

Transcription: Spencer Walker

Today is Thursday, September 26, 2013. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Spencer Walker. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Mr. Walker is at his residence in Hutto, Texas, and I'm in the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for our program. Sir, the first question I always like to ask is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Spencer Walker: I'm the oldest of 14 children. I have 6 brothers and 7 sisters. I grew up in several towns in northern New Jersey. Most of the towns I grew up in was predominantly Caucasian. It was in the 50s. When I was in high school, I was the only Black athlete in my junior and senior year in March Hills Regional High School, which is located in Rockaway, New Jersey. I graduated from that school on June the 13th, 1955, and days later I was in the Marine Corps Depot, ___ South Carolina, and my life changed drastically.

Were you drafted or did you sign up?

Spencer Walker: No, I joined for the Marine Corps.

What was it that made you want to enlist?

Spencer Walker: When I was a little boy, back in those little towns back in the day when I was growing up, I was born in 1937, so I saw I guess when I was about 7 or 8 years old we had I think it was a 4th of July parade, and outside of my town they had a Marine Corps Reserves barracks, and the Marines marched in that parade that day and they were dressed in their dress clothes and it just caught my eye, and I says that's what I wanna be. And then I started back in those days there were a lot of movies made about the Marine Corps battles in the Pacific against Japanese. I saw all of them. I read as much about the Marine Corps as I could. That's what I wanted to be. By the grace of God, I was able to _____.

That's excellent. What did your parents and your siblings think about you going into the Marine Corps? Were they supportive of your decision?

Spencer Walker: Yeah they were because my father and my uncles all served in the Army and in the Navy and in the Air Force during the second World War.

Did you talk to them about some of their service and some of their advice?

Spencer Walker: Yes I did. They told me that the Army, President Truman had just changed the Army from being discriminatory, so all one force, said I was going in at a good time. It was still going to be hard. There was still going to be soldiers that still believe in racism and separation. So I was prepared for that. The best part of my life growing up, I didn't really encounter much bigotry and racism or anything like that in the little small towns I lived in. I know why, because, now I know why. I didn't know why at that time. It was because there weren't that many of us to cause a problem. We weren't a distraction. I never lived in the segregated community, but I lived next to Caucasian people, most of them housed in northern New Jersey have multiple races, Blacks, Caucasians, Italians, Jewish people, Polish people, a

whole lot of Italians in New Jersey, the part of New Jersey I grew up in, and a lot of Irish people. So I had a few incidents, but nothing drastic that I would say, like some of the people went through in the South with Martin Luther King and them.

So what was it like then, sir, when you went to South Carolina in 1955? Did you take a train down there?

Spencer Walker: I was shocked because we were on a bus, and when we got to Washington D.C. and we were getting ready to enter Virginia, the conductor came through the cars and he says oh, well we were Negroes then, and they said that all Negroes must move to the rear car. I couldn't understand what he was talking about. I didn't move. Then he came up to me, and he happened to be a Black conductor. He just told me what it was. I was going into the South and they had Jim Crow law and segregation and Whites and Negroes weren't allowed to associate in the public transportation and things. So as we stopped on the way to Paris Island, we stopped at several little towns, and I could see something I never saw in my life. Blacks only, colored only, and things like that. It was really upsetting.

I'm sure.

Spencer Walker: But I said well, this is the way it is. So I went to Paris Island and I had, in my platoon there was only 4 colored boys as we were called at that time, and I had four drill instructors. One was from the South, senior drill instructor, a Sergeant Moore, I'll never forget him, and we had a staff sergeant, Lester Field. He was from Georgia. And I had one sergeant that was from New York, and another sergeant that was from Massachusetts. So it was very difficult.

How did the drill instructors from the South treat you?

Spencer Walker: Terrible. They didn't think we had the right stuff. They didn't think that we were qualified to be in the Marine Corps. They harassed us. They used racial slurs, nothing we ever done was right. The senior drill instructor, Sergeant Moore, he used to call us his four Black buzzards. Nothing we ever did was right.

So boot camp is hard enough as it is, I know, but then to be dealing with somebody who is just a racist had to have made it even worse.

Spencer Walker: Yeah, well it was terrible because I had never encountered that kind of treatment in my life. It was hard, but I got, the Black guys that were with me, we were all from the East and a couple of them were from New York, one was from Detroit, and I was from New Jersey, and so I told them, they want to break us. The northern drill instructors weren't that rough on us. They were rough on the training, but they weren't, they didn't use the racial slurs.

