

ORAL MEMOIRS  
OF  
DIMAS CONTRERAS  
An interview conducted on  
May 11, 2018

Interviewer: Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai

Angelo State University  
West Texas Collection  
“War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War, World War I to the Present”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Dimas Contreras are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on May 11, 2018.

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WONGSRICHANALAI: This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai for the *War Stories* project. We are in Fort Stockton, Texas. It is May the 11th, 2018. We are here for a *War Stories* interview. And if we could start with your name, please, sir.

CONTRERAS: Uh, my name's Dimas Contreras.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay, and where and when were you born?

CONTRERAS: Born in Ysleta, Texas, uh, 1947. February of 1947.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay, and where is Ysleta?

CONTRERAS: Uh, Ysleta is a suburb of El Paso. It's right there, tied to El Paso.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Good.

CONTRERAS: Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And you grew up there?

CONTRERAS: No, I was just born there. My dad was military. He was stationed at the Army . . . at the Biggs Army Airfield in El Paso. He was in the military, and that's why I was born there.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And when did you move to Fort Stockton.

CONTRERAS: Uh, 1980.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Nineteen eighty. Got a job offer here, and I've been here ever since.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. So, have you spent most of your time in Texas? In this region of West Texas?

CONTRERAS: For the most part, I was a military brat. Okay, my father was military. I was born in El Paso. From there, we went to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio; he was stationed there. Uh, and then he went to Korea, the Korean War, and then we went to, uh, stay with our grand . . . uh, grandparents. They're in Shafter, Texas, which is out between Marfa and Presidio—a little ghost town now. That's where my grandparents lived. That's while he was overseas in the Korean War we lived there. After that, uh, we went to—if you're familiar—we went to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. Then we went to Kansas, Fort Riley, Kansas, stationed there. Then to Fort Carson, Colorado. In 1958, we went to Germany for three years, Munich, Germany. Three years and then came back in '61, and then he got stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, which is where he retired in 1966. And um, when I graduated from high school there at Copperas Cove, which is right outside of Fort Hood, I came out here to Alpine to Sul Ross State University. Uh, I had always dreamt about playing baseball there since I was a kid. We used to visit Alpine where my aunt lived, and her house was right next to the baseball fields, so I'd watch them practice and . . . so anyway, my dream was to play baseball, college baseball, and I came over here to play college baseball in Alpine.

And basically, I've been stuck out here ever since. Uh, my mother was born at Terlingua, way West Texas, you know. Right on the border, twenty miles from the border or ten miles from the border. My father was born in Shafter, Texas, which is that silver-mining town, uh, another seventeen miles from the border. So, you know, this is my roots out here, and maybe that's why I'm out here. Uh, I like the weather. I didn't like the humidity of Central Texas, so I came out here, and I love this desert weather. I guess that's why I'm still here. I'm the only one of my family out here. Everybody else is in the Metroplex or in Central Texas, or in Colorado, or South Carolina, and I'm out here in West Texas.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Our department chair is from Terlingua.

CONTRERAS: Oh, Terlingua? Wow!

WONGSRICHANALAI: Yeah.

CONTRERAS: My mother and all her siblings were born there. Her daddy—his name was John Southard—he was a Civil War veteran. Uh, he came out here in 1963 after the Civil War. He was a member of the 44th Kentucky Mounted Infantry, and he took a saber wound to the leg on horseback, okay. So, he had an injury here on his . . . uh, on his leg. When he came out to Texas after the Civil War and came to Terlingua, he was receiving a check, a veteran's check or whatever . . . you know, whatever that was.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Pension.

CONTRERAS: Five dollars, ten dollars.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Yeah, yeah.

CONTRERAS: Whatever. And uh, he married a Mexican nun from Ojinaga, and then all his kids were born in Terlingua. My grandpa and all them were born there. But anyway, he was a Civil War veteran. There's a stone there at the cemetery, which they placed about ten years ago on behalf of the government for him being a Civil War veteran there in Terlingua. So, he was a . . . you know, he was born 19 . . . 1844. So, when he was nineteen, that's when the Civil War ended. So, he went in probably at seventeen or sixteen, you know. And he was from Kentucky . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: Right.

CONTRERAS: . . . which was a, uh, split state. So, some of his brothers were . . . fought for the Confederates, and he fought for the Union. So, that was, you know, interesting story about his family.

