

Transcript: Wendell Samuel

Good morning. Today is Tuesday, May 24, 2011. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Wendell Samuel. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Samuel is at his residence in north Austin. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to share your stories with us. It's an honor for us. First question, sir, I always like to start with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

Wendell Samuel: I spent most of my time in school. I went two years of college. I used to be a member of the NAACP but my parents didn't want me in it so I had to get out of it. I tried to accomplish the same thing after I got out of high school. I never had any connection so I came in the service and doing that.

Where was it, sir, that you were born?

Wendell Samuel: Darlington, South Carolina.

South Carolina. And did you grow up in a large family?

Wendell Samuel: Yes. I did.

Tell us a little bit about your childhood. Did you have a lot of brothers and sisters? That sort of thing?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, I did. All of them are dead. Died when I was quite young. And, actually, after 1984, I was alone. I had no family. And my brother's killed. One of my brothers was killed in 1934. And one was killed in '38.

They weren't in the military?

Wendell Samuel: No, no, no.

Just killings there in South Carolina?

Wendell Samuel: Yes. I had one brother that in the military and he was blowed up in a, what do you call it? A land mine.

A land mine? Sure. He was older than you?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, he was.

And that was in World War II?

Wendell Samuel: Right.

What happened with your other brothers that were killed?

Wendell Samuel: They were killed by some, what do you call? I forgot what you call those people. They were enemies. They shot my next older brother through the face. The first one was done on purpose.

How old were you when that happened?

Wendell Samuel: I was three or four. I can't give full details because they kept it hushie hushie around me.

So you don't remember that as a child?

Wendell Samuel: I remember it, you know. I don't remember exactly the whole detail of everything.

Understood. So how old were you then when you decided you wanted to go in the Air Force? Or were you drafted into the Air Force?

Wendell Samuel: I was 17.

And what was it that brought that about? Were you drafted or did you sign up?

Wendell Samuel: No, I tell you, I was disgusted about a grade I made in college in one of my classes and I was going downtown in Columbia, South Carolina, and I saw this sign on the street post saying, with Uncle Sam's hand out there, "We want you." And I said, "There's somebody who wants me, so I'll join the Air Force."

What was it that made you want to join the Air Force and not the other branches?

Wendell Samuel: Because I saw this sign and, I don't know if they still have 'em around or not, but they had a sign out with Uncle Sam on it with the tall cap and red and white suit and pants and stuff, shirt and pants. And I saw that and the Air Force recruiter was next door to the sign and he twinkled his finger and told me to come on over. And I went over and that's when I joined.

So you signed up pretty much right there on the spot?

Wendell Samuel: Right.

Now at 17, did you have to get permission from your parents?

Wendell Samuel: No, I didn't.

You didn't? Okay. So you signed up. How long was it then that you were on your way to basic training?

Wendell Samuel: About a week.

About a week. And where did they send you?

Wendell Samuel: To a base here in Texas. San Antonio. Lackland Air Force Base.

Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.

Wendell Samuel: That was in San Antonio.

Yeah, it is. Was that your first time away from home?

Wendell Samuel: Yes. No, it wasn't my first time away from home.

Did they send you on train?

Wendell Samuel: Yes.

They did? Tell us then, what your memories are of arriving in boot camp? What was boot camp like for you?

Wendell Samuel: It was something I'd never been through. An experience I'd never had. Enjoyed every bit of it.

It was desegregated training at the point, right? 1950?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, it was. Now, I came in the service when there had not been any segregation. But a little further, they came out and said that there wouldn't be anymore. And I was stationed at Shaw Air Force Base in Sumpter, South Carolina, when they had broke up all the segregated settings that was on these bases. And I was stationed down in the Black area and they moved us from the Black up to the top.

Was that a strange feeling to have segregation end like that? Was it something that you thought you'd ever see?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, it was. It was all at once. Really it was by force. Thank God for force.

And when you were going through your training in San Antonio and it was desegregated, did everyone get along pretty well?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, everyone got along real well.

And at that point, did you already know what your specialty was going to be?

Wendell Samuel: No, I didn't.

So tell us about that. Tell us about how you got your specialty in the Air Force.

Wendell Samuel: Well, I was sent, you know, different squadrons had to pull KP and stuff, and I went to work in the dining room and I fell in love with it the first day. I had two or three days of KP and I went right back. I told that cook that I wanted to be a cook. He said, "You do?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well you're the first one I ever heard of said he wanted to be a cook." "Well, I do." And that's how I got started.

What was it that you really liked about being a cook? What was it that attracted you to that?