Sure, they treated you the way you should have been treated.

Spencer Walker: So I told them that we have to learn to persevere. We can't drop out, we can't break. And fortunately we all got through. At that particular time, boot camp was 16 weeks. And about the 10th or 12th week, they kind of let up on you because you had become Marines, you adjusted to the Marine Corps ways, and so the last month wasn't that bad. But the other months were kind of rough. But I'm very glad that I'm a Marine. I'm proud of it. A lot of guys couldn't make it, didn't make it through boot camp. I got a chance to meet some amazing

young men. I got chances to go to countries that I probably never would have gone on my own. I have three guys that I served with that I still keep in contact with.

That's great.

Spencer Walker: And I would tell any man if they were going to pick a service, pick the Marine Corps.

Well I agree.

Spencer Walker: I don't regret it even though I had some bad times. But I made it through and I'm proud. I never was a combat Marine. I went in in 1955 and I got out in 1969, and then I was the Reserves.

Sir, let me ask you, what was your MOS in the Marine Corps?

Spencer Walker: I was a rifleman.

Rifleman, yes sir. Did you know that going to boot camp or did they assign that to you once you got there?

Spencer Walker: When we got to boot camp, they brought us in and they told us what did we like to do, what did we want to be, and I always wanted to be a rifleman. I wanted to be in a line company. So that's what I did. First they wanted me to be a steward and I didn't like that. I told them. It was OK. I got a chance, I trained in combat training in June and then to Camp Pendleton for advanced combat training. Then one day they came through and they were asking for volunteers for the fleet Marine force because they were trying to build that up after the Korean War, so I volunteered, so I got a chance to serve at the Marine Corps Air Station in Japan. It was the best duty I ever had.

What was that like going over? Did you take a ship or did they fly you over?

Spencer Walker: No, we took a ship, a dependent ship. It took us 10 days. We stopped in Formosa and we stopped in, what is that place in Japan, Yukusko. Then from Yukusko, the people picked us up. We stopped in Okinawa also. I was stationed in Iwo Koni. It was good duty.

What was it that stood out to you that made it such a nice place to be stationed?

Spencer Walker: Well, I got to see another culture, and I got to learn a lot of things about people and how the world treats people differently depending on what country you come from and your race or – but Japanese people were very good to us while we were there. We were free. They made money off of us. We were one of the great contributors to them surviving. I did get a chance to go see where the bomb was dropped at Hiroshima. I went TAD to Tagu, Korea, when they were moving the air wing back to Iwo Koni.

So you got to see Korea as well.

Spencer Walker: Yeah. Too cold over there for me. But I had a nice tour. I would have been a career Marine, but after Iwo Koni, I put in for all east coast Marine Corps bases to be sent to

because I wanted to go to either North Carolina or Virginia or the ____ Navy yard because I lived in New Jersey and I wouldn't be that far away.

Close to home, sure.

Spencer Walker: But that didn't happen. They sent me to Marine Corps air station in El Toro.

Orange County, southern California?

Spencer Walker: Santa Ana. Which is now closed. But I had about 9 months to do when I got back from Iwo Koni. I was on a ship. I met a girl and fell in love and everything. She didn't like the Marine Corps. She didn't want me to be in the Marine Corps. So I got out. If it hadn't been for her, I'd have stayed. That was my plan from when I decided I wanted to make sergeant major.

What was your rank when you got out?

Spencer Walker: Lance corporal.

Yes sir.

Spencer Walker: I don't regret any of it. I met some very nice guys, some of the best guys I ever met in the world.

Tell us sir, you mentioned earlier, you still keep in touch with some of them. Who were some of the Marines you are still in contact with?

Spencer Walker: A guy named Philip Johnson, a guy named Goodman, and a guy named Hank Jopay. I'm 76 years old, so they are all my age. A couple of them stayed in that I knew intimately, good guys, paid the ultimate price in Vietnam, and we talk and we visit every once in a while.

Where did you first meet them? Was it in boot camp or in Japan?

Spencer Walker: Those guys I stuck with I met two in Japan and one when I came back to Marine Corps air station El Toro. I had a brother that was in the Army, and he served in Vietnam. I wrote a couple of poems about Vietnam because I used to watch it faithfully every night on TV, like most of the Americans did. But I had a good tour.

