

TRANSCRIPT—CARROLL LETELLIER

Interviewee: CARROLL LETELLIER

Interviewer: MARCUS A. MORTON

Interview Date: March 27, 2013

Interview Location: Capers Hall, The Citadel, Charleston, SC

Length: 34 minutes 26 seconds

MARCUS MORTON: We're here today on the 27th of March with retired General LeTellier from the United States Army, and my name is Marcus Morton, and we're just going to talk a little about his time in the service and what led up to that. Now, General LeTellier, I understand that you've spent a fair amount of your childhood on The Citadel campus.

CARROLL LETELLIER: Yeah, I moved to The Citadel campus when I was 3 years old in 1931 until I was a Cadet in 1945 and then graduated in the class of '49, and so I was here from 1931 to 1949 on the campus.

MM: Okay. And how do you think that influenced your decision to attend the school here or?

CL: Marcus, I didn't know there was any other school. (Both laugh.) I had a father that was teaching here and a mother that loved it here, and I enjoyed it. I, to this day, I enjoy going to parades here. I guess I enjoy the martial music and the environment and the regimentation—I wonder whether I would have passed elsewhere if they didn't lock me up in barracks and make me study at night.

MM: Yes sir, and, uh, and when you left The Citadel, you went straight to Korea?

CL: No, no, I had a year in the States before I went to Fort Riley, Kansas. They, back then, had a Branch Immaterial Basic Course, which all the Army West Point Officers had there; of course, there were some still going into other services from West Point, and then there were

all the other ROTC Officers that were given regular commissions, so it— it was a great opportunity to meet your peers and be able to know many whom you would work with in years to come. You hardly went anywhere you wouldn't meet someone who weren't in that course; there were about five hundred of us out there.

MM: Okay, and so from there—

CL: Well, from there I went to Fort Belvoir to the Engineer Basic Course and was there until the summer of 1950 and was ordered—we were a little bit unhappy, all the married officers got first choice; being a bachelor, we got the assignments that were left over—so I was going to Japan for a two-year tour in Japan. On my way to the West Coast, I was in Manhattan, Kansas, which is where I went to church when I was at Fort Riley, and the Rector of the church said, he said, “I see there's a war going on.” This was early Sunday morning of the 24th of June. And I said, “Where's that?” I was thinking, golly, where could there be a war? He said, “In Korea,” and I said, “Where's that?” I did not even know; I had never heard of Korea in my life, but in short while—in less than a month—I knew where Korea was: I was there.

MM: Yes, sir, and obviously, I mean, you know you had some different experiences than most people would have in the States, can—can you tell me a little about when you got there, you know—

CL: Well, when we got there, we went from Sasebo, Japan, which is on the southern end of the islands of Japan—very nice naval base there—and the Japanese had a ferry boat going from there to Pusan, and so they loaded us all on the ferry boat and they were afraid something might be happening in the Straits of Japan—or the Straits of Korea, depending on what part of the world you're from—and so we went over by convoy searching our way across, so we went very slowly, but we got to Korea and Pusan, now Busan, the next day and we had been issued

weapons in Camp Coe—which was in Yokohama, which is where we landed in Japan—and they were full of Cosmoline, so we were still cleaning Cosmoline off of the weapons when we got there. A Lieutenant came aboard and warned us that there were many, many of the refugees coming and that the North Koreans were infiltrating among the refugees, and so we had to be careful. Well, no one could tell a North Korean from a South Korean, so we asked him how about some ammunition. He said, “Well, I’m sorry, you’ll have to solve that problem for yourself,” so we all had weapons and no ammunition. (MM laughs.) So we sent out a party to the dock area, and sure enough they found ammunition for both the M1 rifles as well as the carbines, so we did have a little ammunition once we began to go north. It was an interesting experience.

