

Transcription: Lawson Beard

Today is Thursday, May 10, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I will be interviewing Mr. Lawson Beard. This interview is being conducted in person at the William Courtney State Veterans Home in Temple, Texas, and is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today. It's an honor for us and for our program to talk to you.

Lawson Beard: You're very welcome. Glad to do anything I can to assist you.

Yes sir. Well, sir, as I mentioned before we started, the big point of this program is to record veterans' stories, their memories, so that future generations can maybe learn something from them. Save them for posterity. First question I always like to start off with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Lawson Beard: Well, I grew up in a little town in Tennessee. That's where I was born and I was raised until I left in 1952, and haven't been back to live since. I joined the military in '52, and immediately I went to Korea, and I served there in Korea, you know, during the war, and after that I came back to the States to the State of Washington, Fort Lewis.

Now you joined the Army in 1952?

Lawson Beard: 1952.

How old were you when you went in?

Lawson Beard: I was 19.

Nineteen years old. So pretty much right out of high school.

Lawson Beard: Yeah.

Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

Lawson Beard: Well, I was drafted. But then during the meantime, they talked me into enlisting, so I went ahead and enlisted.

And that was in Tennessee?

Lawson Beard: No, that was after . . .

But you were in Tennessee when you first went into the Army, I guess is my question.

Lawson Beard: Yes, sir, I did. After I come back to the States from Korea, they sent me to Fort Lewis, Washington, and I stayed there for maybe a year. Then they sent me down to Arizona, to Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

I know where that is.

Lawson Beard: I spent about three years there at Huachuca.

Okay, we'll have to get to that. Tell us a little bit about your first impressions of the Army. You know, in 1952, you're 19 years old. Where did they send you to your basic training?

Lawson Beard: I started out at Fort Jackson in South Carolina, and I wound up at Fort Gordon, Georgia, to complete my training.

What was your first impression when you got there?

Lawson Beard: Well, it was kind of exciting, you know, to me because all of my . . . I had three brothers and every one of them had served in the Army during World War II, so I was looking forward to it, you know, to go ahead and get my part of it in.

Had they given you some good advice?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, they had.

What had they told you?

Lawson Beard: Well, they told me how to avoid trouble, and more or less, that's something to make it easier on myself too, you know. And they gave me a lot of good advice. It really worked out in the long run.

I know you went into the signal corps, but when you came out of boot camp, was that your specialty that you were assigned coming out of basic training?

Lawson Beard: No, no. We went through AIT, a special school.

What was AIT?

Lawson Beard: Army special, Army Interior Training. They sent us to that, you know, to give us an MOS. I went down there, took signal training there at Fort Gordon, Georgia. And then I went to many places. I spent about 11 years in Germany altogether.

Oh wow, that's a long time.

Lawson Beard: Yeah, but not all at one time.

Sure, no.

Lawson Beard: Combined different tours. And I spent two tours in Korea, one in Vietnam.

Tell us a little bit, sir, about Korea, especially, did you get over there before the Korean War ended, if you were drafted in '52.

Lawson Beard: Oh yeah, yeah. The war didn't end 'til '53.

That's right. Do you remember when you first arrived in Korea?

Lawson Beard: Yes, I arrived in Korea in November of '52.

Tell us what your memories are of arriving in Korea in November of '52.

Lawson Beard: Well, it was, it was kind of a surprise to me, you know? I didn't imagine things to be the way they were, you know, because when I got there, you know, they had done, made a push, pushed on up towards the north and everything was destroyed. I mean, literally everything, you know, so that was the first time I had saw something like that.

And you as a signalman, explain to the average person listening what that meant you did. Did you work on radios?

Lawson Beard: No, I was a teletype operator.

Explain to us, sir, what that was, what that means. I don't think a lot of people listening know what a teletype was.

Lawson Beard: Okay. We had vans to work out of, and we had teletypes. We had a TT4 teletype, and we had a 76, TT76, which was to tape. We did our printing on the TT4 and it fed, the tape came out on the TT76.

Now was it similar to the modern-day computer that you would type on a keyboard?

Lawson Beard: Yes, same type of keyboard but slower.

Sure. But this was cutting-edge stuff in 1952.

Lawson Beard: Oh, it was, it was.

How did the signal get transmitted? Was it through radio waves that you would transmit?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, well, we had a microwave.

Okay, through the microwave.

Lawson Beard: Yeah.

Tell us, what was the reason or the advantage for using teletype rather than just making a radio transmission, audio radio transmission.

Lawson Beard: Well, it was, we could make copies a lot easier too. And back then we didn't have nothing in radio. We didn't have no like fax or something like that, you know. So we had the teletype. See, we could make hard copies of it too, you know.