WONGSRICHANALAI: It's a great family story.

CONTRERAS: Mm-hmm. Right.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, having been in West Texas, how do you define West Texas?

CONTRERAS: Well, I don't know. Wide, open spaces. A lot of friendly people.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Where does West Texas begin in your mind?

CONTRERAS: Ah, [laughs] you know, when you leave San Angelo, coming this way I guess.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: When you start to see all the mesquite trees, and all the desert, and all the oil fields, you know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, is San Angelo in West Texas?

CONTRERAS: Uh, more around the border I guess I would say.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Some people call it . . .

CONTRERAS: It's humid there.

WONGSRICHANALAI: . . . West Central Texas, yeah.

CONTRERAS: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Very good. Okay. Uh now, tell me about the people of West Texas. You say that they're friendly.

CONTRERAS: Friendly people, yeah. Um, you know, the majority of people out here are Hispanic. You know, sixty, seventy percent are Hispanic. Uh . . . and uh, just a lot of friendly people, hardworking people. You know, uh . . . lower income. Lower to middle income with a few exceptions, ranchers and oilmen, you know. Other than that, you know, there's people who don't make a lot of money out here, you know, just survive out here, you know. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Are they different from Texans in other parts of the state?

CONTRERAS: Oh no, I don't think so. I mean, I wouldn't think so, but I really don't know to be honest with you. You know, but good people. You know, when I was a kid, you know, we'd come down the road and everybody—the vehicles, oncoming traffic—they'd wave at you, you know. And I remember that from a kid. So, I got used to that, waving at them. When you see a car, you wave at them, you know. That's sort of out here in West Texas, the way they are.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What do you think of West Texans' relationship with the military?

CONTRERAS: Oh, a lot of dedication there, you know. Dedicated . . . you know, people. A lot of West Texans have served their nation, you know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you . . . do you have any siblings?

CONTRERAS: Uh, yes. I have five brothers and a sister.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Are . . . are you the oldest?

CONTRERAS: I'm the second oldest. I have a brother, an older brother, and then I'm second, then a sister, and then after that, four more brothers of which . . . uh, five of my brothers were veterans . . . I mean, including me, and then my dad is a veteran also. So, I had two brothers in the Air Force and two brothers in the Army, and I was in the Army. My dad was in the Army, and then uncles in the Navy and the Army, and one of them got rejected because he had flat feet. But, you know, a lot of military here . . . history here in my family, you know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: It . . . was there any branch rivalry?

CONTRERAS: No, no, no.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay [laughs].

CONTRERAS: No, I don't think so, no. No, I got drafted, and two of my brothers were in the lottery system. That's why we went Army, you know, but my brother, one of them, he . . . two of them—the ones in the Air Force—right out of high school they entered the Air Force. One of them did four years in the Air Force. The other one made it to Korea for twenty years. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well, tell me about your father. What was his name?

CONTRERAS: Uh, my father's name was Ventura Madrid Contreras. And uh, he joined the military in . . . right after Pearl Harbor in '42. Uh, went into the Army Air Corps, and then he didn't come back to this country until '46 after the end of World War II. I got a brother that was born right when he left, and he didn't . . . he didn't see his dad until he was four years old. Um, and then he got out of the Army after the war, and there was not a whole lot out here. He worked at . . . out at Terlingua, over there at the CCC camps. He worked, you know, delivering groceries. And there's just not much work, so he went back into the military. And that's why he made it a career, you know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Where was he stationed in World War II?

CONTRERAS: Uh, well, he was in Italy, and North Africa, Saipan—all over.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, both theaters?

CONTRERAS: Eisenhower chasing Rommel there in North Africa.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Wow.

CONTRERAS: Yeah. Sicily, uh Saipan, and that area, yeah. Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did he ever talk about his experiences?

CONTRERAS: Well, not really. To be honest with you, he never really did. You know . . . nah, he never did.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And do you remember when he was deployed to Korea?

CONTRERAS: Uh, '51 or '52, Korean War, and then later in '65 again . . . '64. I was in high school, a senior in high school. He went for another tour, one-year tour in Korea. Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Do you remember how you felt at the time?

CONTRERAS: Oh, I was the . . . I was the man of the house because my other brother was in the military already. And yeah, I was, you know, got to be the father at home, you know what I mean. He's the one with all the honey-dos, you know, has to do everything. Anyway, yeah. No, I really missed him that year when he was gone. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. And the . . . okay, let's . . . let's switch gears.