We got on a train there in the harbor of Pusan very slowly. The train commander did not know how to speak Korean, the Korean train engineer and those people did not know how to speak English, and so every time the train would stop, the Army commander on the train would get a party, which I was always a part of, and we would go out and secure the area close to the train, and all of a sudden the train would begin to move and we would all run and catch the train, and fortunately we didn’t leave anyone along the train track, but we went on up to the 25th Division rear, which was in a town called Waewan, it’s where we joined the 25th division.

MM: Alright, so whenever you linked up with the 25th in Korea, did you immediately take on the assignment in the engineering battalion or did they assign you different duties?

CL: No, we immediately joined the 65th engineer battalion, which was the organic battalion of the 25th division. And we were there overnight. And the next day the S2, the intelligence officer, came and got three of us. We had come over from Japan together and we had all been together at Fort Riley and at Fort Belvoir. And now we were together there in the 25th division and 65th Battalion. We got in the Jeep, and he said he had orders to take us up to this

unit. The other two knew that it was a Black engineer company. I did not know it until we were on the way up there. And Captain Smith, the S2, said, "I've orders that if they need one officer to leave, you, Lieutenant LeTellier; if they need two officers, [I'll] leave all three of you." So it was obvious that I was going to be assigned to the 77th engineers. Those of you that are familiar with the divisions know that the divisional engineer battalion back then had four line companies, one for each regiment and then one in reserve. This battalion had only three line companies and a separate Black engineer company, which was the 77th, which was equivalent to their Delta Company and I was left in the town of Sanju and actually joined the battalion—the company I should say—there.

MM: And you served your whole tour?

CL: No, I was with them until December, which was [when it] ended—July till December. The Chinese came in the war and the C Company of the 65th Battalion had gotten beaten pretty badly. They had one officer wounded and two officers that were taken prisoner, and we got down just north of Seoul and the C Company of the 65th—what was left—was on the Imjin River. And I was told that I was to join the C Company as a replacement because we had more than enough officers in the 77th because any Black engineer officer that came to Korea was normally assigned to the 77th, and instead of having three line platoons, we had four line platoons to accommodate the officers.

MM: And whenever you got to leave Korea at the end of your full tour there, did you go to Japan or did you come back Stateside?

CL: It was an interesting thing. Let me fill you in a little bit. After that I stayed with the C Company's 65th until April, I then got called in by the battalion commander. Again, we were in the defense of Seoul, and he said—offered me a drink—and I told him, "I don't drink," and he

told me I ought to have a drink. It was Scotch, and I haven't liked Scotch since. And he said, "I'm going to reassign you back. I had in the interim become the commander of the C Company 65th, so he sent me back to the 77th as a commander. I was still a First Lieutenant, and he thought that maybe that I was really happy in C Company. We had a bunch of young men who were from the Dakotas who knew how to use hand tools and some from Hawaii that also knew construction. I guess they'd been cutting pineapple, but they knew how to use tools. We could build bridges and they knew how to really operate hand tools.

So, anyway, I was sent back, but he saw I was a little disappointed, so he called the A Company and the B Company commanders and asked who their best Lieutenants were—Lieutenant Pitts up from A Company and Lieutenant Buller from B Company. So we all arrived at the 77th at the same time—three White officers. I stayed with the 77th as the company commander until I rotated in August of 1951. In going out, we were in Inchon listening to someone who had a transoceanic radio, and so we were listening to the peace broadcast. They had just started talking about peace broadcast, and we were sitting there waiting for the boat to Inchon. And we had to wait for the tides to come in there, and they had tremendous tides. You can only go out—you could almost see the tide move out of the mud flat and come back in again. So they sent us out to the Marine Lynx to transport us back to the Sasebo, Japan, again and back. Then you stayed in Sasebo for several weeks until you got orders for Stateside assignment. If you hadn't gotten it in about two or three weeks, you came back anyway. The disadvantage of that was that you had to go to Camp Stoneman, California, and wait there until you got orders.