Wendell Samuel: Well, a man's mind, if you can feel a man's mind, you can pretty well control that mind. I wanted to be able to be in control.

So you told him that you wanted to be a cook. How long was it before they were able to get you that specialty?

Wendell Samuel: It was about six months later.

So you finished basis training. Did they send you to a cook school?

Wendell Samuel: No. I didn't go to a cook school. Not on my own. I went after I was in the service. I was shipped to Paris, France. That's when I went to cook school and I paid my own way.

So, let's jump back a little bit then. So you finished basic training and they told you you're now going to be a cook.

Wendell Samuel: No, they didn't tell me that.

They didn't tell you that?

Wendell Samuel: No, they didn't tell me that.

Six months later.

Wendell Samuel: Yes, six months later.

So what was your specialty then when you graduated boot camp?

Wendell Samuel: They put me in. I was a, what do they call those? I used to work in the orderly room. Clerk typist. And I went to a . . . that's what I did. And then later, they were short, they needed another cook and they said I had to _ in order to become a cook. _ "I don't mind that. That would be easy for me."

So then, you spent six months as a typist before you finally got the assignment to be a cook? Where did they send you when you became a cook?

Wendell Samuel: _

What was it like being a cook?

Wendell Samuel: Oh, man, that's the greatest feeling in the world, knowing that you have all these hands to feed and you want to do the best and watch what happens. It was the best service there's ever been.

Did you have a lot of long days being a cook? Did you get there really early?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, I did.

What time would you normally arrive at the chow hall?

Wendell Samuel: Before three o'clock, a little after.

In the morning. So you get there really early. When would you start serving breakfast?

Wendell Samuel: Six o'clock.

So you'd have to be there by three o'clock to get things ready to go by six?

Wendell Samuel: Yes. Well, it didn't take that long to prepare for breakfast. But you had to prepare yourself for that day at noon. For the noontime lunch.

And how many would you be cooking for?

Wendell Samuel: About fifteen hundred.

So that's a lot. Did you ever run out of food?

Wendell Samuel: No. I never ran out of food because I learned how to save and put other food out that wasn't on the menu. And like today, we have spaghetti and meatballs, and whatever we had from the day before, I would prepare it for the next day. But it would be a different menu. In other words, I had three meals in the one.

How many men worked in the chow hall that you were in?

Wendell Samuel: Twelve.

Twelve? I imagine too, that's there's a lot of cleaning that has to be done.

Wendell Samuel: Yes. We had to do our own cleaning and everything. But in the after, they started hiring civilians to come in and do all the cleaning and stuff in the kitchen.

Run the scullery to clean all the pots and pans?

Wendell Samuel: Yes. Now that part we did ourselves. And the rest, when they hired these civilians to come in, they did the dining room. Picked up the dishes.

Sure. When would your day normally end? What time would you get to go home?

Wendell Samuel: According to how many I fed and how many times they came in. I really didn't ever check the time 'cause it didn't make me any difference. I wasn't married. So I had no family to go home to.

So you would arrive at the chow hall at three in the morning, but when would you get to go home?

Wendell Samuel: Sometime it would be three and four in the afternoon.

Three and four in the afternoon. So at that point, there was somebody else to take over for the evening meal?

Wendell Samuel: Yes.

Where all were you stationed during your time in the Air Force?

Wendell Samuel: I was stationed at Moses Lake, Washington. And I was stationed at Lake Charles Air Force Base, Alexandria Air Force Base in Louisiana, both bases. I was stationed at

two bases I can't remember right offhand. I just remember this one. I had gone to Vietnam three times.

Tell us a little bit about that, sir.

Wendell Samuel: First time I went to Vietnam, I was stationed in Binh Thuy, down in the Mekong Delta. That was the worst place in the world. We were overran. It was in '59. We were overran, captured prisoners of war there at that time until we were saved by Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, when they came in and cleared everything out, cleared all the Vietnamese out of there. That was about two and a half hours. And then, I was at Tan Son Nhut, not Tan Son Nhut, what was that base the Red River run through?

I'm not sure.

Wendell Samuel: Slipped my mind. I can't remember but I've been to Vietnam three times. One in the Mekong Delta, and the other one, I'm trying to think of that second. I was there in '63 and '64. This is when I got hurt. In '63.

How did you get hurt?

Wendell Samuel: They blew the officers' club up and I was in it. And a number 10 can fell and hit me on my chest and knocked me unconscious, under the table.

Do you remember much of that?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, I do. I remember getting up, standing, and someone helping me out. To get out of there. But they had already blown the dining hall up. But I don't have anybody that remembers me being hurt there but General Joseph H. Moore. And he's from Atlanta, Georgia. I haven't been able to get in contact with him, 'cause I'm trying for the Purple Heart.