Yes sir. Let me ask you a little bit about when you were in Japan as an infantryman with the air wing. Did they have you on sentry type duty, react duty?

Spencer Walker: We'd guard the airplanes. I don't know why. Nobody wanted them. And then I worked with the billeting NPO who they had billeting, they had officer's country, and so I worked there because I could type. I took typing and I knew how to file in high school, which was very good, the best duty I ever had in the Marine Corps. There was four of us. We had 24 on and 48 off.

That's not too bad.

Spencer Walker: No, that was not too bad, it was great duty. And it was kind of, we still had our inspections. We didn't have to drill. We'd have parades while there but we'd fall out every day for muster, and they would have rifle inspections every now and then. We'd go to the range. We never had to clean the barracks because we had a houseboy and we all chipped in every month and paid him.

That's not bad.

Spencer Walker: He knew more about laying junk on a bunk than I do, he knew it better than me. He could clean a rifle better than me. He was only about an 18-19-year old kid. He kept our barracks in top shape and everything. He would take our clothes to the cleaners and get them cleaned and bring them back and have it laid out on your bed when you got there. We paid him more than what you were supposed to pay him, but he shined your boots, he did everything.

He was a Japanese citizen?

Spencer Walker: Yeah, Japanese citizen.

What type of rifle did you have at that time?

Spencer Walker: The trusty M-1.

M-1, that's great. During those four years in Japan, did you get to come, or did you go back to the U.S. at all or did you just stay there the whole time?

Spencer Walker: No, I stayed there the whole time. We went to Gotima, Japan, which was for exercise which is right at the foot of Mt. Fuji, but I got a chance to see Mt. Fuji. That was nice.

Did you climb it?

Spencer Walker: No, no, we had a base camp there. But all in all, I respect the Marine Corps, I respect the discipline I got, and a little young country boy from New Jersey and turn him into a man. I wear a lot of the Marine Corps stuff. This guy in Oklahoma, Sergeant Grit, I don't know if you ever heard of him –

Oh absolutely, all the Marines know about his catalog

Spencer Walker: Yes, so I have his catalog and I bought a lot of hats and t-shirts and stuff from him.

That's great, that's excellent. For anybody who's been in the Marine Corps, anybody I know, it's usually one of the proudest days of their life is when they graduate from boot camp.

Spencer Walker: Oh man, that was the greatest feeling I ever had.

What type of uniform did your platoon wear? Did you get to wear blues for your graduation?

Spencer Walker: Yeah, we wore blues at graduation.

So they've kind of changed that over the years now to where they don't issue dress blues anymore in boot camp, so you got to buy 'em. So like when I graduated, we wore the dress blue deltas. We had the blue trousers and the white cover, but didn't have the actual blues. The only ones that got blues were the honor grads, the ones that were the guides.

Spencer Walker: Yeah, whoever shot the highest score and whoever got the best marks on the test. They didn't think we were gonna qualify. But I was a country boy. One of the guys, Thomas I think his name was, he shot – at that time in the Marine Corps, 250 was a perfect score and he shot a 242

That's pretty good

Spencer Walker: So he got a stripe out of boot camp.

So he came out as a PFC because of that?

Spencer Walker: Yeah. Whoever shot the highest score, the guides that got 'em and whoever was the best academic.

When you graduated from boot camp, did you have any friends or family there to see your graduation?

Spencer Walker: No, unfortunately they weren't able, even though New Jersey is not that far away, they weren't able to come.

So then before you went to school of infantry and your follow on schools, did you have a chance to go back home to New Jersey?

Spencer Walker: Yeah, I had a 10-day leave.

Tell us, sir, what that was like. I'm sure your family was proud.

Spencer Walker: It was great. I'm the oldest of the 14 children, so they thought I was a hero. And one of my sister's sons joined the Marine Corps because of me.

Excellent, that's great. And I'm sure your uncles and your father had to have been proud.

Spencer Walker: They were real proud. Like I said, they were in the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. One of my uncles, he came out a first sergeant. He did something like 25 years.

That's great. That's a lot of time.

Spencer Walker: My dad and my uncle, they just did the second World War, when they went in, when they started, and they got out after it was over. And fortunately they got out without any major injuries. One of my first cousins was in the Army and he was shot in the leg, but he survived. Most of the men in my family served in the military.

That's great. And so you said you had a nephew that went in the Marine Corps because of you?

