

Don Robertson- Interview with Dr. Tara Hembrough and Noah Patton

Link: <https://youtu.be/UXvxfKYeLc0>

Transcription completed by Noah Patton.

TH: Hi, this is Dr. Tara Hembrough, and I'm at Southeastern Oklahoma State University today, and I'm here with Don. I'm going to let him introduce himself in a minute. I'm also here with Noah Patton. We're going to talk today with Don about his experiences in the military. Thank you for being here today. Don, can you introduce yourself to us?

DR: Okay, I'm Don Robertson. I've lived here most of my life outside of the military. I'm 77 years old, and I wish I could go back to Germany.

TH: Will you tell us a little bit about your military family history? Did you have any?

DR: No, I never had anyone in the military except myself. Now I had a nephew that was in the Marine Corps. Believe me, I've seen pictures that he sent. Everything has changed, from the pictures he sent me. I said, "You know, it's not the same."

TH: What do you think is different?

DR: Well, for instance, he showed me in his wall locker, and there's a bottle of whiskey in it. You didn't do that when I was in there. You didn't have alcohol in your wall locker. I saw right then it has changed.

When I got to Germany, once a month we'd have what we called alert. It was liable to be Sunday morning at two o'clock. We'd all get in our vehicles, and we had to be at the vehicles fully loaded down in ten minutes. When we took off, there was nothing standing in our way. Trees, we'd knock them down if we had to, we were in tanks. Who's going to buck a tank?

When I was in Germany, a lot of things happened that was kiddish, like shorten your sheets. One night I crawled in my bunk, and it had Post Toasties in it. It's just jokes. And they would take the springs off of your cot and put strings on them, and when you lay down, you'd go clear down to the floor, and everybody'd have a big laugh out of it. So that's like kiddish, but I loved it when I was in there.

TH: Out of high school did you join?

DR: I joined in June after I left high school in May.

TH: And what year was that?

DR: That was in '58.

TH: And why did you decide to go into the military as opposed to doing something else?

DR: A good friend of mine went in the Marine Corps; he actually turned out to be my brother-in-law, and I thought, "Well, I'm going to go in one." Someone told me to try the Army, so I tried the Army. Joey Wakefield's daddy that lived at Calera, he was the recruiting officer. That's how I got in the Army.

TH: And what did your parents and your relatives say about that?

DR: Well, my dad was dead, but my mother was kind of skeptical. She didn't say much. I don't think she wanted me to go, but I did anyway.

TH: What was going on in this time period in the United States? What was the need to go over to Germany?

DR: It was the Cold War then, but I was on active reserves when I got out, because of the Vietnam War. They were always pulling stuff on those camps in Germany. They would maybe throw a grenade in the middle of our meeting, or they would talk about North Korea was invading South Korea again, and we had to go over there, but it was just a joke. And roll call, I'll tell you what. We had one guy, his name was Henn, H-E-N-N. Well, Sergeant Lopez, he was the platoon sergeant, he'd get to Henn's name, he'd say, "Chicken. Chicken. Chicken. Henn." "Here sergeant." "Chicken, when I call your name, I want you to answer." And everybody'd start laughing. It was funny though.

I went in, I weighed 117 pounds, and after six weeks, I weighed 146, I believe.

But Elvis Presley. When you first go in the Army, you're restricted to base for six weeks, I mean you can't get off the base for six weeks. Well, he told the platoon sergeant, he said, "If you let me get me an Impala," a new Chevrolet, which that was the first year, '58 was the first year of the Impala, "I'll give it to you after basics." He said, "I can't do that Presley," so he didn't give it to him. And I remember one time, Elvis was over there getting a haircut, and you ought to have seen the officers' wives was over there picking up the hair off the floor. Really, what I remember about Elvis, and I told you about it, in Germany, just before he went back to the States, he came in the mess hall with a major and a captain, and they had on these bunny hats, which you wear in the wintertime, they looked like a bunny, and I knew who he was. And I walked over to the mess sergeant, and I said, "You know who that is over there?" "No," I said. "That's Elvis Presley." "No, it ain't," I said. "Yes, it is." He walked over, he said, "Oh, my gosh, it is, and my sixteen-year-old daughter will have a fit." Well, when he left, I just reached and grabbed that Army coffee cup from him. Lamont, Sargent Lamont, he said, "Give me that coffee cup." I said, "No." He said, "It's not yours." I said, "It's not yours either." He said, "What'll you take for it?" And I said, "Ten bucks." He said, "Okay." He gave me ten dollars for it. Now how would I have told anybody, "Hey, this is the cup Elvis drank out of?" "Oh, you're crazy." But ten dollars to me was a lot of money, because I think I may have been making \$150 a month then.

