

**Voices of Protest Oral History Project (EVOP)**

**Butch Chavez (Air Force veteran, Vietnam War)  
Narrator**

**Brandy Gomez  
Interviewer**

**Part One of Two Part Interview**

**October 15, 2010**

**Colorado State University-Pueblo  
Administration Building**

**Interviewer:** This is Brandy Gomez. I'm interviewing Butch Chavez, on October 15, 2010. This interview is taking place in the administration building of CSU-Pueblo. The interview is sponsored by the CSU-Pueblo University Archives and Special Collections, and is part of the Southern Colorado Ethnic Heritage and Diversity Archives Project. I want to confirm that Mr. Chavez understands that this interview is being recorded, and that this recording will be preserved at the CSU-Pueblo University Archives.

**B.C.:** I understand.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed with us; we look forward to hearing all your information. Now can you please state your name for us?

**B.C.:** I'm Butch Chavez.

**Interviewer:** And when and where were you born?

**B.C.:** I was born May 8<sup>th</sup> 1946, here in Pueblo.

**Interviewer:** And, did you grow up in Pueblo also?

**B.C.:** Yes, born and raised, and got into a lot of trouble.

**Interviewer:** And have you just lived in Pueblo all your life?

**B.C.:** No, no.

**Interviewer:** Where else have you lived?

**B.C.:** I've lived in Denver after I got out of the service and Littleton, in Aurora. And then do you want military foresight of it as well?

**Interviewer:** We'll just do the part we're on and then we'll go on the...

**B.C.:** O.K., O.K.

**Interviewer:** And then, what jobs have you had?

**B.C.:** I worked at Martin Marietta, working on the Titan 3C Missile. So, I did that for about 5-6 years. And then I went into the real estate business. I was in the real estate business for, 38 years. Up until just last year.

**Interviewer:** And, what do you do now for a living?

**B.C.:** I'm retired.

**Interviewer:** Retired.

**B.C.:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Enjoying the nice retired life. And, we know that you're involved in many veterans' organizations now.

**B.C.:** Yes I am.

**Interviewer:** And, can you tell us a little bit about those organizations?

**B.C.:** Yes, I am a past Vice President of American Legion Riders. It's a motorcycle organization. It's not a gang. We are just a group of veterans that like to ride motorcycles, and we all have the same passion, and that's helping veterans. One of the major things we do is raise funds to buy care packages for soldiers overseas, and to have a little extra money to help soldiers out in need and, and veterans as well. Lately, it seems like, while the soldiers deploy, the families are having problems financially, with utilities and stuff. So, so we kind of help out if we can.

**Interviewer:** That sounds like a wonderful organization. Very [inaudible]

**B.C.:** Yes it is.

**Interviewer:** It's nice to get your enjoyment in, along with helping people.

**B.C.:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And what were you doing before you entered the service?

**B.C.:** Uh, nothing. That was one of the problems. I graduated from South High School. My parents had always instilled in me that I would never go to college. I don't know if it was the money portion of it, or they just felt that way. So, I graduated, and just partied throughout the summer, until my folks said "that's got to stop", and they were going to kick me out. So I said, "well I'm gonna show them", so I joined the Air Force.

**Interviewer:** And, so that's how you entered the service?

**B.C.:** Yes, Yes.

**Interviewer:** And so you enlisted. You weren't drafted.

**B.C.:** Well I was close. And I figured if I don't do something, I was going to be drafted.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**B.C.:** I was pretty high up on the list.

**Interviewer:** So you just took the initiative, and just went [inaudible].

**B.C.:** Yes, actually my good friend, Gino Blagg, I called him. We called each other cousins. We weren't really related, but Mickey Two-Feathers... Martinez, we all just decided to go in on what the Air Force called the buddy system, which... well I could say a little bit more about it, but I won't.

**Interviewer:** It was kind of nice to have somebody there with you huh?

**B.C.:** Yes, the three of us. Yes, the three amigos.

**Interviewer:** The three amigos, huh?

**B.C.:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And, why did you choose to go into your specific branch of service?

**B.C.:** Well we did do some research, and we all agreed that we felt that we could get a position in the military that would be something we could use when we got out because the Air Force, that's what they push. The Army pretty much gears their recruits towards fighting. And, it's not that I was afraid. I just thought, well I'm not going to go to college and hopefully I can learn a trade.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**B.C.:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And, when did you depart for training camp?

**B.C.:** September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1964.

**Interviewer:** And what were the training days like?

**B.C.:** Rise and shine at a 4 am. You had to clean the barracks; literally sometimes you end up using your toothbrush to clean the floor. A tooth brush. I'm not saying one that you use to brush your teeth...