CONTRERAS: Okay, okay.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Uh so, when did you . . . when were you drafted?

CONTRERAS: I was drafted in 1969 right . . . I graduated from college in May of '69. In August, I went into the Ar . . . into the . . . boot camp. August 1969, Fort Bliss, Texas. Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was that experience like?

CONTRERAS: Uh, it was a . . . it was a different experience, you know. Just a wi . . . a rude awakening to life, you know. And . . . and discipline and all that, you know, that you do in basic training and all that. Uh, but I see . . . also, I think it's an experience that every young man and woman in this country should have an opportunity to have access to, you know. I think not far from high school every child should serve this country in any . . . some capacity, you know. Whether it be the military or Peace Corps for two years, I think that's a great experience for people. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Yeah. Now, in 1969, you knew that the Vietnam . . .

CONTRERAS: Yeah, yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: . . . conflict was going on.

CONTRERAS: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Were you concerned that you would be deployed?

CONTRERAS: Well, not really. I just never thought about it, you know. And uh, then out of basic I got stationed in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the 101st Airborne, which was in Vietnam at the time. And then in April, I got orders for Vietnam, you know. So, it was "so be it," so I went. Out of the military members in my immediate family, my siblings and my dad, I was the only one that went to Vietnam. One of my brothers went to Hawaii, one of them went to Germany, another went to the Philippines, Clark Air Force Base, and then the one that was the career man, he didn't go overseas. Uh, he was here stateside, except for TDY there in Italy and England and Germany for six weeks with the cadets from the Air Force Academy. He stayed [laughs], for the most part, twenty years in the United States. Yeah. So, for . . . since I was there, that meant that my other siblings didn't get to go, you know. Only one person per family, you know, got sent overseas to Vietnam, I mean. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was your rank?

CONTRERAS: I was a special . . . top bran . . . specialist fourth class. Specialist fourth class. Uh, I could type. I took high school . . . my junior . . . I took, uh, typing my junior year in high school, and I could type. So, as soon as I got . . . I mean, when I was in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, I worked, you know, in the office as S1, personnel, you know. And then upon arriving at Vietnam, you know, usually the first two weeks in Vietnam, you have in-country training, but because I was a clerk—I mean, because I could type—I didn't have to do that. I just went straight to work in the mail room, you know. In the mail room and then, uh, intelligence m . . . uh, the comm. center—message center. And then . . . and then I did awards and decorations—doing the paperwork for those people receiving decorations, military decorations. And that's about it, the extent of my service. It was just . . . but because I could type, I was not out in the boonies, you know, with a rifle, you know. I was sitting in an office, you know. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Let's go back to your college days.

CONTRERAS: Uh-huh.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Was there a lot of, um . . . what was the sentiment on campus about Vietnam?

CONTRERAS: Well, over here, what I saw was there was not a whole lot of anti . . . like in California and all that, you know. I don't . . . I don't think there was that much of it. At least not to my knowledge, you know what I mean.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Yeah. And you know, like I say, I got drafted, so be it. You get called; you go, you know. I didn't protest. I . . . you know, I mean, it's just part of, uh, being an American citizen, you know. That's the way it is. So, you know . . . yep.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And what were race relations like in the . . . well, in boot camp?

CONTRERAS: At boot camp? Well, I mean, they were fine for the most part. I thought there was no . . . nothing that I could see, you know what I mean. Uh, other than that, I know in the military when I was overseas, I worked with a gentleman who was a black soldier, you know, from Louisiana. From Hammond, Louisiana, you know, and we worked in the same office, you know. And he told me, you know, when they're out at the club with his black peers, they acted differently than they did with me here in the office, you know what I mean. He didn't want to look like an Uncle Tom. So, when he was with his buddies, he had different . . . just different . . . you know what I mean: Ghetto talking, you know that thing. And then here with me, it was a different thing, you know. But he told me, you know, he didn't want to be called an Uncle Tom, you know, if you're friendly to the whites, you know.