So tell us, what were some of the things that you would transmit through the teletype, different things that you would put in?

Lawson Beard: Well, our mission for the day, whichever it was, we'd get together in the morning, early in the morning with the officers and the noncommissioned officers, and we'd all sit down and discuss what we were gonna do that day. Then I'd keep a log of it, you know, and file it. So it would give our company commander an idea of what we were gonna do, and what he could expect to go out and check to see if we accomplished that. During the day we would get together and discuss the problems that maybe we incurred during the day. Because sometimes we'd run up against something that we just felt like that was beyond our power, you know, to

finish it or get it done. So we'd discuss it and maybe someone else would come up with an idea, you know, how to do it.

What type of things were you transmitting? Was it orders, troop movements?

Lawson Beard: Well, yes. Troop movements and, more or less, alert signals, you know. Like say, if we had an air raid, something like that, you know, we'd transmit that. Or if we was fired upon, we'd transmit that, and if we had artillery coming in, we'd transmit that.

So you had a pretty good feel then for what was going on being a teletype operator. You were getting information and transmitting it, so I'm sure it meant you had to have some sort of clearance as well, right?

Lawson Beard: Oh, I had a top secret clearance, yeah. See, everything, all the orders came straight through me, through the teletype, you know, because we had landlines to the higher headquarters, and all the orders came right down through me, you know.

I imagine to get assigned to that specialty, you had to have done pretty well on some testing, right? To show that you had the aptitude to do that. They don't just put anybody in teletyping.

Lawson Beard: No. You had to be qualified to do it, and you had to have a little knowledge of it to start with, you know. You couldn't just walk right into it and start doing it. You had to have a general idea of how it works.

Sure. You mentioned that you were in vans; you would go out in vans. How many men would be with you in a van?

Lawson Beard: Well, maybe two, two at the most.

Two at the most.

Lawson Beard: Yeah, it would be three of us, me and two men.

And they would put you out there with other units and that sort of thing?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, we'd be out with the artillery and stuff like that, supporting them. We did that a lot, you know, we'd go out with the artillery and that way we could call in airstrikes for 'em, stuff like that.

So you really did get to see a lot by doing that.

Lawson Beard: Oh yeah.

So when you arrived in Korea in November of '52 and the war was raging, you were almost immediately put out there towards the front lines running the teletype machines?

Lawson Beard: Yeah.

I know at that time Korea had been going on for a couple years but you said it was devastated.

Lawson Beard: It was.

Did you have a chance to see many of the Korean civilians while you were there?

Lawson Beard: Oh yeah, we saw a lot of them, the civilians, and we had a lot of 'em that we put to work working for us, you know, doing odd things, you know, that we didn't have time to do and that relieved the other, the GIs over there, of that so they could perform their duties. And we had them as KPs, and we had 'em to fill sandbags for us, stuff like that. That took the load off the GIs, you know, and at least give them some rest when they came back.

Did you have any interaction at all with the North Korean soldiers, any prisoners of war, that sort of thing?

Lawson Beard: No. I didn't come in contact with none of them. But I saw, they had a prisoner of war unit right down the valley from us, but we weren't allowed to go visit it, you know. Even me with my top-secret clearance, you know, I couldn't visit places like that.

How long were you in Korea that first time?

Lawson Beard: I was in Korea 18 months.

Eighteen months. So you were there all the way until they passed the so-called ceasefire that's still in effect today.

Lawson Beard: Yes.

I know in 1952, President Eisenhower was running for office and one of the things he had said was that he would go to Korea if he was elected president. Do you remember, were you over there, I guess you were over there. Do you remember when Eisenhower went to Korea?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, he came over and visited us, and he was good at his word.

What was the thought amongst your fellow soldiers about the war at that point? It had kind of come to a stop, was it a sense of relief or was it frustration that it had to end where it did? What were your thoughts?

Lawson Beard: No, we was glad it ended. In fact, we was relieved because we were losing, losing our soldiers, men by the hundreds, so we was glad to get it over with and to get our prisoners back.

Do you remember what it was like when you finally got to come back home after having been over there for a while?

Lawson Beard: Oh yes.

Tell us about that.

Lawson Beard: It was nice, and it was something . . . It's hard to forget stuff, something like that, because they really welcomed us back then, you know. They had, when we arrived, see we arrived in Oakland, California, and so they welcomed us, you know, and had a welcoming party there and everything. It really made us feel like we was welcome again, you know.

That's great. Did you have a chance to go back home at that point to Tennessee?

Lawson Beard: Yes, I did. They gave us all that was gonna stay in a 30-day leave. But the ones I say that were just the regular draftees . . .