But there was another rock and roll singer there in Fort Hood. We went out to the field one day, and it was pretty cool. Well, everybody had on their fatigue jackets. And this one guy, I kept looking at him. He was red-headed, kind of thin head, but he didn't have his name on his fatigue

jacket. I thought, "I saw him somewhere." Well, he took it off, it said, "K-N-O-X." Knox, that was Buddy Knox, he was a rock and roll singer. He was an ROT second lieutenant, which would have been over Elvis. And I had saw a movie called *The Big Beat* with him and Fats Domino and Little Richard, I don't know who all, before I went into the military. But that got me, when Lamont took that coffee cup, gave me ten dollars for it.

Then after I left Germany, when I came back, I went over on a ship, USS Upshur, come back on the USS Rose, and that Statue of Liberty really looked good when we pulled in. Gosh. But let me go back to Fort Hood. When we left Fort Hood, we rode by train to Brooklyn and boarded a ship there. Some of those boys from New York, we had a guy named Dardones and a guy named Shimaleki and, at the end, a man named Mandola. Well, we was riding a train, one of them says, "What is that out there?" And I said, "That's a cotton field." "Oh, I've never saw one," he says. "Is that a cow out there?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "I've never saw a live cow." They was from New York. But it was exciting going over there. Saw the White Cliffs of Dover. And those seagulls will follow you all the way across that ocean, which is thousands of miles.

Like I said, when we had the alerts, we took off. You were liable to tear the side off of a building, but we got out of there.

TH: Tell me what your job or MOS was.

DR: My MOS was a tank driver. I drove a tank. I remember one day. Every year, we'd go 30 days to what we call Grafenwöhr, and Grafenwöhr was nothing but a desert to me. But it had a theater, and it had a canteen. You'd go to the theater, and there'd be bombs falling all around you. Well, one day we was up there, and we had, we were in tents, but we had concrete floors. Well, all of a sudden, there was an explosion. It knocked me down. I had just got up off the cot. It knocked me down and put a big knot on my side of my face. I didn't know what it was. Well, everybody run outside, and there was debris in the air flying up about maybe 200 feet back west of us. What had happened, the artillery was firing rounds, and they put a short round in the weapon, and it exploded in the middle of the tents, killed 17 GIs. And I remember that was on, I forgot what day, but two days later on Sunday, we all marched up a hill, and it was misting rain. They had 17 tables laid out with their helmets on them, and that broke, well, everybody. I started crying. Something you never forget. But then I don't know, one of the guys, I think he went completely bananas, and he was discharged. They filed charges, some of them was filed on for that, because the officers put that short round in, and it dropped in the middle of the tent instead of going over it. Something you never forget, something like that. And they said those phone lines when the United States found out about that, they were jammed over there.

But Elvis, you never saw him when he got off duty. And he was going with some girl, excuse me for saying so, but that was one of the ugliest women I ever saw. She drove a red and white new Lincoln. He started at Fort Chaffee, but then they transferred him to Germany. And I was told, I don't know how true it is, they stopped for lunch, the Army bus, in Waxahachie. He ate up at the bar, on a stool. They said after he left they roped off that stool, and nobody ever sat there again except Elvis. But I never will forget old Lamont, his face when he says, "Oh, that is him." But you know when it was over with at five o'clock, you never saw him again till the next day. He

was an active Jack, active sergeant, and he carried a clipboard around, and a lot of us thought he'd reenlist.

And what we done in those days is we would take like fruit cans, the big, I guess, fifteen and a half inch, fruit, peaches and pears, and cut the bottom out of them. Well, we would put them in our fatigue at the bottom and blouse them up. Those cans fit perfect down there. We done that all the time.