**Interviewer:** Right.

**B.C.:** But, it just depends. You know they're pretty tough on you, and it's to instill discipline in each individual. In a way it's kind of geared to weed out the undesirables because they'll break.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**B.C.:** And then, when that was done we had calisthenics. We went out and ran four miles or five miles and exercised and then we would have breakfast.

**Interviewer:** Sounds like a lot of hard work.

**B.C.:** Yes, Yes.

**Interviewer:** Where did you serve?

**B.C.:** My first station for basic training was in Lackland Air Force Base, and that's eight weeks, if I remember right. From there we went out to Amarillo, Texas for tech school. I trained to be an aircraft sheet metal repairman, maintenance and repair, which I enjoyed. I mean, once I started classes I realized I liked it. And, so we were there another eight weeks, learned about what makes an airplane fly, and how to do repairs. When an airplane flies, it pulls what they call "G's". They fly so fast that they

sometimes pop rivets, and they rip skins. Underneath the skins there are ribs and spars, and they'll crack those, and so those have to be maintained.

**Interviewer:** Wow. That must have been a lot of work.

**B.C.:** Yes. Yes. Yes it was.

**Interviewer:** We're going to talk a little more about the combat that you experienced. What were some of the emotions you experienced while out in combat?

**B.C.:** I wasn't actually in combat, you know, fighting, and firing a weapon. I did qualify in basic training on M-16. But the Air Force really doesn't teach you how to fight. And that's one of my major PTSD issues, my anger. I'm still very angry that they didn't train us the way they should have. And then they put me smack in the middle of a combat zone. Basically, a lot of my training was geared towards just keeping the planes flying, to support the Army, and the Marines, and what have you. So basically, my combat experience was dodging and, and trying to get away from mortar fire and rocket fire.

**Interviewer:** It would have been nice if they offered the training...

**B.C.:** Yes I, I gave [the Archivist] some pictures of our air base to show that we were under fire. That's basically the scope of my combat.

**Interviewer:** So do you still kind of experience, because you said you were shot at.

**B.C.:** Yes

**Interviewer:** Do you experience, like when you hear loud noises?

**B.C.:** Yes I do. One of the major triggers for me, is...one night, I'd gone up to the 71<sup>st</sup> evac hospital. We had just been hit, and I was about thirty feet from one of the planes that got destroyed by

mortar, and it knocked me out for a while. So, when I woke up, I had blood coming out of my ears, just a little trickle. And so, they sent me up to the evac hospital. The triage nurse said not to worry, that it was probably just a mild concussion, and they said, stick around, we need your help. So I just sat there, and finally she told me, that there were some helicopters coming in that they needed help unloading. Well I thought it was just medical supplies or something, and the first chopper came in, and it was uh [gets emotional, fighting back tears], excuse me, [wipes tears].

**Interviewer:** You're Ok. You're OK.

**B.C.:** It was loaded with dead or wounded, [and] body parts. We began unloading, taking them to triage. And this went on for two and a half hours. It's helicopter after helicopter. It was then that I gained a whole new respect for the Army and Marines, because I used to get into a lot of fights with them. They would tease us, because they were kind of jealous. We weren't in combat, so they would call us wing-nuts, and sissies, and pussies, and what have you. And so, nobody's going to tell me that without me smacking them in the face, you know.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**B.C.:** So, I would get in a lot of fights. Some of the guys we'd carried off were still alive, and talking. A lot of them would ask me to please write their mom or girlfriends. I didn't know who they were [wipes tears]. I'd just tell them OK, I would do that. And so, when I hear the sound of a Huey\* (and there's a lot of difference between the sound of a Huey helicopter and more modern helicopters), it's a trigger, and if I'm not careful, it sends me into a rage. But I've learned to cope with that.

[Inaudible]

**Interviewer:** I can only imagine how hard...

**B.C.:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** that is to have to deal with every single day. So, it's...

**B.C.:** Yes, with a lot of helicopters around, these days.

**Interviewer:** Yes. I'm sure you can still see those images...

**B.C.:** Yes

**Interviewer:** in your head...

**B.C.:** Yes I can.

**Interviewer:** every single day. And you said that you wrote to their families [inaudible]

**B.C.:** Well I, I wasn't able to. I told them I would...

**Interviewer:** Right. [Inaudible]

**B.C.:** just because they were injured. Some were mortally wounded, and...

**Interviewer:** But you really couldn't know them.

**B.C.:** There was no way for me to get an address, I mean, you know, to ask...

**Interviewer:** Exactly.

**B.C.:** them at that time, so...

**Interviewer:** Did you form any friendships with anybody else in there?

**B.C.:** Yes, of course. I had some good friends, and one of them was shot and killed by a sniper.

We had to work 24 hours a day, just about. I mean, we would work at night and when we worked on our airplanes, you had to light it up to be able to work on it. So they got these big, big lights, and generators, and that just makes you an easy target for a sniper and that's what happened. We were

working on an airplane, and he was shot in the head by a sniper. I got a good buddy now that lives in Michigan; we keep in touch by phone.