Spencer Walker: Yeah, one of my sister's sons.

Did you give him any advice before he went to boot camp?

Spencer Walker: Yes I did. I told him don't challenge the drill instructor because he won't move. You won't win. And one of my high school teachers was a former Marine, and that's what he told me before I went in, because I liked athletics and stuff and I was aggressive, and he told me that's not gonna work in boot camp.

That's some good advice. I remember I was told, too, just be able to run, run, run, and I think that was true. If you could run, you could eventually get through any of the PT they put you through.

Spencer Walker: Yeah, it was rough and some days now I think back, am I gonna make this, you know. But I wanted to and I wanted it bad enough, so I did it. I was trying to find you something that I wrote.

Is this one of the poems, sir, that you mentioned?

Spencer Walker: Yeah, I'm trying to find the one I wrote.

When did you start writing poetry? What was it that prompted that?

Spencer Walker: I wrote poetry from when I was a little boy, and my mom wrote poetry and stuff, so I picked it up from her. Now like I say, I didn't serve in Vietnam, but I had a brother that served and I had two cousins that served. I wrote this poem because I was able to follow it through the news, and I watched faithfully every night. I call this poem, The Vikan. OK.

Out from the jungle they came
Through the heat, the mud, and the rain
One of the oldest of man's races
Little men with moon-shaped faces
Spreading ruin and horror
To reappear tomorrow
All for an insane dream

Out from the jungle they came
Dressed in black white pajamas
For anyone of the peaceful brother
Making a nation shudder
All for an insane dream

Out from the jungle they came
Through the heat, the mud, and the rain
Leaving death and sorrow in many places
These were the men with moon-shaped faces
Who is there to stop them?
Men from far off places
With freedom faces
Will man the jungle station
Die for the peace of a nation

To end this insane dream.

I wrote that one.

That's great. Did you share any of those with your brother when he was serving over there?

Spencer Walker: Yeah. And then I worked for TWA, and TWA brought a lot of fallen Marines back from Vietnam, and I worked on the ramp as a ramp serviceman, so I loaded them and unloaded caskets of Marines on and off the airplane. So in the honor of them, for the fallen, I wrote another one. This is just a few lines. It says

Caskets from Vietnam

Flag-draped caskets from South Vietnam
Are arriving in American towns
Flag-draped caskets, the loved ones for the burial grounds
They found peace in their own home towns.

I unloaded many a dead Marine.

What airport were you at at that time?

Spencer Walker: Los Angeles.

Were you at LAX?

Spencer Walker: Yeah.

So I guess you're right, one of the biggest airports on the West Coast and those fallen angels getting sent back.

Spencer Walker: Yeah, I made sure they were treated the way they were supposed to be treated in the casket, and the caskets were handled the way they were supposed to be handled. They always had an escort and he would get off the plane and stand down there and make sure it was done properly.

That was a trying time, and you had your brother over there. Were you able to write to him pretty regularly?

Spencer Walker: No, because I never knew where he was. He was called, he was a long range, anyway he was like our Recon.

Long range recon, I know what you're talking about, sure.

Spencer Walker: And he would go into Cambodia and he would go into Laos, and they would locate troop movements and supply lines and all that stuff, and then they would call in for air strikes and stuff. Long range reconnaissance patrol, that's what they are. So that's what he did. So he was all over the place, so it was hard for his mail to keep up with him. But I did write him a few times, maybe a month, three or four weeks before he would get the letter.

Did he make it back OK?

Spencer Walker: Yeah, he got some shrapnel in his foot and leg, but other than that he got back OK. He very seldom talks about it. And I don't ask him anything. The same thing with my cousin. Sometimes when I go home and we sit around and we're having something to drink and stuff, they might tell me a few things, but I don't ever push 'em for it.

Yeah. So when you got out, sir, in '59, your last duty station was at El Toro, and I guess I take it you stayed in southern California then and started working for TWA?

Spencer Walker: Yeah, I stayed in California. I had the American dream, raise a family and all that, the house, and end in divorce. And then I went home. After the kids got out of school and everything I went back to New Jersey. Then I spent 10 years back there because I had been, the fun would always go on. My brothers and sisters, and my mom. Then I went back to California and then I had a daughter that's there and a son. I had two sons but unfortunately, 15-16 years ago my oldest son got killed in a drive-by in LA. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I'm sorry to hear that.

