130. We were loaded and got on the runway, and I'm thinking boy, mama told me not to come. Man, I'm telling you it was vivid in my mind and my mother said she was not going to sign me off, and we didn't have time to call anyone, and we don't

know whether it was an exercise or not. We don't think it was because it had never happened before and to my knowledge it's never happened since, but we took off on that runway and before we got up, and I do fly choppers now, but I can tell you I didn't know anything about this at that time, but we weren't up 6,000 feet yet and they turned around and whirled us back around and we hit the runway again, and we didn't hear anything more about it and they never gathered us up again. So in all of my four years that I did serve, I never had to go to Vietnam and never fought in a war, but we were trained, because I was in the military police and I trained at what we called Camp Bullis was right in that area for combat defense training. But before I was on that airplane hitting those air we thought, we had not had this combat defense training. So we were scared. And I was again, I was just 17. Most of the guys were not much older than I was, but I was 17, I was a squad leader and what not, but I'm telling you the truth. It was very strange to me.

At that point, I guess everybody that was in, the draft had been abolished, is that right?

John Savage: Yes, correct.

So you were in with all volunteers.

John Savage: Yes indeed.

And so you were at Lackland, you went through your training, when did you find out that you were going to be assigned to military police duty?

John Savage: Just after basic training, you get your orders and after you see assignments and what not, and it turned out to be military police. I mean my tongue dropped, and you didn't have anybody to talk to because the people that I tried to ask about the class and what not, they said well, your record does indicate that you came in under the general terms and they couldn't guarantee it. I said well, that is true. So I just kind of sucked it up at that time and I went through the training for military police and I had a very good time, very good time.

Tell us, sir, what some of your best memories were of being an MP.

John Savage: Well, you know, driving those jeeps and circling the base and patrolling, working at the main gates and all that, to me that was just a lot of fun. We looked sharper than everyone else. I was a kid that my mom taught us basically everything, how to cook and how to iron, and so we looked really sharp, and I learned in the military how to shine my boots and all that, so I just kind of took pride in it and I just really enjoyed circling the bases and just kind of having that sort of privilege in my opinion to just kind of be a part of something that was so huge, and so well respected. I kind of felt like, and especially from those old guys that I was telling you about that worked at the plant with me there, they thought that the Air Force was just so much sharper than many of the other, and I've found out since that it's one of the services that, I mean they're all good in other words, none of them is any better than any other in my opinion, but at that time most people thought that if you were in the Air Force that you were smarter than other folks. They thought that if you were in the Army, and you had to go be in the Marines, you were just big and strong, and the Navy was fairly smart, but if you were in the Air Force, you were real smart. I don't know if that's true at all because I've got friends in every branch and many of them are smarter than I am. So but yeah, that was some of my most fond memories, and I just kind of really enjoyed that sort of thing.

Were you assigned to Lackland as well as an MP, or did they transfer you elsewhere?

John Savage: No, after all of the training, now I was there for quite a long time because I had to go through basic, I had to go through military police training, then I went to combat defense training, and then I went to canine training, so I was at Lackland for several months, longer than most people would have been, but I was never really stationed there as an assignment. But following Lackland, my first assignment was at Ellsworth in South Dakota, Ellington Air Force Base in South Dakota. That was my first assignment.

OK, yeah. Tell us a little bit about what that was like. Was that your first time away from Texas or away from home for that long of a duration when you went, because I've not been to South Dakota, but I know it gets pretty cold in the winter.

John Savage: It gets really cold. Now I had been back and forth, the only two states in my life I'd ever visited was Texas and Louisiana, because we were in Louisiana probably almost as often as we were in Houston, because again, most of our relatives were there, my mother's mom was still alive at the time, and we were just back and forth almost every weekend or every other weekend just on the road. And if we weren't there, some of our relatives were here in Houston. But yeah, you're right, whenever I was able to get that first assignment, that was my first time away, first time flying, and I had made 18 by then because my birthday is in November, so I went in in September, so I made 18, and but yeah, and it was very cold, I guarantee you, and it's still very cold there. I go there every year now to hunt pheasants, but I can tell you it's by choice now, and it wasn't at that time. I'm telling you, I remember some of the weather there, and I would always write home or call and tell my parents that when you're in 60, 70 and 80 below zero weather with wind chill, that's real, real strange.