So I—fortunately I got orders to go to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, before I left. So I—that was sort of an interesting thing about the promotion cycle. I got my company for the C Company at the 65th before the other three officers got their company, and they all got promoted

to Captain, and I was still a First Lieutenant. So I was wondering whether I parted my hair on the wrong side. It later turned out that you could not get promoted; the local rules were that you could not get promoted until you were 23 years old to Captain, and also there had to be a vacancy at that time. Fortunately, I got promoted on my birthday, because if you got to Sasebo on your way home and left Sasebo, you got out of the command environment, and therefore you were no longer eligible for promotion. It was sort of the luck of the draw. And that's about how we got out of there from Inchon to Sasebo and waited there about two weeks before we came back on the nice little troop ship called the *Thomas Jefferson*.

MM: And I understand then that you of course stayed in, and I understand that you did two tours in Vietnam. Do you think that Korea prepared you in a lot of ways for that or do you think it was so completely different—your jobs and the wars itself?

CL: Marcus, the first tour in Vietnam was quite different from the second tour in Vietnam. But Korea was pretty much a linear war, and you knew pretty well where the front lines were. And it was a uniform war. They wore uniforms, and you wore uniforms—the identification of friend and foe—except for refugees that were coming out of Korea. It was what I called a linear war. The wars were fought along lines, so it was tagged as a police action, which is a pretty good description in both tours. My first tour in Vietnam had only seen one or two Americans killed; they were out in the countryside someplace and were ambushed so we didn't—we didn't think too much about it. It was about like someone having an automobile accident. It was that infrequent, so it was we used to say if there was an ambush in a certain area, the next day that would be the safest area in country because seldom did lightning strike twice in the same place. (MM laughs.) The second tour was a bit different in that I left Vietnam on the first tour the first day that the Vietcong attacked American facilities. They attacked the air base at Bin

Hoa and Pleiku, several of the up-country fire bases. The second tour, they had a full-fledged warfare going. It wouldn't be one or two people ambushing an American Jeep. It would be a group, and you didn't know whether they were farmers by day and warriors by night by or what. It was sort of a black pajama war where a lot of the people wore black pajamas particularly in the night. Again, it was sort of the luck of the draw: you didn't know whether you were in danger or whether you weren't in danger. I think I sort of digress a little bit. We had a young West Point officer who was in Hau Giang province, which was a very, very scary province. His name was Reed Jenson, class of '49—I think of '49—of West Point, and he had the feeling that we'd never pacify this country by flying helicopters from A to B: we'd have to get on the ground. So he was driving back. He'd been to Saigon from Hau Giang, which was on the Cambodian border. He was driving back through War Zone C, which was the CuChi rubber plantation area, and he was ambushed and killed. It later turned out that the ambush was set for the Vietnamese province chief, but he got delayed, so they just decided they would pick the next chief down the road. That was sort of the luck in the draw that Reed happened to be the next person down the street.

MM: Yes sir. And whenever you left Vietnam, later you had a tour in Lebanon. I don't know too much about that. I don't know that's taught too much. Can you tell little bit about your experience there?

CL: In 1958 I was in Fulda, Germany, and the—I had just been promoted to Major, and I commanded the 58th armored engineer company that supported the 14th armored cavalry that was patrolling basically the East-West border. And the battalion Regimental Commander of the armored Cavalry Regiment called me in one night, and I knew that the IG inspectors were on the base and that I was the only company that had not had an IG inspection. So I was back and forth in the company trying to get ready for it. And when the Regimental Commander called me in, I

said, "Lord, what have I done bad now." So I went over to see him and he said, "Close the door."

And I said, "Yes sir." He said, "Is there any cogent reason you can't leave here this evening?"

And I said, "No sir, no reason I can think of." He said, "Call this number."

So I called the number, and this guy sort of frantically said, "When can you get here?"