TH: What did you do that for, put those in your fatigue?

DR: It made you look better, made you look sharper. Let me tell you something. I went with a girl over there one time named Wooshi Bendernagel. She lived in Celle, which is the old capital of Germany. She told me one day, she said, "Why don't you go home with me?" I said, "Oh no." She said, "Buy my daddy of carton of Winston cigarettes, and he'll like you." Well, I did. Winston cigarettes cost every bit of a dollar a carton then. We went to the house; they gave me the family bed that night. I got up the next morning; he had spit shined my shoes. They had a tray of food waiting on me. And he started talking about he was a Nazi at one time, and he told me, "If the United States hadn't gotten in the war when they did, we would have took it." He told me that. And she took me down to Celle Castle, into the dungeon where all the torture chamber was, and there was some down there. Never will forget that. The younger generation over there at that time was friendly with us. The older generation was kind of, they didn't like Americans. I remember one time when we went to the field, and you would see mounds out there, "here lies so many Jews tortured by Germany," and all this, and you'd see a Nazi tanks burned out, out there, or VCRs, which were vehicles. I went in one of the old caves, the bunkers was concrete and steel, about so thick. Well, they were bombed anyway. And I found me two rusty German lugers in there, and I wish I had kept them, but I left them.

I remember there was 32 of us, 32 tanks. And we'd get in formation and go out in the field. When they let us go, we'd just take off all of us, and there's a lot of pheasants over there. I never will forget it, you saw a pheasant, you'd take off in a line, take off after those pheasants. That was so funny though.

In the little towns, women done most of the work. You'd see the women on wagons doing the crops and everything. They raised a lot of beets over there, or they did then.

Slot machines all over the corners of those little towns, like out here at the casino. And there's so many things that I saw over there and said, "Why don't America come up with something like that?" It's something you never forget.

TH: You were in the US Army for three years. How do you think that's affected the rest of your life? What you've done since then?

DR: It's made me more of an adult; I was a little crazy kid then. But I'm married with grandkids and great-grandkids, and I just love life, and I love Germany. Something you never forget.

What we would do is, we'd go down there, supposed to be pulling maintenance on the tanks. We'd lock ourselves in the hatch, nobody could get in. And we were right across the field from the baseball. We'd sit there and watch baseball games. We were supposed to be performing maintenance, but there was no maintenance to perform. But one day we was out in the field, and I was traversing a turret, making the tank gun go round and round. And lucky, one of the boys, there was three of us in the tank, punched me on the back, and one of those 90-millimeter rounds had fell, and it got hung in the turret, and it was bending, and if he hadn't got me, it would've blown that tank up, and I wouldn't be here. And we drove at night with cat eyes. You could see, but if you came up to a cliff, you couldn't see how deep it was. And we had one tank with three guys drive off of it, and it killed them. It was deep. Those tanks were going about a max was 35 mile an hour, but you do 35, you'd swear you was doing 100 in them, and I mean they'll turn around on a dime. Of course, that's 50 plus years ago, so I don't know what they've got now.

TH: How did you get to be the tank driver? Did you decide you wanted to do that? Did you have any choice?

DR: Well, they asked me to, and I said, "Yeah, I'll try it." They said, "Try it, you'll be one." I said, "Okay." Back to basic for a minute, they was always pulling stuff. They would have inspectors come in there. We was in the old barracks with wood floors. They saw a little piece of straw laying in a crack, "log on floor." They came in one day, it was the first inspection we ever had, and I was standing there, and the second lieutenant's name was Lockley, come by, and he says, "Robertson, are you clean?" "Yes, sir." "You ready for inspection?" "Yes, sir." He goes to my wall lock and reaches up over the front door behind it. "Must have come a dust storm last night." They would pull jokes on you. You had to pull KP. Every once in a while, I'd pull, everybody'd pull KP. Well, what'd they do, they would put a sign on your bed, a metal sign, saying KP, that way they would know to wake you up early. They would switch signs and put it on somebody else's bed. I got up one morning, I thought, "I'm not pulling KP." Somebody had done put one on my bed. Golly.