Yeah, it's very cold and it's painful and can be extremely dangerous.

John Savage: Oh indeed, we had people that learned to fall in love together as strangers sometimes in those conditions when their vehicle stopped or some people wouldn't make it until the next day. We used to find people, you know, just kind of frozen to death, so it was pretty bad.

The base where you were located, was it an air base, I know there's a lot of missile bases that were up there, can you tell us a little bit about what the base was like?

John Savage: Yes sir, this one was actually a SAC base. I was assigned to Strategic Air Command units and these were ones that had the bombers, the B-52's, and we patrolled those, as military police we would have to guard those either alongside of them or patrol the entire perimeters, and you'd do both from time to time. But yet these were the strategic bases that carried bombs and bunkers and the large military jets and aircraft and what not, and B-52's as well as the fighter jets as well.

Also as an MP, I imagine you had to deal with keeping the order, not just guarding the perimeter of the base, but also dealing with the troops in the barracks or any disorder that took place in the base housing or things of that sort. Did you see much of that or have much having to do with domestic situations or other things aboard the base?

John Savage: Sure, we did, we of course, the answer is yes to that, but let me qualify that by saying that in those days, times were not as difficult as apparently they seem, the crime wasn't

quite as prevalent as it is today, so there wasn't a whole lot of it, especially on the Air Force base. There may be some truth to various assignments in the military. Now with the Air Force being at some point, you would even have to pass certain tests to join the Air Force. It wasn't like it was a work release program, so some of the people there didn't have quite the background as some of the other bases or posts may have in various other locations, so we didn't have a whole lot of trouble. But of course with their schools there and children and they get into friction and things, and of course we had speeders from time to time that people tried to overrun the base every now and then, but of course we didn't have the concerns as we do now, of course not with the possibilities that we have surrounding the world and our military establishments, so it wasn't a difficult assignment. Again, it was so much fun. All I really remember is a lot of fun. Now you'd have your share of having to put people in jail from time to time, and I remember one instance after I had either gotten out completely or was at home just on leave, I remember running into a guy that I at one time in my whole career in the Air Force I remember running into a person that I had put in jail, and he was a little bit upset with me. He saw me at the mall once, and man I'm telling you, I was kind of concerned about that but it turned out OK.

At one point during your service did you think law enforcement was something you wanted to do for your career for your livelihood?

John Savage: Well, honestly at what point, I would probably think that it was pretty, pretty early, because what I started doing right away was to take as many classes, college credit classes and hours that I could, and all I thought that I knew that I could be pretty good at was security or law enforcement courses, so that's what I took, other than your general basic classes, and I never finished while in the service, but afterwards I went ahead and finished a couple of degrees. But I can tell you I've always kind of kept that same track, so what I feel that my forte is, and I feel that it could be largely because of my beginnings there, and I believe because I am a Christian, and of course love God and born again and minister of the gospel and all, I believe now, and I didn't know that at the time, but that God had directed my path that way, because again, as you know, James, I told you that I was not really, I had no desire to do this. But because it happened the way that it did and then I kind of felt that it was good for me and it was fun and all that, I started taking classes that kind of prompted me and promoted me along the way and had some significant I guess accomplishments if you will in those areas over the years as they've come to play in the long term over those years that is.

I know you said before we started the interview that you served four years but you got out as a staff sergeant. That's a pretty high rank for just a four-year period of time. Tell us about how you were able to be promoted.

John Savage: That's a good point. They have what you called at that time, now I don't know because I haven't kept up, but what they called below the zone promotions. I don't know if over your interviews with several veterans maybe someone has said that in the last years, but somehow for some reason or another they kept coming to me with a promotion every now and then. I went in as just a basic, just out of high school, never had any kind of degree. Of course there is a track that you can go in after completing a Bachelors degree, then you go in under totally different criteria and you can become a second lieutenant right away after your training, but as a basic military person going in, just a regular cadet, you don't have any rank at all early on. And so I became, let's see, right before sergeant there's a rank that they called, I can't think of it right now, but I got this below the zone promotion that gave me this particular rank, airman first class I believe it was, and then all of a sudden it was time for me to test for sergeant. I tested right away and I was going to get out and so they offered me this other promotion, I tested

for that and I got that E5 rank. But you know, I just didn't, I missed home so much. I may have gone in too early because almost every day that I was there throughout the years, you know my sister, my second oldest sister, she had twins and I wasn't there for that and I felt really bad because we were always so close and I was in Germany at the time and I couldn't get home. They kind of knew that I was, well of course they knew I couldn't really come home, and so they made it OK, and made me feel OK, and stayed in touch by phone and writing and pictures and all, but I never really over the years have gotten over that really that I wasn't there for her. I lost my train -