But uh, there were some racial problems, you know. There were all the time, and I noticed that in the military, you know. Uh, when I . . . when we lived in Germany as a dependent, I was twelve years old, but I knew all . . . all these soldiers that were in, you know, athletes, you know—the baseball team, football team, boxing, basketball. And there was, in Germany, we had bars that were frequented by the whites, and there's bars that were frequented by the blacks, you know. And that was basically it, but these guys were always talking about fighting, you know. It was a lot . . . you know, interracial fighting at bars and all that with all the alcohol. But uh, I never . . . you know, like I said, I never had a problem with that. It's just like I said, I didn't want to be around them when they do that, you know, that ghetto thing. It's just like even now, you know. I was watching last night that movie *Straight Outta Compton*, you know. Anyway, it was about this rap group and how they . . . the songs that belittled the police, "F the police," and all that. You know, that stuff I can't . . . I can't handle, you know, the ghetto thing, you know what I mean. I don't have, I mean, problems with black people, you know, but this

ghetto thing—rap, and all that stuff—I . . . I . . . I can do without it, you know what I mean. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Were your parents concerned with you when you were sent to Vietnam?

CONTRERAS: Ah! I mean, I imagine they were, you know. But uh, yeah, we never discussed it, you know what I mean. But . . . yeah. Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did they ever write? Did . . .

CONTRERAS: Yeah!

WONGSRICHANALAI: . . . you write to them?

CONTRERAS: Yeah, all the time. Yeah, I wrote to my parents, yeah. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was your . . . ? So, you were, I mean, you were a staff officer.

CONTRERAS: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: But did you understand . . . what was your conception of what the United States was doing in Vietnam?

CONTRERAS: Well, that's a good question. We were just trying to . . . you know, working for peace and to stop the war, you know. But after that, who knows what really . . . why we were there, you know what I mean. Decisions of somebody, you know—presidents, and politicians, and all that. Even . . . even to this day, now, you know, Syria, Afghanistan, all that, you know. I mean, in a way, why are they there? They don't want us there, you know. Anyway, so who knows? You know, it's supposedly the way it's supposed to be. I don't know. It's a good question. I don't know why we don't get out of there. But then again, who knows what the world would be like if we weren't there. I don't know. That's another question, you know. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well, can you tell me about a regular day for you working in Vietnam?

CONTRERAS: Oh yeah, just working over there. It's getting up, doing breakfast early in the morning. And then mostly in Vietnam, it was raining. Raining every day—monsoons, you know. Going to work, just . . . you know, the typewriter doing paperwork, you know. I did paperwork on this one guy. He was . . . he was a, uh . . . uh, what's the term I'm thinking of? Recommended for the Medal of Honor, and I did the paperwork on that one guy. He was a medic. Uh, Spec. 5 Gary Beikirch. He got all shot up, you know, on . . . in a situation where there was a lot of machine gun fire. People were shot. He was shot, and he was rescuing his buddies, you know, being shot up. And uh, I remember the sergeant major, Sergeant Major Klukowski, went to . . . went to . . . uh, Japan to see him in the hospital. He's just like a zipper, you know what I mean, uh, all shot up, you know. He survived! Later on, when I got out of the military, I was working with a teacher, and I was in the library. I saw this magazine where Ronald Reagan was awarding him the . . . the Medal of Honor, you know, and the paperwork that I did. And the paperwork that I did, and this man got . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: That's cool.

CONTRERAS: Yeah, ten copies. And that was before computers. It was typewriters, and we had to do the application. It was ten copies. Can you imagine ten copies?

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you have the carbon paper?

CONTRERAS: Carbon paper, yeah. Yeah, yeah. There was no fax machines, no computers. Carbon paper.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Wow.

CONTRERAS: Yeah, so that was it, you know. And then in the evenings, we'd maybe go watch a movie, go to the club, you know, have a beer, have a drink or two, you know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Were you always on base?

CONTRERAS: Yeah, for the most part. Yeah, I was one of those, you know. There were guys, some of the wilder guys, that went out for the bars and all that with women and all that. I . . . I wanted to stay [laughs] on the premises of the base, you know what I mean. So, I didn't go off and wander into town and bars and all that, you know. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you interact with any Vietnamese citizens?

CONTRERAS: Uh, I just . . . just, you know . . . well, yeah. Actually, we had custodians that worked for us, of course, and they were Vietnamese people, you know. Secretaries, you know, and the people that did our laundry, the cooks, all that, you know what I mean. Yeah, that's . . . that . . . that . . . yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How large was this office?

CONTRERAS: I'm sorry?

WONGSRICHANALAI: How large was the office you worked in?