They had good food in the Army though.

I was talking about Lamont. He was very goosey. I remember one day I was in there, getting in line, going through the chow line, and somebody walked up to him and goosed him in the back, and he had a knife in his hand, and he hit me in the back with it. Didn't leave a big cut, but it scared him. It cut me. Golly. I've got a scar on my hand right there. I done on a tank. They told me, said, "You can get 25% on your hand." I said, "I'm not right-handed, I'm left-handed." Said, "Oh well."

TH: Noah's going to ask you a couple questions about if you see any student veterans on campus today.

NP: We were wondering what kinds of issues might people in the military be facing today that might be different from what you experienced.

DR: North Korea is the main one. Afghanistan. Even as old as I am, it's scary. I'm scared of that place, and I wish I could go back. I know a guy here that's fixing to go to Afghanistan. Look at

that hand shake. You never know when they're coming back again. I remember one time, after I got out of the military, I had a good friend come in from Vietnam, and him and another friend of mine and me, we met at the old cafe at First on Main, and we were talking. He was going back to Vietnam. His name was Eugene, but we called him [unclear]. I said, "You keep going over there, you're going to get your * shot off." We all laughed. Less than two months, he was dead. Stepped on a landmine, killed him. You just never know.

NP: So, besides North Korea, what else do you think has changed about the military since you were there?

DR: It's not as strict as it was, one of the main things. They're not disciplined like they were. That's about all I can think of.

TH: Do you see a lot of student veterans on campus? Do you feel any kind of bond when you see people in the military or students here?

DR: The only way I know it is if they had their military cap or something on. I should've wore my cap. I've still got my third Armored Division cap at the house, I wish I had worn it. That's the only way. If I see veterans, like I go out to the casino quite a bit. And I see them. Like I told you, I met that guy that was in the same little town I was in in Germany. We talked about 30 minutes. It had changed a lot, because I was tell him about the barracks I lived in, he said, "No, it's not the same anymore," said, "they tore those down and built a more modern barracks."

TH: So why did you get out of the military? How did you decide not to stay?

DR: I was ready to come back home. Right after I got out, I went to work at the Water Department. Coming back on that ship, sure was nice to see that Statue of Liberty. I was ready to come back. After I got back, I was ready to go back. I started to reenlist. I could have spent 20 years in there and just been 38 when I retired. I started out at \$79 a month, and I don't know what they start at today, but it's sure not \$79 a month, probably eight or nine hundred anyway.

We had one Brigadier General, he carried a staff around with him. You'd always know when he was around because it had a point on the end, and he'd throw it and stick it in a tree. I didn't tell you about the day we was in the field, and we split up. This side went here, this side went there. They said, "Okay, you guys, right here in this tent there's a map on the table. You guys come get it. You guys say, 'no they're not going to come and get it.'" We went up there, and we had a sergeant, his name was Carter, black man, a good guy. He said, "I'll show you how to get that." We were at Fort Hood, mind you, and the snakes are everywhere down there. "I'll show you how to get that map." He ran up there with a gun, hollering, "Snake bite, snake bite!" They just cleared out of the way, and he just walked in, got that map, walked off. Those guys got chewed out after that.

One of the guys, we was in the field one day, and they put a horned toad on his shoulder. He turned around and knocked the fire out of that guy. He said, "Don't you ever put one of them devil toads on my shoulder again." He was scared to death of them. He said they were bad luck.

We would go out in the field, and some of those second lieutenants would go in this little bunker and have their gas masks on. They had tear gas in there all over the place. We had to go in, take ours off, and tell them our name, our serial number, and our rank and everything. And a lot of times, they'd say, "I didn't understand you," and you'd be trying to get out of that tear gas. It was fine.

One thing about it, when you're in the armored division, you seldom ever walk. Probably half a mile's the most I walked there, up to the ammunition depot. But you'd pass them infantrymen, they'd just be falling all over the place. They were cheap over there.