And I said, "Where are you?" And he said, "I'm in Höchst, Germany, which is right outside of

Frankfurt." And I said, "Well how do I come?" And he said, "Come in full field gear, and get

ready." I told him it would take me about two hours to pack and then take me another two hours

to drive there, that I could be there about four hours. He said, "No, no, no—come in the

morning." I said, "Fine. I'll be there in the morning."

So we didn't know exactly what was going on during this period of time. An airborne brigade had deployed, and a Marine Regiment had deployed around the Beirut, Lebanon, area.

We were in the support forces, and I became executive officer of the 299th Engineer Battalion.

We sent one company down by air; the rest of us got on a train and went to Bremerhaven aboard the troop ship for the construction battalion, and we took about four or five days to get there.

And the ironical thing about it [was] the headquarters' Company Commander of the 14th Cavalry

and I shared a mess together at Fulda, Germany, and we were sitting around one morning and

he—in the mess hall having coffee or something—and he said, "Why don't we go down to

Lebanon and straighten this thing out?"

When we landed in Beirut, who was standing at the end of the pier but the Captain Al

Shehab. He spoke fluent Arabic. The General and Commander of the Lebanese forces was

named Shehab, and General Paul Adams took him down as the aide-de-camp. So he said,

"Where have you been?" So I spent a good while down there at the Olive Grove just north of the

airport. And 1958 in Lebanon was the first time we had come in contact with the—some of the

more aggressive Arabic people that were looking for a home—Palestinians. And the Watermelon Circle was a circle going into the airport that was overlooked by the Palestinian camp on top of the hill. The only problems we had there were times, occasionally, when we'd get some erratic fire, somebody shooting at us, but nobody was ever hurt. Spent about two months down there.

MM: And then I know that—at least I think I know, but every time I've said that I've been wrong. (Both laugh.) From what I understand, then, you, later in your career, you took over the Corps of Engineers for the Army or—

CL: No, I was not the Chief of engineers—that was a three-star; I only made the two-star. Later in my career, I was in charge of the South Atlantic Division, which was my last assignment, which controlled the construction of both military construction and civil works in the Southeastern part of the United States. The districts under our control went from Wilmington, North Carolina, around the southern coast to Florida, across Florida to Mobile. So we had an interesting assignment in building the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. We didn't finish it while I was there, but we had some exciting moments during that period. It was politically a sensitive [project] and very much supported by very strong group of Congressmen from Alabama and Mississippi, people like Senator Stennis and Senator Sen. Jamie Whitten—Congressman Whitten from Mississippi, excuse me—and they were very strong people in Congress and that's why that waterway was finished.

MM: I know you had a long and successful career, evidenced by obtaining two stars, but out of everything that you did in your service, what would you say was your most memorable command or favorite time period and position that you held in the Army?

CL: Marcus, all of it was so different. Two things that I've got to say—as number one, I used to counsel the young officers that if both you and your wife like the service, stay in. And if

your wife likes it and you don't, it'll work—still stay in. (Laughter) And, believe it or not, the next possibility is that you both don't like it but you honestly look at the world around and say, “[I can't] do any better than here to support my family,” and that'll work. You don't have a problem of coming home at night and say, “I had a miserable day,” and saying, “wait till you hear about mine—it was just as miserable.” But if you like it and your wife doesn't, get out.

The first thing I can say is I had a wonderful married life and wife who enjoyed it and looked forward to getting the next assignment. I really don't know if I have a favorite—it was so diversified, it's hard to compare one assignment to the other. I had 27 months in combat in Vietnam, and I had 14 months in Korea. If you want to count the three months in Lebanon as a sort of an interesting deployment, I kind of feel that's what we're here for. That was the reason we were in the service, and so I ended up pretty close to 40 months of my—my 26-plus years in the service in combat.