**Interviewer:** It's probably nice...

**B.C.:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** to have someone to talk about what you went through.

**B.C.:** Yes. Yes we do. He worked on the older C1-C147's, which had a lot fabric instead of aluminum. That was his specialty, working on fabric. I would be sent over sometimes, to Camp Holloway to work on helicopters. So I formed some friendships with some Army guys. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find any of them.

**Interviewer:** Right, I assume it's pretty hard...

**B.C.:** Yes, it's hard remembering names after 40 years.

**Interviewer:** Exactly.

**B.C.:** I can see their young faces, and wonder what they look like today and...

**Interviewer:** And after everything you experienced...

**B.C.:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** it's hard to even remember if those...

**B.C.:** Oh it is.

**Interviewer:** minor details. Yes. And, what are your post war feelings? Like, what did you feel when you came home?

**B.C.:** Well, that's another trigger for me. Happy. I mean, I was excited I was coming home, coming back to the real world, we called it. And, we had a nice flight back. Luckily, we came back. I think it was on Continental Airlines, and we landed in San Francisco, mid-evening I would say. And as we pulled up to the concourse, where the planes park, you could tell there was something going on inside. You could see out the windows. So, we kind of thought, "wow", you know, this is our welcome home. It wasn't. It was an organized war protest, and [gets emotional wipes tears], [says to himself gosh, I thought I was ready for this. Myself and a Marine were the first off the plane. There were several guys behind us, but they ended up throwing buckets of urine and human feces all over our uniforms, called us baby killers. Of course we started to fight, and the MP's stopped it immediately. They said, well they have a permit to protest. And they escorted us to our connecting flights. I asked them if I can get my duffel bag and change. He said "no your duffel bag's already on the plane." So I went to the bathroom and did the best I could to wipe off my uniform...but the smell...and so, when I got on the plane [gets emotional and wipes tears], nobody said anything (inaudible). They just, all looked at me, just staring at me. And that's the way the flight was on the way home. My folks weren't exactly happy with the Vietnam War either, and even though my dad was in World War II, he seemed nonchalant, I don't know if that's the proper term, about me returning home.

**Interviewer:** He didn't seem to (inaudible)

**B.C.:** Yes. I had some high school friends that got college deferments to... at that time it was Southern Colorado State College and P.C.C. campus. I knew how to get to the cafeteria, so I went there to wait for him at the noon time. This first time, he smiled and he was obviously glad to see me, but I don't know if it was that he was uneducated or what, but he hollered "hey the baby killer's home". We chatted for a while, but as I looked around, I could see anti-anti war protest signs and it bothered me a little bit, because I really didn't know. When I was in Vietnam, I knew what it was about, and I thought I

was doing good, fighting against communism for their freedom. But I really didn't know what was going on back home.

**Interviewer:** You didn't expect to be...

**B.C.:** I didn't expect to be. So I...

**Interviewer:** tortured like that.

**B.C.:** Yes. So I just stayed home. I had a 30 day leave but I only took a week of it. That's about all I could take of the silence at home. My mom and brothers, and of course they were always at school, so I just kept my leave short and went on to my next base.

**Interviewer:** So you continued to be in, in the Air Force afterwards?

**B.C.:** Yes, one more year. One more year after that I went to Georgia Air Force base, in Victorville and worked on the F4's. It's a training base for pilots going to Vietnam. It was during that time period I just decided, I'm not going to tell anybody, ever, that I was in Vietnam.

**Interviewer:** So you just kind of kept it to yourself afterward?

**B.C.:** I kept it to myself for pretty much 30-35 years. I would have my nightmares and flashbacks and... I wouldn't, I didn't tell my wife. I didn't tell my son or daughter as they grew up.

**Interviewer:** Now when your wife talks to you about the war, is she very supportive and (inaudible)?

**B.C.:** Well during our early years, we had some tough times. She was the strong one to stay with me for so long because, I wouldn't open up. About 2000-2001, she had enough and she says "you

know I love you very much. Either you get help or I'm divorcing you, it's one or the other. So that's when I sought help. Actually I waited another year, year and a half, before I went to the V.A.

**Interviewer:** That's a long time to go with suffering some, for such harsh conditions.

**B.C.:** Even at that time I didn't think I was suffering. I just felt this is the way I am. I just kept to myself.

End of part one.

\*(nickname for the UH-1 series helicopters)