You were talking about being in Germany and your family being back in Texas. I was going to ask you, so after you were at the Air Force base in South Dakota, Ellsworth, did you go to Germany next? Was that your next stop?

John Savage: Yes, just after South Dakota I went over to Germany and I was there actually the rest of my time. I didn't really have but two assignments. Now of course I stayed at Lackland that extra period of time, and then Ellsworth, and then I went over to Sping Dom, I was actually at Sping Dom, a sister base which was just five clicks away, it was called Bitburg. So yeah, that's where I spent the remainder of the time.

Tell us a little bit about what Germany was like in the mid-1970s, especially as an American in a foreign base.

John Savage: Well you know, it was a lot of fun. We had good times over there, too. It was cold and wet as I recall, and just a lot of beautiful open territory, a lot of hills and a lot of rain and mist all the times it seemed, but quite different from South Dakota, of course. I don't remember it ever really freezing there, in other words, and it may have but I just don't have no vivid imagination of a freeze. But it was a lot of fun. The people were just exceptionally kind, they loved Air Force people. Now in terms of the working status there as a law enforcement officer, law enforcer there, it was a little bit different. Now we had Army as well as Air Force on our base there, so then you really began to learn and see a little bit more about the real side of policing. It was just different. That's not to say that the two different branches didn't get along, it was just that there was a lot more activity, a lot more crime seemingly going on at the time, so we had to do quite a bit more. We stepped up our policing and I think I learned a lot more about the real side of law enforcement being stationed over there.

Also with the Cold War going on at that point, and being in West Germany, and then there's East Germany and the Soviet presence, did that intensify your duties as an MP in terms of keeping security on the base or around the base?

John Savage: Yes indeed, it certainly did. We were a lot more guarded there with a lot more hard type security mechanisms in place. The lighting was a little bit more intense. We had more officers on patrol, a lot more vehicles, a lot more coverage and you took it a whole lot more serious there, a lot more canine on perimeters and what not, and it was a little bit different and the base was called to alert a whole lot more often let's say than what we were in South Dakota. Yeah, it was quite different there and you just had to up-step your interest in safety there, and you just made sure, in other words, you just had to pay more attention to what was going on because it was a little bit more intense there.

You mentioned canine. Did you work with a dog?

John Savage: I did.

Tell us about that. That seems pretty fascinating.

John Savage: Oh we did, so much fun. These dogs, just common knowledge about dogs, they love their handlers, but I can tell you when you really have one that is so well trained, that it's almost like a person. It becomes a whole lot more fun I guess and you learn to love these animals just like you would a partner. Now that I've been a cop in the city of Houston for so long, you know how you can really get close to your partners, you look after each other and what not, and these dogs, they take it serious. They listen to you, once they're trained proper, and some of us would spend more time with our dogs because if you're single, if you don't have a life going on, if you're not a worldly type person that you're out in clubs, then you just go to the kennel and do the extra training. So a couple of the last two, three dogs that I had, I taught them how to sniff out bombs and that kind of thing, and so actually after training a couple of them, they went on to further be trained to actually be certified as bomb detection dogs and what not, so it was a lot of fun to be part of that.

What type of breed of dogs were they usually?

John Savage: German shepherds.

German shepherds.

John Savage: Yeah, most of the while. Every one that I had was a German shepherd. Now I've seen others trained since then, but it just seems over the years for century and security type dogs, they've mostly been the German shepherds. I think they are smart and they look more of a serious nature and most people respond and respect them now. I do know that the Doberman's are the types of dogs also, but we just couldn't ever get them trained on the same level as the shepherds. I mean they're aggressive, they're mean.

Yeah, they're pretty intimidating looking dogs.