They were getting out, discharged.

Lawson Beard: They were discharged.

What was it you think that made you want to go ahead and stay in at that point?

Lawson Beard: Well, I wanted to complete my education, get a better education, and I figured that's one way of doin' it, you know, and so that's why I stayed in.

Did they send you to more schools? Did you go to college at that point?

Lawson Beard: Yes, I had a, I went to two years of college. I had an associate degree.

That's great. And that was paid for by the Army?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, so it didn't cost me nothing.

I know you ended up serving well over 20 years. Was there a certain point that you thought, "I want to do this for a career," or did it just kind of start to happen?

Lawson Beard: Well, I first enlisted for six years, and after that I enlisted for six more. By the time I completed that, man, I was hooked, you know.

Yeah, 12 years, sure.

Lawson Beard: My age was starting to creep up on me a little bit even by then, you know, so I figured I might as well stay in and complete it. So I did.

Now were you married during this time?

Lawson Beard: Yes, I was. I got married in '57.

So the first time you went to Korea you were a single man. So several years later you got married. And I guess your wife didn't mind you being in the Army.

Lawson Beard: No, she stuck right with me. Went everywhere I went. She was a darling, I tell you, and I'll never forget her.

That's great. How did y'all meet?

Lawson Beard: She was German. I met her in Germany in '57, and we went together for about, oh, about six months, and decided we'd get married.

Did she speak English well or did you know some German or both?

Lawson Beard: No, I learned German.

Okay, so she didn't speak English at first?

Lawson Beard: No, no. I taught her English.

And I guess she taught you some German?

Lawson Beard: Oh yes, sir. I speak pretty good German.

Wow, that's great.

Lawson Beard: So after we got married, we came back to the States, I brought her back to the States with me, and we was married for 26 years. She passed away in '84. She traveled with me and was right there with me through thick and thin. I couldn't ask for a better wife.

That's great. And you met just while you were stationed there in Germany?

Lawson Beard: Yeah.

That's neat. If it hadn't been for the Army, you wouldn't have met.

Lawson Beard: No, we wouldn't.

You mentioned too, sir, that you did a tour in Vietnam as well. When was that?

Lawson Beard: That was in '87, '88.

In '68?

Lawson Beard: I mean '68, not '88, '68. I'm sorry, '68.

Tell us about your memories of being there in '68 because I know that was during the height of the war.

Lawson Beard: Yeah, well that was during the Tet Offensive, you know. I was stationed in Qui Nhon, Vietnam, and I was in the signal company. We were way back up in a little valley there, and it was an experience that you'll never forget, you know, because you had, we was right up in the little valley there, you know, and we had the South Koreans, we had them supportin' us, you know. We had a whole division of South Koreans that were there with us, you know. So we had them over here supportin' us, you know, and here the North Vietnamese was over here on the other side, you know, up here, and they were shooting at each other right over our heads, you know, with artillery, with M80 rockets and then B40 rockets coming over. Of course they only did it at night, and so it was kind of scary there for a long time. But finally we, you just assume, "Well, heck, it ain't gonna bother me, ain't gonna hurt me any so . . ." We just, when it first started, you know, I was just thinking, "Well, suppose one of those rounds are gonna maybe collide in midair," you know, "fall right down on us." Of course it never happened but it coulda happened. But we just assumed it wasn't gonna happen, and we just laid down at night and go to sleep. Don't worry about it.

How long of a tour did you do in Vietnam?

Lawson Beard: I did 12 months.

Twelve months, so a year-long tour. During that time, how did your job differ in 1968 compared to 1952 in terms of the technology and what your roles were? I'm sure you'd been promoted by

then so you were higher up the chain but was your job, was the mission still essentially the same, taking information and transmitting it?

Lawson Beard: Yes, but I was more or less a supervisor then, in a supervising capacity then. I was more or less the operations noncommissioned officer of the unit, you know, and I had practically control of everything in the unit, you know, because I had to check with 'em and make sure everything and take their reports, and I didn't have time to communicate alone, you know. Of course I helped 'em with and assisted 'em but I left it up to the lower ranks to do that.

Sure. You mentioned being there during the Tet Offensive. Share with us, sir, your memories of that.

Lawson Beard: Well, that was kind of a scary moment too, you know, 'cause they just started just coming down in droves, you know. I mean in droves, just coming down and just more or less like a suicide mission, you know. So they'd push us back so far, then we'd say, "Well, heck, that's it," you know, "ain't going no further." Stand and fight. And we had some of our troops, we'd try to get around and go around behind 'em, you know, but the North Koreans, I mean the South Koreans . . .