CONTRERAS: Uh, well, first I was in Nha Trang at the headquarters, and then they shipped me off to Pleiku, which was Company B in Pleiku and that was smaller, you know. Our commanding officer was a colonel, a full colonel, Murl F. Tullis. But like in Nha Trang, that was a headquarters. We had a brigadier general that was in the command. Michael D. Healy was in the command of special forces in Vietnam. That was his special forces group, uh, that . . . well, I was assigned to the special forces not because I was qualified special forces but because I could type, and they needed clerks, you know what I mean. And that's why I got there. Like I say, when I got in there, instead of doing that two-week introduction to Vietnam somewhere, I just went straight to work, you know, in the post office, you know. Yeah. But no, and . . . uh, just, you know . . . just went to work, and that's it. Seven days a week . . . I mean, you're off Sundays and Saturdays, you know. But I just hung around there. We had a swimming pool there, and we had a club where they brought in shows, you know, entertainers from the Philippines, from Bangkok, and it was just . . . you know what I mean. They tried to, you know, entertain the troops, you know. Bob Hope and them, that bunch. What's the gal that used to go with Bob Hope? She was a comedian. I can't think of her name. I don't know. But, anyway, she went to see us at our base there. And then we had . . . our guards were Montagnards, this tribe of Montagnard people. They were the ones that did . . . pulled the guard duty for the base, for the compound, you know what I mean. Uh, and you know, you'd say "hi" to them and just, you know, be friendly. Try and be friendly, you know. Um, that's about it I think.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, you worked in the post office and also in the clerk office?

CONTRERAS: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: At first, I was in the post office, and then they changed me to the S1, you know, personnel, then S2, the comm. center—you know, intelligence message center. We had the messages come in on the . . . it was a . . . some kind of message machines, you know. It was like computers, but back then that was before computers, you know what I mean. Uh, and that's it I guess.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Was there any decoding that you had to do?

CONTRERAS: No, we didn't. There was secret and top secret notes. We just received them and passed them on, you know, that's all. We had a machine and put them in the little boxes where they're supposed to go, you know. Yeah, military intelligence about . . . you know, from Saigon, you know. You know, MACV Headquarters and all that. You know, just . . . yeah. Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And when did you return to the United States?

CONTRERAS: In '71. I was there a year. I went in '70 and got back in '71 a month early. I did an eleven . . . I got a thirty-day-early release. So, I got out after eleven months over there. And uh, when I was there, I took my R & R over there. I went to Hong Kong for my R & R for a week. Bought me a Rolex watch over there. I don't have it with me now, but . . . uh, you know . . . uh, I gave it to my brother, but anyway, I bought me a Rolex watch and some suits. You know, you go to Hong Kong, and you get those tailor-made suits and all that, you know. Then when I came back, I got stranded in Saigon. That's when we invaded the . . . the nation next door, Cambodia. Uh, the invasion of Cambodia was going on, so I got stuck in Saigon for a week. Couldn't get a flight back to Nha Trang where I was stationed there, you know. So, I had to hang around and wait for a ride, you know, for a . . . for a plane to go that way because they're all, you know, busy with that invasion. Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, you were talking about you like the weather here in West Texas.

CONTRERAS: Uh-huh.

WONGSRICHANALAI: It must've been horrible and humid in Vietnam.

CONTRERAS: Oh yeah, yeah, you take showers twice a day. Yeah. Oh yeah, it was humid. Miserably humid. You know, hot and humid. We were in Nha Trang. When I was at Nha Trang, the beach was right there, you know what I mean. And we would go out to the beach, and they had . . . sometimes they would have barbeques there and stuff, you know, for . . . we had a lot of Filipino reps that worked with the . . . our government, you know. And they'd barbeque, you know, slaughter hogs, you know, and put them on the roaster. I remember one . . . eating with them a couple times, you know, and the beach was right there. But, other than that, I mean it was just humid. Miserably humidity. Miserable humidity. Yeah. Yeah, miserable.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you have any problems readjusting . . .

CONTRERAS: Nah, no.

WONGSRICHANALAI: . . . to civilian life?

CONTRERAS: I didn't, nah. Like I said, I never did any combat or nothing like that, you know. One time, we were called out to . . . uh, to the bunkers that were supposed to be overrun, you know. Intel said we were supposed to be overrun that night, you know. It never happened. So, yeah. That was about it, you know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, what did you do after you left the Army?