John Savage: They really are, that's right, they are, but for them to stay committed to the handler was the problem that we saw, and so they just didn't rise up to the same level by not even close to where the shepherds did.

How old were the dogs when you'd start training them, were they pretty young?

John Savage: Typically you want to start them out two and a half or three years old, at that intensive type of training, and if they didn't work, if some of them were more mature than others even at an earlier age, but going through those, we usually trained for about five or six weeks. We can take a green dog and get him pretty ready for patrol in about six weeks, and if they are not as mature or if they turn out to not to work, we'll just wash 'em out. But for the most part, you can pretty much look a dog over and assess him through veterinarians and what not and look at some of the background of them and you can almost tell when one is able to make it through a training course. And just loving on 'em and being with 'em and getting to know them and treating them with good love and affection. We never beat 'em of course. You have what they call a choke chain to keep 'em lined up and marching properly and all that, but there was never any real abuse of those animals, just a lot of love, love and affection.

Once you got a dog and it was trained up, how long would you be partnered with that dog?

John Savage: Typically until you left the assignment because in most cases you were not able to take that dog to the next base assignment. The only reason I changed, one of my dogs it was so old, I mean he had been around a long time, his name was Rex, just a fun, beautiful dog, but he developed hip dysplasia, and that's a bone disease where they begin to sink down and not have much strength in their back legs, and so they had to put him down, which was very devastating to me. Of course I got another very young dog. His name was Joe, and he used to try to bite all his previous handlers and he tried to bite me a couple of times, but what you do, you just kind of work with him outside of the gate and just come by and see him, however long it takes for him to get used to you before you can even be brave enough to try to take him out because those dogs are big and they're strong, and if they don't know you, you don't want to just stick your hand in the gate. So it took a little while, but he became very close and attached to me, and that's the one that was so smart and I spent so much time with him, and I taught him to detect bombs and all, and he went on to a school after I left that assignment and became a bomb detection dog. He was one of the best we had.

That's pretty fascinating. What do you do or how do you go about training a dog to sniff out something like that?

John Savage: Well, on your night shift post, what I used to do is just, gun powder, and dogs have such a sensitive smell and nose, so what I do is I just take a bullet out of a magazine and I'd let him smell it and sniff on it, and then I'd throw it in the grass and make him find it, and he'd search around, he'd find it and bring it back, and of course I would congratulate him and pet on him and love on him and play with him, and over a time, I would change it up from maybe one bullet to a magazine, or I'd put my weapon down and try to hide away from it and send him out to find it and locate it, all of that, anything having to do with odor or smell that represented gun powder or a bullet or weapons and that kind of thing is what I would train him on and he would, boy he picked it up right away. Then of course there are other more sophisticated items and things that once he goes into the actual bomb detection training, they taught him that as well. So it was really, and when they got him, he was ready to go already. They didn't have to do a whole lot.

That's great. That is pretty fascinating. I've seen them in the movies, you see police dogs and that sort of thing, and it's amazing what they can do.

John Savage: It really is, and this particular dog, he was so strong and tall and young, I mean he could jump a fence. He was just a sportsman, you know, like a star football player, as strong as he could be, and so much younger than the other dogs that I'd had before. But he was a fun, fun animal.

I've also read that police dogs are fiercely loyal to their handlers. Is that the case?

John Savage: That is really the case, yes indeed. They protect you, I'm telling you, and you can set them on alert. Most dogs are going to protect you anyway, and some of them, you give them a signal or some sort of a command to be on alert, and they're gonna do that anyway if they're trained, but you're right, police dogs typically they guard over their handlers big time.

That's great. So you were there then in Germany in 1978. Tell us about your decision at that point. I guess you decided to get out of the Air Force.

John Savage: Yeah, that's where I was going before when I told you I lost my chance. I had missed my family so much, we were so close, and that was the reason I went ahead to get out, and I wanted to complete my school, too, so I did immediately upon coming out went straight on into a junior college near my home, but I just missed my family so much I had to get home. It was difficult for me to be away as long as I was, and then I guess with the last couple of years being so far away and my mother just, she loved on all of her kids, but boy, she sent me these long letters and sent me boxes of food and all that. I'm telling you, it was just tough for me. I was a big baby, you know, so I had to get on back home. And that was the reason. And I could have very easily, I mean even several times after getting out I've always wondered what it would have been like had I stayed in and just made a career of it, because I could have very easily done that. I was on a fast track in promotions and all and had a good time all the while I was there. I never had a day that I wish I hadn't gone in.