Okay. How different was it cooking in Vietnam than it was back in the States? Pretty much the same?

Wendell Samuel: The cooking was, but you had to be very careful and particular. You couldn't let anybody around. You know they had those Vietnamese, some of 'em had 'em working around here and everything. And I didn't trust anybody around anything that we were cooking.

Afraid they might poison it?

Wendell Samuel: Yes. I was a very particular cook.

And I was told, sir, that at one point you also cooked for President Johnson, is that right?

Wendell Samuel: That's correct.

Tell us a little bit about that.

Wendell Samuel: Well, I met him through General Crow. That's why I thought you were Colonel Crabtree because I was putting stuff together for them to help me with this Purple Heart. How I got acquainted with LBJ was he came and he had a party out at Bergstrom Field. He wasn't no longer the president then and that's how I got started.

So that was in 1968?

Wendell Samuel: Yes.

Were you stationed at Bergstrom at that point?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, I was.

Tell us then what it was like cooking for him?

Wendell Samuel: It was just like cooking for anyone else except that you knew exactly what he liked. So you had no problem.

What were some of the food items you cooked for him?

Wendell Samuel: He liked barbeque. And he likes his ribs and he likes his chicken. And he ate a little beef, not that much.

Did you have a chance to talk with him very much?

Wendell Samuel: No, I didn't. I was too nervous.

Too nervous?

Wendell Samuel: I mean, a guy from a small town talking to the President of the United States.

You were mentioning in Vietnam being worried about poisoning. Did they have the Secret Service agents with you when you were cooking his food?

Wendell Samuel: Oh, yes! Yes, yes, yes.

Tell us about that.

Wendell Samuel: They watched everything you picked up to season with. And they would check it. And sometimes they would check it before you would. But most of the time when I was in there, I wasn't in there that long, but the whole time they was. I was glad to get away.

Did they let you pick out the food items, the ingredients, or they'd bring them to you?

Wendell Samuel: Well, sometimes they would bring 'em to you but most of the time they wanted to know what you needed.

And then they'd go out and get them?

Wendell Samuel: Uh-huh.

I've read that that's still common today, that the Secret Service does a lot of the, they don't want to let people know where they're getting the food from because they don't want it to be poisoned so they keep it very secret.

Wendell Samuel: That is very common, I'm sure.

So how long, sir, were you stationed at Bergstrom?

Wendell Samuel: I was stationed there three times.

Three times.

Wendell Samuel: Yes.

Did you like Bergstrom?

Wendell Samuel: Yes I did.

Tell us what Bergstrom was like back then because I think a lot of people now just know it as the Austin airport.

Wendell Samuel: It was the best place to me to be at. All the bases I ever been in my life, and I became familiar with everyone around there, and I knew everybody in the city, and I just had a good life there. It was just like living at home, and I was away from home.

So is that why you're in Austin today? Did you decide to stay in Austin because of Bergstrom?

Wendell Samuel: Right. I said wherever I was at, I'm going to go retire here 'cause this was my last place before my retirement time was up.

And you got out in 1971?

Wendell Samuel: Right, in 1971.

After over 20 years.

Wendell Samuel: Uh-huh.

That's great.

Wendell Samuel: I wanted to stay in but my health wouldn't let me.

Well, over 20 years is a long time too.

Wendell Samuel: Yes, but I really, I would have legs today if . . . I don't have no legs anymore. I can't do nothing.

Do they ever let you go in the kitchen there where you're residing now and help out?

Wendell Samuel: No.

No? You could probably teach them a thing or two though right?

Wendell Samuel: Oh yes, I could. Very easy. I was a dietitian too.

So have you ever let them know that?

Wendell Samuel: Yeah, they know it.

They know? Because it's one thing if they're cooking for just anybody but cooking for you, being a chef and a dietitian, you kind of know more about . . .

Wendell Samuel: Oh, I cooked for Eisenhower too.

Oh, you did?

Wendell Samuel: Yeah, when he was in Paris.

Tell us a little bit about that, sir.

Wendell Samuel: Now that wasn't much. I just went there a couple days as the guy that was cooking for him had took sick. And they sent me over there to cook until the guy came back. I cooked for him about two or three weeks. And, man, to me he was just like, what was his name? Bill Clinton.

President Clinton?

Wendell Samuel: Yeah.

Did you get to talk to Eisenhower?

Wendell Samuel: I talked to him but not that much.

Not that much. So you were nervous then as well I guess.

Wendell Samuel: Not as much as I was with the president.