South Vietnamese?

Lawson Beard: No, it was South Koreans that was working with us, fighting with us. We let them . . . They'd go around behind 'em, you know, and come in. We'd catch the group right in the middle, you know, between us and the Koreans. That way we could annihilate 'em pretty easy. But there was a lot of 'em just kept coming and we stuttered around as long as we could.

During that time I imagine you had a good idea of what was going on simply by being in the signal corps. You could see reports coming in from other units, that sort of thing?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, we'd get all of that and get casualty reports. Yeah, it was kinda devastating but . . .

Where in the United States was your wife at that time? Was she back in . . . ?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, she was in El Paso, Texas.

At Fort Bliss?

Lawson Beard: Yeah.

Okay, so that was where you were assigned to when you deployed over there?

Lawson Beard: Yeah.

How was that for her with you being gone for a year in a war?

Lawson Beard: Well, it was kinda scary for her too, you know, because she had went through World War II there, you know, the last part of it, you know, and all the bombing and everything, and she knew what was going on, what could happen.

Were you able to write letters pretty frequently and make phone calls?

Lawson Beard: Well, we couldn't make no phone calls.

No calls, yeah. So just letters.

Lawson Beard: Just letters, yeah.

How long would it usually take for a letter to get to Fort Bliss from Vietnam?

Lawson Beard: It'd take about, oh, I'd say about three or four days, about four days.

That's pretty quick. I was thinking in terms of weeks.

Lawson Beard: No, it would take about four days, you know, because everything went out by air, and they handled the mail pretty rapidly and pretty fast that way.

Yes sir. So then after you got back from Vietnam, you had just a few more years left. Where did you finish off your tour in the Army?

Lawson Beard: Fort Hood.

Fort Hood. Is that the first time you'd been stationed at Fort Hood?

Lawson Beard: No, I was there in the early '60s at Fort Hood.

So you've seen it change a lot then I guess?

Lawson Beard: Yes. I was there, you know, when we . . . I got called down, you know, because we had to go down in the early '60s when Mr. Kennedy was elected president, and he wanted to have two divisions at Fort Hood and there was only one then, so he wanted to have another division there. So we started reactivating the First Armored Division, and it took us almost a year to get activated and get it on its feet where it could operate but we did it. And then I went to Fort Bliss, Texas, and that was it. That way I went from there, I went to Germany, and then I spent a tour in Germany, then I came back to Fort Hood. And I went to Korea then, and I spent 18 months in Korea that time. Of course it was a different Korea than the one I saw earlier. They had started to build up and a little progress, I seen a little progress in action. So I stayed there 18 months, then lo and behold, I came back to Fort Hood. And then after that, while I was there at Fort Hood, I got transferred back to Fort Bliss, Texas. And I stayed there at Fort Bliss, you know, for maybe a year, and then I got reassigned back to Germany. I went to Germany and spent three years there, and then I came back to the States, and then I went to Vietnam. And when I come back from Vietnam, I went back to Fort Hood. No, not Fort Hood, I went to Fort Bliss, Texas, which my wife was there, you know. And in the meantime I had orders to go back to Germany, you know, so I went to Germany, to Frankfurt, Germany, and I spent three more years there.

That had to have been nice for your wife to be back home in Germany while you were stationed there.

Lawson Beard: It was, yeah. So I spent three more years there in Germany, and by that time I had almost 21 years in service, you know, when that was completed. So I came back to the States

and it was determined I was gonna retire and get out, you know. And lo and behold, they sent me to Fort Hood to retire.

So you retired in 1972?

Lawson Beard: '73.

'73 from Fort Hood?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, Fort Hood I retired, and I bought a house there at Killeen, and I went to work for the Killeen Daily Herald, a local newspaper, as an offset printer.

Great. How did you transition from teletyping into being a printer? Was that a skill you had to learn or something you were interested in?

Lawson Beard: No, it just come naturally.

Came naturally to you, interesting.

Lawson Beard: Yeah, and I stayed there for seven years, and just said, "Well, heck, that's enough. I've had it. I might as well get out and enjoy life a little bit," you know. So I retired from that, and in 1990, I retired flat out, you know, retired.

But you've always stayed kind of here in the Waco or Temple/Killeen/Belton area?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, in Temple, I mean Killeen. I stayed there 'til '90, let's see, 'til 1990, no 1990, yeah, May of 1990. I got married again, and my second wife, she was from Bristol, Tennessee.

Is that close to where you were from?

Lawson Beard: No, it was all the way across the state.

So you were from West Tennessee?