Sure. Well tell us sir then when you get out and you come back home to Houston, tell us what that's like transitioning from the Air Force back in the civilian world and I know you said you'd been an MP, and so you were thinking you wanted to go into law enforcement. Tell us how that process went in becoming a police officer.

John Savage: Well it was pretty fast. I had gotten out right away and I went straight to the Houston police department and tried to join right away, and of course they took my application and it was gonna be a few months anyway before they would contact you back, so I joined, I went ahead to get a job at a plastic company again, and went right back over there and was hired and worked there just two or three months, all along thinking when are they gonna contact me from the HPD. And so they did and they called me in and I was interviewed and joined in 1978. So I wasn't even out a year before I was already on a PD. So I started in August of 1978 with the Houston police department. I went through basic training which at that time was four months. We do six months now, but it was four months then, and that's how it got started. It was a very easy and fast transaction. Of course my background was good, I didn't have anything to hide, and went through the course as you know with most departments, they're going to expect you to pass a lie detector test and all that, and all that went really well. So I was able to get started and spent quite a number of years. In fact, James, just two weeks ago is when I finally took a retirement after 31 years...

Congratulations, that's great.

John Savage: ...one month and 12 days. So that gives me a total of 35 total in law enforcement including the military.

Wow. Tell us sir, a little bit about what it was like being a police officer in Houston, and maybe tell us a little bit about what it was like your first time out on patrol, or what it was like being a rookie officer in really a big city.

John Savage: Boy, that brings back a lot of memories. It was strange. When you first graduate the academy and you hit the street, we always put our guys and ladies on what we call field training program, so that means that you are with a veteran officer, and you go three months field training back then. It's a little bit longer now, but one month on day shift, one on evenings, one on nights. It doesn't necessarily start out that way, and I think mine started out on evenings, I went to nights and then days. But you get with a veteran officer and they are pretty much sizing you up and they are grading you every day. So just because you finished academy doesn't

necessarily mean that you're out of the woods yet because you still got to get graded by this particular field trainer.

So you're still kind of on probation.

John Savage: Oh indeed, yes, you got a whole year's worth of probation. So one of the big things that stands out in my mind is after the field training three months program, I was sent out and finally able to go out on my own and the very first thing, I had a hand up on most guys because I had experience from the military. It wasn't a lot and it didn't measure up to what any law enforcement, especially a large city cop has to do and know to survive on the streets, but I did have a lot of experience in comparison to someone who had none. And so I was released pretty quickly after the field training program, and one of the very first nights of my release to ride by myself, I think it was the second night, I got shot at, and I'm telling you the truth, that scared me to pieces. I still remember the exact spot and every time I pass in that area, you know, you have these sort of flashbacks, but I remember being shot at and the bullet went through my door, the front portion of my door, and went through the inside of my car, and I can tell you that was probably the scariest day of my life.

Tell us a little bit about that situation. Were you just driving or was it a stop?

John Savage: No, I was just simply driving through a neighborhood, one of the nicer ones in fact, it was right off of Reveille which is near Telephone Road, southeast area of Houston, and I turned down this one street off of Reveille and all of a sudden I hear a gun shot. I never saw a human being. Of course I didn't give myself a whole lot of time to see anybody because I dove on the floor. I put my foot on the brake and just kind of dove under the steering wheel area on the floor as much as I could and grabbed the police radio. We didn't even have the side on the pocket type radios as we do now. All you have is that police radio, so if you lose your car or you are away from the car, you don't have any contact. And so I grabbed the radio and they were trying to understand what I was saying and I was scared, and I was on the floor banded up in a knot down there trying to get away. I only heard one shot and there may have been more, but I heard the one and it got me on the floor. So some of my friends said man, we couldn't understand what you were saying. We came as fast as we could. I said well I probably wouldn't have been able to understand you either. So that was, and you know, ever since that time, to my knowledge I've never been shot at again, never, but that was such an experience. To be a rookie cop, brand new, by yourself first couple of days out, and here you are taking a shot, and never found a person. The troops started coming out now. I mean once you hear that, everybody in the world started taking away, and I guess whoever the person was was just taking a pot shot at me.