CONTRERAS: Oh, let's see. I started teaching. I became a teacher, school teacher for thirty-nine years and then retired as a school teacher.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What did you teach?

CONTRERAS: Math! Math. Math, and I also drove a school bus, you know, because teachers don't make a lot of money, so a little extra income driving a bus. And to this day, even though I retired about nine years ago from teaching, I continue to drive a school bus. Well actually, it's a van. I've had a van for twenty years, you know, pick up kids that live in ranches. There's a prison fifteen miles out of town. The warden's kids go to school, you know. So, I just . . . I really drive a van, you know, but it's school transportation, you know, for the kids. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Can you tell me a little bit about your . . . your brothers' careers in the military?

CONTRERAS: Well, like I say . . . well, one of them . . . okay, most of them . . . two of them were drafted, you know. They did their time and got out, you know what I mean. And then my other one in the Air Force, he got out and went to college, and then he got a degree. But anyway, he wound up just being a truck driver—that's all, you know. My one brother, my oldest brother, he, uh, went in after graduation from high school, and then he was an enlisted man. And then he went through this program where he was going to night school, and when he got sixty hours, the Air Force sent him to, uh, this program. I forgot the name of it, but basically they sent him to college, okay. So, he went to Arizona State and got his BS degree in electrical engineering. Then when he got that degree, then they sent him to OCS in San Antonio—Officer Candidate School—and he became a second lieutenant. After that, they sent him to the University of Illinois to get his master's degree and his PhD in electrical engineering. And then after that, they sent him to the Air Force Academy to be a teacher. So, he was an instructor there of, uh, electrical engineering. So, he did twenty years in the military: ten years as an enlisted man, and ten years as an officer. And he worked on the . . . the program he worked with was Star Wars.<sup>1</sup> So, after he retired at thirty-eight from the Air Force, he went and worked for Martin Marietta Aerospace—again, Star Wars. So, you know, the military took care of him, and there were many good opportunities for him, you know, like the PhD in electrical engineering. So, he really took advantage of what the Air Force offered him, you know.

And my other ones, you know, we did our two years, and we all got . . . I went to college. My brother went to college. The other two, they didn't go to college, they just went straight away . . . went straight to work at construction, you know, just hard work labor. But they had the opportunity like I did with the GI Bill. I learned how to fly, you know, with my GI Bill after I got out because I had graduated before I went, you know . . . before. So, after that, I took flying lessons. I learned how to fly and became a flight instructor, you know, at . . . you know, which was, you know, what the military did for me, you know. And, yeah, that's about it, yeah. My dad . . . my dad, he spent—of his twenty-four years in the military—he spent about twelve years overseas: World War II, Korea, uh, a year in Korea later, and three years in Germany. So, about ten or twelve years-worth overseas, you know, away from home. Away from his family.

WONGSRICHANALAI: But you moved to Germany with him?

CONTRERAS: Yes. So . . . yeah, yeah.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Defense Initiative

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Dependents can go . . . even now, can go with their, uh . . . to Germany, France, Italy, Spain, different places. So, that was a great experience, too. I learned how to speak some German, you know. We had to take it. We had no choice in school. You had to take three years of German.

WONGSRICHANALAI: *Ausgezeichnet!*

CONTRERAS: Yeah, I learned a little bit of vocabulary, you know. The *bleistift*. The *Fenster*, the window, you know.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Mm-hmm.

CONTRERAS: *Bleistift der schule*, you know. But, you learn vocabulary when you learn that language, you know. The *Tür*, the door. *Bruder*, brother. *Sch* . . . you know, all kinds of things.

WONGSRICHANALAI: *Schwester*.

CONTRERAS: *Schwester*.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Yeah.

CONTRERAS: *Mutter, Pata* . . . *Vater*, you know, all that, you know. I never used it because I didn't live off base, but anyway, I . . . I still remember it, you know. Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And how long were you in Germany?

CONTRERAS: Three years.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Beautiful weather. Cold all . . . [laughs] real cold. Cold. My dad and I spent a lot of time out in maneuvers in the wintertime—thirty days at these maneuvering places, you know, out in the boonies in the freezing cold, you know, and . . . yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And you were a teenager at the time?