Lawson Beard: Yeah. And she wanted to go back because she had a little farm there, you know, approximately 10 acres. So she wanted to go back and see about that, take care of it, you know. So we moved back there and I stayed back there five years, and I started getting sick, you know. I got the idea . . . The human mind, you know, can tell you when your body, something is wrong with it. So I went to the doctor and he ran some tests, and he said, "Well, we'll give you some medication and wait and see." So I went on back home and it just kept getting worse, you know. So I told my wife, I said, "Look, I've got to go back to Texas because they've got good doctors there. And I know if I don't, I won't be living within another couple years." So we sold out everything, moved back to Killeen, bought another house there. And that same month, she called a urologist in Copperas Cove, set me up an appointment. And I went and saw him, and he started running some tests on me. And then he took, it was my prostate, and he took a urinalysis test and he also did a lot more testing, and then he says, "Well, we're gonna have to kind of cut this thing down a little bit, you know, and hope that we don't find nothing real bad," you know. Because he said it's interfering with your urination. He got me into the hospital there, and he got me back

there and did surgery on me, and two days later, he had sent it off to the lab, you know, for analysis. And he called my wife in and told her, says, "I'm sorry to tell you but he's got cancer."

Prostate cancer?

Lawson Beard: Yeah. He says it's pretty bad. And he says, "He's gonna have to have surgery but I got to go to Dallas to another hospital." Said it had to be up there so he couldn't do it. So we set it up through Scott & White.

Right here in Temple?

Lawson Beard: Yeah. So they sent me over there and old Dr. Riley, you know, in urology, he did my surgery, and by the time he got in there, he said, "Well, that, it's done started to jump the capsule and start spreading." So he went ahead and removed everything down there, my prostate and as much of the cancer as he could, you know. So he said, "You're gonna have to take radiation." So I took seven weeks of radiation after I got out of the hospital, and then I started taking chemotherapy. Then my PSA, which is to tell how high your cancer is, you know, and it just started rising, up and down, up and down. And he says, "Well, we're gonna have to start giving you the injections," which is a type of, well it's kind of, I'd say, a minimum of chemotherapy. And he said, "Well, you're gonna have to take these the rest of your life." So I'm still taking 'em.

Yes sir, but you were able to get rid of the cancer?

Lawson Beard: No, it's still there.

It's still there but . . .

Lawson Beard: It's in remission.

Yeah, that's great.

Lawson Beard: Yeah, so I have to take my injections every three months.

That's great.

Lawson Beard: It keeps it shrunk.

Yes sir, and you've mentioned before we started this interview, you said you've been here at the Courtney Home for a little less than a year now?

Lawson Beard: Yeah, I'll be here a year in August.

That's great. How do you like it?

Lawson Beard: I love it.

That's good.

Lawson Beard: I love it here. I have my own private room and everything, and I couldn't ask for better treatment, nicer people that are running it.

Do you like being around a bunch of fellow veterans?

Lawson Beard: Oh yeah.

Is that positive?

Lawson Beard: Oh yeah, that kind of gives you a feeling, you know, that you're not alone, and you're here, and that there's people that understand you and you understand them, you know.

Sure. I know that's one of the things they've always said, is that it's, for a lot of folks it's nice to be around fellow veterans, share background, common interests.

Lawson Beard: Yeah.

That's great.

Lawson Beard: It's kind of like, you know, you sit around and share your war stories. You bond with each other, and one tries to outdo the other, you know.

Yeah, that's when the war stories turn into fish stories, stretch the truth and that sort of thing.

Lawson Beard: Yeah, but we have a good, good times.

That's great. Well, sir, we want to thank you just for sharing with us some of your stories, and especially thank you for your service to our country. This program is just a very small way of the State of Texas saying thank you for your service. Commissioner Patterson is a veteran and myself, and just everybody at the Land Office appreciates what you've done, and this is one small way to say thanks. Like I mentioned before we started, our goal with these interviews is to collect them for posterity. You know at the Land Office we have archives that go back to the 1700s. We have Stephen F. Austin's original registro that he kept of all the original settlers in Texas, and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. And so our hope is that several hundred years from now people can listen to these interviews just as they today look at those old documents. With that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening to this interview long after you and I are both gone?

Lawson Beard: Well, I would just like to comment on the fine services that the Land Board provides, the opportunity for the veterans, and the veterans are well taken care of. Texas is one of the finest states, I guess, for a veteran to be from, and the Land Board is something that a veteran can really benefit from, and can learn from, and is something that he can turn to if he needs help.

That's great. Well, sir, again, thank you very, very much today. It's been my honor and pleasure to get to meet you and interview you.

Lawson Beard: You're quite welcome, and I appreciate the opportunity to visit with you.