You've got to feel blessed to have been able to avoid that.

John Savage: Oh my God, yes, that could've been lights out early on, 21 years old.

You mentioned working days and nights, how often would you be on patrol and how long would your patrol last for?

John Savage: Well, during that time period it was just a three-month period because you went for one month with a field trainer on days, one month on evenings, one month on nights. Now when you graduated and came completely, when you finished in other words the field training, then you got your regular assignment, and my assignment was evening shift. Now I didn't last very long in patrol at all. I was so blessed that my sergeant go to know me – his name is Arthur

Valdez, a Hispanic brother, very nice, and he kind of took me under his wing. I've been so blessed all along in my career. They were looking for juvenile officers that could work with children, was articulate enough to be able to do certain things, so he recommended me for whatever reason. I know God has his hand on me all this while. So he recommended me to the chief and I got a call and asked if I wanted to come, and most of my class, we had 78 people that graduated, well that started out, we wound up having 71 that actually graduated. Half of them went to dispatch division. The other half went to jail division. So for me to be pulled away from patrol, now my assignment actually was patrol, but I found out later on that even those guys that were assigned to patrol all had to go to one of those two divisions, and to my knowledge I was the only one called away from the whole group and asked if I wanted to go to juvenile division. So I accepted and went up there and was plain clothes, had a take home car. I'm telling you, God has really just had his hand on me all the while.

What was a typical day like for you as a juvenile officer? Did you deal with those guys that were on probation, or schools? What was your job like in that role?

John Savage: Well we actually investigated juvenile crime. So they were actually juvenile people, young people who were committing crime and we investigated. Now that was as the general juvenile division, but after a few months of that, I was called up and asked to work the sex exploitation detail which handled, which was tantamount to vice division or vice squad, but it was involving juveniles, adult suspects possibly, but juvenile victims and what not, but it could be either way. And then I was kind of taken under the wing of some of the veteran officers over there who had been doing that for a long period of time, and I was over there for a number of years and just had a wonderful part and taught a lot of course when you're handling juveniles in learning how to deal with that sort of crime and having to work through statements and get and develop statements from these adults who had perpetrated crimes against juveniles. What you wind up having to do, you had to use strategy with these people because what you ultimately wanted was a statement from them so that they would be convicted of this particular crime. So in so doing you would have to befriend them sometimes, you'd have to offer them a cup of coffee, let them smoke a cigarette and just try to work your way into getting them comfortable enough to tell you exactly what happened. So investigative strategies along that line, you had to pick up pretty quickly if you wanted to be successful over there.

I imagine too, it had to be a challenge dealing with people that you probably thought committed some pretty horrendous crimes and being able to put your own emotions aside and like you said, had to befriend people that probably had done some pretty horrible things. How did you learn or what was the training you had to allow you to do that sort of thing?

John Savage: Well, you'd have to have either just God-given skills or picking it up from the veteran officers, or just learning from the boot straps or what not because you're not going to get anywhere at all if these guys know that you consider them the scum of the earth. You have to make them feel that, and you make statements, well I've seen this in the past, this is pretty common, we see this all the time, just tell me about it. It will help you to get this off your chest, and that kind of stuff. And all the while you're wanting to pop them in the lip, you know what I mean, or jumping over them and telling them how silly they are and how could you actually do this? But if you go in talking to them like that, of course you're not going to get anywhere at all. So it was difficult. You can only do that sort of job for so long. I didn't stay in that particular detail but about I'm thinking 17 or 18 months. I had to hurry up and get out of there, man, because I didn't have any children at the time, but you know, you start thinking, boy, you've got nieces out here, sisters and all, and just something else.

I imagine. I know that Pastor Perry is the one that put me in touch with you and he mentioned, too, that you've done a lot of security work now for Lakewood Church, and I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that because I think people listening to this interview might know that's a huge, huge church, and well known all over the country.