Spencer Walker: Yeah. And then I had my baby daughter, she married a guy from Texas and so she relocated to Texas, and when her oldest sister used to come out there to Texas and visit her, she would see all these beautiful houses in Texas for good money, and the type of house that she wanted that she has here in Texas, no way she could have afforded it in California, Los Angeles.

Yeah, California real estate is just unbelievable.

Spencer Walker: Yes, so she asked me to come and help her get settled in and everything, and it was only supposed to be for a year, but I'm going into my sixth year now.

That's great. And this daughter of yours is the one that now works at the Veterans Land Board, right?

Spencer Walker: No, that's the baby girl. The other one, she works for a company that does payrolls for a whole bunch of different companies.

What I was going to say is you've got to be proud, too, of your daughter that works at the Veterans Land Board, yourself being a veteran, and now she's in a job where she helps veterans. That's got to be something you are proud of.

Spencer Walker: Yeah, I'm proud of her. I've been down to her work place several times.

That's great. Hopefully I'll meet you at some point. In fact on November 7th, we're going to have a Veterans Day program here at the General Land Office, and we'd be honored if you could make it down.

Spencer Walker: I'll come, and three days after that it'll be the Marine Corps -

That's right, exactly. Marine Corps ___ Day is on the 10th, and the actual Veterans Day is on the 11th, so it's always perfect timing. But we're doing it on the 7th just because the 11th we're closed that day because it's a Monday. Of course you won't be here on Sunday, either. And then some people thought well, with it being a long weekend, that Friday the 8th, people might not be here, so on the 7th, the Thursday, November 7th is when we're going to have the Veterans Day program. It should be nice. It's something we haven't done in a while.

Spencer Walker: I'll make sure I come to that.

Yes sir, absolutely, and I'll make sure she has all the info and tells you how to get here and the time and all that sort of thing. We're going to hopefully have Mr. Overton here. He's a veteran that lives in East Austin who is 107.

Spencer Walker: I saw him on television.

Yes sir, he's gotten a lot of attention.

Spencer Walker: As a matter of fact, my daughter's fiancé -

That's right, I know her grandmother.

Spencer Walker: Yeah, she goes with the grandmother.

She's in her 80s. I don't think you'd call her a girlfriend, but she's a lady friend of Mr. Overton.

Spencer Walker: Yeah, I guess that would be -

She's a really nice lady, so I hope that she and Mr. Overton can come and we'll have him as the guest of honor that day. He's apparently the oldest veteran in America, which is -

Spencer Walker: Yeah, 107 years old if I remember correctly.

And he's a former state employee, too, so it's only fitting that we have him over here at the Land Office that day.

Spencer Walker: Oh, that'd be good. Yeah, I'd like to meet him.

And then our key note speaker that day is gonna be Ken Wallingford who works here at the Veterans Land Board. He was a Vietnam prisoner of war and he's got a pretty remarkable story about his experience and so he's agreed to be our speaker that day.

Spencer Walker: Oh that's good.

It should be a great program.

Spencer Walker: I'll make sure I'll attend.

Yes sir, absolutely. We'd be honored to have you here and I want to thank you, too, just for taking some time to share with us some of your memories and your stories as a U.S. Marine. I don't know if you know or not, but what we're doing with this program is we're trying to save

these stories for posterity and for future generations and we have archives here that go back to the 1700s. We have the original Registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of the settlers that came to Texas, and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo, and so these are amazing documents, and our goal is add these interviews to that archive so that potentially hundreds of years from now, people can listen to these interviews and perhaps learn something from them. With that in mind, is there anything you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview long after you and I are both gone?

Spencer Walker: Well, what I would like to say is if they want to serve their country as a young man, the best outfit to join is the United States Marine Corps. We have a great history. We're the first to respond to threats against our nation and I think if they go in the Marine Corps, they'll be honored and they'll be thought well of not only by their family, but the people of our nation.

Well said, I agree. Well sir, again, thank you very much for letting us do this interview today and as I mentioned before we started the interview, in a few weeks we'll send you copies of this interview on CDs along with a nice letter and certificate signed by Commissioner Patterson. It's just a small way the state of Texas is saying thank you to you for your service to our nation.

Spencer Walker: OK, well thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Yes sir, take care, we'll talk to you soon.

Spencer Walker: OK, semper fi.

Semper fidelis, bye bye.

[End of recording]