CONTRERAS: Yeah. Well, I was in nineteen . . . eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

CONTRERAS: Sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, I got to travel around Germany, you know, different places, which are places that you go visit now as tourists, you know. We got to see them when we were kids, yeah. Anyway, it was a good experience, you know, pleasant experience, you know. Not every . . . not every kid . . . you know, kids that live out here in West Texas don't go see Germany, you know, unless you're military, you know. But that was a great experience, you know . . . yeah, aside from being away from your family for three years, from your grandparents and so forth, you know, aunts and uncles. Uh, my aunt passed away here in Odessa, and I didn't get to go to her funeral. I was in Vietnam, you know. Just . . . other than that, you know . . . oh, I mean, that was when I was in Vietnam, you know, not when I was in Germany, but when I was in Vietnam. But uh . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, in all the years that you were a teacher, did any of your students, after they graduated, did they go into the armed forces?

CONTRERAS: Oh yeah, yeah. Oh yeah, yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did they ask you about any of the . . . ?

CONTRERAS: No, no, not really. I mean, they . . . not . . . not that I can remember offhand, you know. But I did . . . had a lot of them go into the military and got out. Desert Storm, and, you know, over here in Afghanistan and Iraq. That's . . . you know, yeah. Mm-hmm. Yep.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well, looking back at uh your military career and all the . . . what the military had done and all that, has your conception of the United States changed in any way over the years?

CONTRERAS: No, no, I don't think so. I just, you know, other than this government, what it's coming to, you know . . . uh, you know, just all this division here in our country, you know. Uh, hard-core division, you know what I mean. Uh . . . uh, I don't know if there's ever going to be an end to that or not, or if that's the way life works from now on, you know. Hating . . . hating people because they're Republicans, or hating them because they're Democrats, you know what I mean. That type of thing. It didn't used to be that way, you know. Hopefully we'll get back to the way it was. I don't know. Time will tell, I guess, huh? Uh . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: There was a lot of social division in the 1960s too.

CONTRERAS: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. Well, a lot of it had to do with the Vietnam War and all that. Yeah. I'm sure, yeah. Yeah. Well, I guess you're right, you know, if you think about it. I don't know, not now. I don't think as much now as . . . well, there's more now. Or at least I think so, anyway. You know . . . yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Do you have any advice for any young men or women . . .

CONTRERAS: Uh, good opportunity.

WONGSRICHANALAI: . . . who are entering the service?

CONTRERAS: Good opportunity, yeah. Get in there and it's a good opportunity, good learning experience. Meet people from all parts of the country, maybe parts of the world, you know what I mean. Uh yeah, I think . . . like I said, I think every kid in this country should have to serve for two years in the military, you know. I don't mean having to go to war—just go serve. If they're against war, I . . . put themselves doing something where they don't have to go, you know. Uh, good experience! Uh, you know, like I said, I think I'm better for it. All my bro . . . siblings are better for it, you know, because of that opportunity we had, you know. Uh you know, we had an opportunity, because my dad was military, to travel across the country. Otherwise, we would've been stuck out here in Marfa and Presidio, you know, which there's nothing wrong with that, but it's just, uh, I had more opportunities than others have had than, you know, those guys out there, you know.

I don't have a Spanish accent, you know, for a Contreras, you know. Some of my guys that I went to school in the first grade out here, you know, because of the fact that my language, most of the time, was English because of where you lived, you know what I mean. I remember even when we were kids, at times my mom would talk to us in Spanish, and after a while our response was English. You know what I mean, you got so used to it. You know, your classmates, for the most part, where we lived out in the military there weren't that many Hispanics. At least, you know, we were. There were few, but not a lot. Had we lived out here, you know, eighty,

seventy, eighty percent of the people are Hispanic here, you know. So, it's a different ball game. So, like I said, my brothers and me, you talk to us . . . unless we tell you that we're Hispanic . . . of course, my great-grandfather was Southern, you know, was Anglo. He married a Mexican woman, you know, so our features are that of an Anglo. A lot . . . a lot of our features, you know what I mean. Uh but, anyway, uh, I feel blessed that I've, you know, been associated with that and my dad also with the military, that upbringing. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Very good. Is there anything else you would like to add?

CONTRERAS: No, not that I can think of offhand. It's like a . . . no, no.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well, marvelous. Thank you . . .

CONTRERAS: Oh yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: . . . very much for your time!

CONTRERAS: You're welcome. Welcome.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Thank you.