John Savage: Oh yeah, this is what I am doing now and I've been here a number of years. I've actually been a part of Lakewood for about 20 years. I started out with John O. Steen. Of course Pastor Joe is dead, and I worked with him, and I was asked to head up the sanctuary security team here over a number of years, and I was very blessed to have had particular background that has lent itself very well to dignitary and executive protection type details working with the PD in certain areas over there, criminal intelligence, and special operations, and I trained with the FBI National Academy, and so that kind of thing has really helped me along here quite well. And yes it is, it's huge, it's larger than any of us, and we travel all over the world, and again as you said, it is the largest church in America today and Pastor Joe is just such a wonderful person and people love him all over the world, but there may be an element out there and we guard over that particular small percentage element that would try to do harm to any of God's people.

Sure, I think anyone that's as high profile as he is, that's got to be a challenge to provide that type of security. You mentioned you've been with the church for a long time now, tell us a little bit about how that all first came about, how you first came to be associated with them.

John Savage: Well good. I was actually raised Catholic. I've been a strong believer all of my life. I was raised up in a Catholic church and we love the Catholic church, and most of our relatives are probably still a part of the Catholic church, but over the years, and I used to teach catechism and that sort of thing, but what happened was while teaching one day in a Catholic church, one of the leaders over there didn't like the fact that I was asking to actually teach from the Bible. I would rather do that than the insert that they were passing out to teach from, and I just never understood that. I said well, you know, we're Catholic, we're born again, we love God, can I just teach my kids, I had like 7th graders and I think that's a pivotal point, you know, with children especially. If you don't come to them with right information and something they can wrap their hands around, you may not get them turned if they're not already there. So anyway they didn't really like that and so I just started searching and I did exactly what they asked me to do, and finally my sister, both my sisters and my mom and several nieces, they had already been at Lakewood Church and they were inviting me for a long time. I said no, no, you guys go on over there. I'm satisfied, I like what I'm doing. I'm having a good time. Of course I was still going to church every week, and I know I wasn't getting what they were because I was sneaking around viewing the TV program which on those things, I knew that they were getting some serious training and teaching over there. So one day I let one of my nieces or sister talk me into just coming out to watch the guy preach one time in person, and I said well listen, just tell me what time does he actually start preaching? I don't want to go in there when you all start holding your hands up in the air and all that type of stuff, what time does he start the preaching part? And as best as they could they tried to tell me, but man, I got there, they thought it was like 11, at that time church would start like at 10:00 or 10:30 or something. They said well if you get here at this time, maybe 10, 11 or so, as soon as you walk in, that's when he'll start teaching. So anyway I walked in there a little bit early and sat down, and I got the praise and the worship and the tithing and all that, and I'm telling you it stuck with me. Now I've been coming here ever since that one day, so I haven't been able to turn away and don't want to.

That's great. And how did it come about that you ended up working in security with them?

John Savage: OK, well they knew about my background. I had started out as an usher and I was ushering for many, many years, and my wife and I, we met while I was ushering and she was in the choir, and we both after years of doing both, she in the choir and me an usher, and I became a prayer partner, she became a prayer partner and we did prayer partners together here and then, the guys, two or three of the major leaders at our church – there was a Dr. Reginald Cherry, another gentleman by the name of William Guthrie – they were both pastors and ministers in the church, and two other guys, they were always asking me to join what we at that time called the sanctuary security team. Man, pastor really needs you, you really know the business, you've been working in it all these years, and the other guys were good volunteers but they didn't really have the background and they were very good, and still many of them are still a part of the what we now call ministry assistance team. So I prayed about it a few years and I said man, you know, God called me to be an usher and he called me to be a prayer partner, and I just hadn't heard from him on doing this. If you guys need me, I'll answer any questions you have, but I've got to do what God tells me to do, but I'll keep praying about it. Finally I got an umption in my heart and in my spirit I believe to go ahead and assist them on a full time basis, and I did so. It was after another guy had asked me. His name is Robin Smith. And so I said Robin, let me go ahead and pray again about this, and I did and I got the go ahead from God and so I joined them and just served under those men for a number of years and then I was asked, a good friend of mine now and my immediate boss, of course Pastor Joe is my boss and I have his brother-in-law is right below him in my chain of command. I have two bosses above me, of course my wife I should say is my boss.

That's commander in chief of the house.