I'm going to tell you, and I'll admit it, the first day I was over there, I got tipsy. I got drunk. I went to the alehouse where I was at, the football and baseball teams were the Braves, they were playing the [unclear]. I went to the game. Well, I didn't know anything about no German beer. I drank two bottles of German beer, and I was so sick, I nearly crawled all the way back to barracks. Come to find out each bottle 18.5% alcohol, which is a lot more than ours was. I never drank German beer again. And cigarettes was a buck a carton, like I said. Buck a carton. Golly. But a lot of the people, I went to a bar one night and passed out in it, and I woke up, and I was in a nice clean bed with a white sheet, and the waitress had put me upstairs in that bar. I was drunk.

There's a guy that lives at Caddo, [Oklahoma]; his name's Utah Nation. I went in with him. Well, he got discharged early because his mother, something was wrong bad, he was the only relative, so they let him out. I went one day down at the barber shop on South Ninth, got a haircut, he was in there. He said, "I'm going to tell you something," he was telling that Robert Markham, the barber, he said, "I'm going to tell you something about that little guy right there. He stood up in that military with the big boys." I said, "Oh yeah." He said, "He'd do anything they can do, and he was a little bitty kid." It was so funny.

I wasn't real close to Elvis, but I knew Elvis. And like I say, that mess sergeant went crazy. He said, "Oh my gosh that's Elvis, my 16-year-old daughter would have a fit."

You want to ask me anything else hon?

NP: Oh no, I think you answered all our questions, thank you so much.

DR: That's something I'll never forget.

TH: Do you talk to any of those guys today from your unit?

DR: Every once in a while. I went twice to Little Rock, we had kind of a reunion, I met them all then. But some of them have died since then. But now Willie Pruitt, Willie Shelton that lives in Ardmore, [Oklahoma], every once in a while, I see him over here and talk to him. I haven't saw Utah Nation in a long time. But when I started out, we started out at Fort Carson, Colorado, and then they shipped us to Fort Hood on a plane. I'd never rode a plane. And you know it's funny, when I went to Germany, I went over on the Upshur, didn't get seasick. Coming back, I had the bottom bunk, they were three high, and tell me, when you got somebody on that third bunk throwing up, and it's going all over your hand, you get sick. Be in there watching a movie, and

the chairs would just move down with you in them, and then move back. It's something you don't forget.

TH: Well thank you for sharing your story with us.

DR: Well, that's not much of a story.

TH: Well, that was helpful to people, to just know about your experiences.

DR: All I can say is God bless America. And Toby Keith put out a song about soldiers, about putting a boot so and so, and I agree with that song. I hear that and I stand up, and that "God Bless the USA" that guy put out. Brings tears to my eyes. Lee Greenwood.

And I was in North Hall [at the university], working North Hall when 9/11 happened. They had it on TV, and I remember seeing a guy way up in one of those Towers, had on a black suit, jump out the window. I can't believe that happened to us.

That got me though, when I saw Buddy Knox, and he took off that jacket. He sang a song, "Party Doll," that was one of the only songs he ever put out, "Party Doll."

Let me say one more thing. Our platoon sergeant was a black man. His name was Pinkney. One time we were up on the field, and we'd go forward in them tanks and then back, some general told him, "Those tanks move just like a cobra." Well, that stuck in his head. Even me, I had a black satin jacket with a big cobra on the back, and he said, "I love that, troop." I said, "Thank you sir." Everybody was wearing cobra jackets, because that general made that remark. And then General Westmoreland we had, he was a colonel at the time. Before he went to Vietnam, he was a lieutenant general, which was three-star.

My nephew, he spent time in the Marine Corps, and I could tell by the pictures he sent his mother, military has changed a lot. He had photos inside his door, women, nude women. You wouldn't do that when I was in there. Give you article 15. And when we were expecting it, we called it inspecting, Inspector General would come in. Pick at your clothes and all this. There's any contraband, they'd put it in plastic bags, and we had a big 50-gallon barrel at the back with oil in it about half full. They'd drop it in a bag, that's how they got out of that. [unclear name] Whiteside was a company commander over there, he was a captain. I remember one day, and what did that guy have, and oh he had a, they was doing inspection, he had a sword in his room with a swastika on it. Captain Whiteside took that out on the granite stairways and just screamed and hollered and beat that sword all to pieces. He fought the Germans over there, that's why he done that.