I sometimes got the feeling that the Army didn't want me particularly in the States because out of my 27—26-27—years, I had 12 of it overseas. They kept me overseas and we went to War College. Instead of going to Army War College, I went to Navy War College; I said they were trying to tell me something. But things worked out very well for me. I think the most enjoyable of it all was troop command, getting command of troops, and particularly where other branches were your bosses, not engineers. For example I had the Engineer Battalion, the 10th Engineer Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Division, in Germany, and you became a part of a team. And I think where the unit was only six months long, the six months of Fulda, Germany with the 14th armored Cal; that had a different feeling than the infantry. They had a mission along the border there, and they took it very, very seriously, whereas the infantry was back in the rear except in the combat period. The 25th division, the 3rd Infantry Division, the 14th Armored

Cavalry—I was lucky that most of my experience was in combat units and not in support units, but in working for the people on the front line. So, as far as what was my favorite assignment, I would have to say any of the troop command.

MM: Well, sir, I've tried to get a broad idea of your service time. I'd really like to open it up for anything you would like to specifically talk about or clarify or something that I might have missed. I'm sure that I have. 26-plus years of service—

CL: One of the most disappointing things was that I ended up with a medical problem—cancer—that I was unable to stay. I came up with heel marks all the way out. I enjoyed my service. However, I must say, that I went to work immediately for an engineering company, which made me feel real good about my college training at The Citadel. Whereas I had been reasonably successful in the military, I then went into the private sector because of a medical problem and became reasonably successful in the private sector. You kind of wonder after 26 years away from engineering: How are you going to work in the private sector? And we found out that probably just as challenging, whether it was just as rewarding or not. Fiscally, it was much more rewarding than the military. But to be able to look back at two services, both in the private sector as well as in the service of the country, when you've got both experiences it's very rewarding in your later years.

MM: We definitely appreciate your service. It's very kind of you to give the interview, and, like I said, it's astounding the experiences you've had.

CL: Life has treated me well, Marcus, and it really—it's been a great run. And if someone told me I'd be 84 years old sitting here talking to you— (Laughs.) It's interesting to note that I used to walk by this building on my way to school. I went to public school here in

Charleston when they were building this building, and now they tell me they've got to tear it down.

MM: Yes, sir, that seems to be the way of things.

CL: This used to be marsh. Marsh came right up to the Lesesne Gate. And so they were loading piles and things like that, but apparently they're not enough piles under some of this building as it settles, which is causing the problem. But the Capers Hall was built at the front and the addition was added later on. And the—it's hard to believe that looking around the campus now that when I came to the campus there were two barracks, old Alumni Hall, which is now Grimsley Hall, Alumni Hall was replaced by Grimsley Hall. Nothing on this side of the chapel, library, Mark Clark Hall as far as faculty quarters— There was a General's house, not the one they built for General Clark, but a two-story that they tore down. One duplex that's still there, the commandant's quarters, and the senior professors', and then that one four-plex, Murray hospital, and Old Coward's Hall, the mess hall outside of the support buildings that were mostly wooden where McAllister Armory is now. That was what was here, so the campus really expanded during World War II when there was such a demand for people to get military training and be commissioned. A bit of a diversion, maybe, from what you're looking for.

MM: No sir, no sir. Like I said, it's interesting to hear about different experiences and how things have changed. And you know, it's really interesting with your engineering background and having seen this building over time be created and—

CL: Some of them have been created and re-created during my lifetime. (Both laugh.)

MM: Yes sir.

CL: Well, I hope this has been what you are looking for, Marcus.

MM: Yes sir. I really wanted to give you a platform to lay out some of your experiences.

CL: It's been a happy life both in service and out of service, and I attributed a lot to this school. It gave you good background. And then, as I said earlier in the interview, to have a wife who enjoyed the military and moving as much as I did makes life a lot easier.

MM: Yes sir, yes sir. Once again, we thank you for your service and your time.

CL: Good, Marcus.

MM: Thank you, sir.

CL: I enjoyed it.

—END OF INTERVIEW—