John Savage: But these two guys, Kevin is his name, he asked me one day, he said John, when are you gonna be police chief in this town? I said Kevin, I've been asked a couple of times and I just don't want to be police chief. It's too political and I just, I'm not into that. I'm the assistant to the police chief now and I enjoy doing that, and I'm right there doing what I think I'm called to do, and my name was in the hat a couple of times and I had offers from three or four other cities to be police chief and I turned them all down. And so Kevin said man, that's good, but when you gonna be police chief around Lakewood? I said what are you talking about? You don't really mean that. Man, I really do. So that was the seed that Kevin planted in my heart, and I never went to pray about that, I just he said it and it just took residence in there, and I said you know what, it probably would be fun but I never said anything to anybody, not even my wife. But God kept watering that seed and it just kept growing and growing and growing, and finally I talked to my wife about it and she said I have peace about it, and we prayed about it, and finally I went back to Kevin after a long time. It was probably like, my wife and I prayed for two years, that's what I was going to tell you, two years later, we decided it was time to go back to Kevin to see if number one if he really said that from his heart, do you really want this? And he said man, listen, whenever you're ready, we're ready. I said well you know what I'll do, let me pray about it again. So after a while, and so we had never had what we called the executive director of security here at the search, another name for a police chief I guess. We've never had anything like that, so he asked me to write up my own resume and submit a job proposal, how do you want to run it, what do you want to do? So I wrote it all up and they accepted it verbatim 100 percent, and we've been rolling ever since. So I came over to do this in '05, but again, for previous years I had been doing essentially the same thing, but just as volunteer. Ever since Pastor Joe was, became pastor here was in 1998, I've traveled with him and gone everywhere that he's gone for the ministry since that time, even as a volunteer, and the two police chiefs that I worked with every day, the one that had retired and the new one came on board, they both gave

me every privilege that I ever needed to get away any weekend, anytime I needed to go, I would always get off and it was just a real miracle privilege that I never had to miss a single weekend away.

That's great. Sir, well that's an amazing story and to think that it all kind of started with not being able to go to basic training when originally scheduled to and having your MOS go from being air traffic control to being military police.

John Savage: It's amazing, isn't it, I'll tell you, that's how I know it was God designed and it's just been fun. Whenever you can go to work and really don't have to be paid for it and enjoy it every day, you're in a hurry to get there and when you're off you are always thinking about what can I do better, what can I do more, do you need me for anything even on my day off, so it's just been a real privilege for me.

I think it's the Will Rogers quote said the man who falls in love with his job will never work another day in his life, and it sounds like that applies to your situation.

John Savage: That's right, that's the way I feel about it and we just trust God through it all and we just know that it's his plan and purpose, and we've got favor, and it's an amazing ministry and pastor and his family, they've been amazing to me and my family. My heart is with them and whatever we can do to serve 'em, that's what we're about.

That's great. Well sir, I tell you it's been a real honor to have talked to you today and to have done this interview, and like I mentioned before, we're gonna make copies of this onto disk that we'll send to you, but also our main goal for doing this interview is to save your words and your memories, especially your time in the service and your life, and save it in our archives. We've got archives here that go back to the Spanish land grant days. We have original documents of William Travis and David Crockett's widow and that sort of thing, and so that's our goal, that was Commissioner Patterson's goal. He's a veteran as well and a history buff, and so our hope with this program is that we can add these memories to that archive and hopefully hundreds of years from now people can still hear 'em. And so also if you know any veterans that live in Texas that would want to be interviewed, please just put them in touch with me because we'd love to interview them.

John Savage: Well, that would be an honor for me to do, and I'll tell you Mr. Crabtree, I've enjoyed this and thank you so much and God bless the Voices of Veterans and I hope to see you personally one day so I can hug your neck -

I need to come down and meet Pastor Perry in person.

John Savage: Oh, that would be great and he is a real man of God. I'm telling you, you'll love him, you would love him.

I talk to him on the phone pretty frequently, but I've not been down to Houston in a while, so the next time I get down there I'll be sure to say hello to both of you.

John Savage: Oh, that would be great. Let us take you to lunch one day as soon as you come into town.

All right sir, well thank you very, very much and have a great weekend.

John Savage: Yes sir, thank you and God bless you.

[End of recording]