So when you were cooking for Eisenhower, it was after he'd been president.

Wendell Samuel: No, I cooked only before. He was a general then at Orly Field in Paris.

So this was like 1950 or '51?

Wendell Samuel: Or '52 or '51, yeah.

So right before he got elected. That's interesting. Did he like being in France?

Wendell Samuel: Yeah. He was all right. He was a lot better when he was president because he had thorough knowledge of everything.

Did you like being stationed in France when you were there?

Wendell Samuel: Oh, yes I did. I loved it.

What would you say was your favorite place of all? Still Bergstrom?

Wendell Samuel: Yes, it's still Bergstrom.

Did you ever get married?

Wendell Samuel: Yes I did. I been married twice.

When you first went in the Air Force, you were single, right?

Wendell Samuel: Right.

Your first wife, what did she think of the Air Force?

Wendell Samuel: She loved it.

She loved it.

Wendell Samuel: But my first wife, she stayed with me the whole time that I was in until I retired. In fact, she married me four months after I was in, six months after I was in the service.

After you got in. That's great. And at home, did she have you do all the cooking?

Wendell Samuel: No, I wasn't home that much 'cause I did a lot of cooking out.

So at home, would she cook?

Wendell Samuel: Not that much. There were times that I would cook whatever meal that would be. Sometimes it would be alike, sometimes it would be different. And I didn't eat that much.

What was your favorite thing to cook?

Wendell Samuel: I cook anything very well. I really had nothing special. Everybody liked everything I prepared. I was real pleased.

That's great. So now you're in Austin, and you said you don't cook anymore. They don't let you in the kitchen?

Wendell Samuel: Nah.

You think by being a chef that it makes you kind of a picky eater because you feel like when you're eating something, you could have made it better?

Wendell Samuel: Yes I do.

That's great. Well, sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to let me interview you today. I don't know how much Ms. Thompson had told you but these interviews are being saved in our archives here at the Land Office. They're being saved so future generations can hear these stories and historians can hear these stories. We have documents that go back to the Spanish Land Grants in the 1600s and 1700s. So your interview will be added to those archives.

Wendell Samuel: Now since we're interviewing, is there any way you can help me with the Purple Heart deal 'cause I've been struggling, fighting. They can't find any records of me from '63 to '64.

From when that officers' club was blown up?

Wendell Samuel: Yes.

Well, sir, the best thing I would recommend is that you get a hold of your congressman's office. Have you tried to do that?

Wendell Samuel: No, because, okay. I haven't tried because I didn't want . . . I didn't want anyone to think different. You don't quite understand the reason why I didn't call on them. Not

because I didn't, I know J. J. Pickle real well. In fact, I can, that's okay. I just thought about that. Because J. J. Pickle was one with President Johnson when I prepared for his party.

Yeah, he was congressman in Austin then.

Wendell Samuel: Yes.

That's right. The thing is though now, sir, is Representative Pickle is deceased, and he hasn't been in office in a long time either. You'll want to get a hold of your congressman in Austin, and where you reside, I believe it might be Congressman McCaul. But you should ask Ms. Thompson and she can put you in touch with his office because they are the ones that will usually start the paperwork process for you, especially if you rate that Purple Heart. They can help ask questions and kind of help you navigate the bureaucracy. Because it is a big bureaucracy, especially when you're trying for an award that happened decades ago. So I would contact them, sir. I would start with the congressman.

Wendell Samuel: Okay. I'm sorry I wasn't much help but my mind has been just shriveling away and shriveling away slowly but surely. I just couldn't remember all the bases I've been on.

No, sir. It was . . .

Wendell Samuel: I know there's a lot of them.

It was a good interview. I enjoyed hearing your stories and I've eaten in a lot of chow halls over the years, and I definitely appreciate someone who can cook all that food for that many troops.

Wendell Samuel: Oh yeah, and I won three food service trophies from different bases.

That's great.

Wendell Samuel: I won the Best Food in the Air Force.

That's excellent. It makes me hungry just thinking about some of those chow halls. They had pretty good food. Well, sir, again, I want to thank you for taking the time today but, more important, want to thank you for your service to our nation. On behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone here at the Land Office, we want to thank you for your 20-plus years of serving our country in the Air Force.

Wendell Samuel: All right, you're welcome.

Yes sir. In a couple weeks or so, we're going to be sending you copies of this interview on CDs as well as a nice letter and certificate signed by Commissioner Patterson.

Wendell Samuel: All right.

All right, sir, you take care and have a good day.

Wendell Samuel: You too.

All right, sir, take care. Bye bye.

Wendell Samuel: Bye bye.