Transcription: Casey Wilkes

Today is Wednesday, August 25th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Mr. Casey Wilkes. This interview is being conducted by phone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Wilkes is at his home in San Antonio. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us.

Casey Wilkes: Thank you, my pleasure.

Yes sir. First question 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.

Casey Wilkes: OK, well to start off with actually I was born in New York, born in New York City, born and raised there, and lived there most of my life, and it was from there that I actually joined the Marine Corps. It wasn't right out of high school, believe it or not I had gone to work – let me back up just a bit – I had actually gone to college and had a half a year of college and dropped out, and went to work in a department store and there was a promotion came up and I went to see the boss about putting my name in the hat for the promotion, and he said you know, he said I'd love to promote you, Casey, but you're 1A, you're eligible for the draft at any time, and I just can't train you and have the military take you and then I've wasted all that time and money.

And this was back when the peace time draft was in place.

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, that's when we were in the draft, right. Of course they couldn't get away with that, but that was the story back then. So that's when I realized I had to either get that military behind me or somehow, so a group of us went down and decided to join up, join the Marine Corps on the buddy program. There was six of us and we all went to leave Carsall on the same day, and we did. We went down on the train, took the train down together, and got off in Yamsey, South Carolina, and that was the last time I saw these guys. So the six of us were broke up from that point, so so much for the buddy program.

How long did you have between the date you signed up before the day you actually shipped off to boot camp?

Casey Wilkes: Good question, I really don't remember. It seems to me it wasn't that long, it was probably about two weeks.

Because you felt, it was pretty certain then that you might be drafted at that point because of your –

Casey Wilkes: No, it was just a case where I was still 1A and I was eligible at any time, so no one really knew at that time. You didn't know if you would or you wouldn't, so I figured well look, let me just get it behind me.

You said you were born and raised in New York. What part of New York City?

Casey Wilkes: In Brooklyn. I was born in Brooklyn and then lived in Queens most of my life.

OK, and did you have any family connections to the military service?

Casey Wilkes: None.

None, OK.

Casey Wilkes: No, none whatsoever.

So what made you choose the Marine Corps?

Casey Wilkes: As I said there was a group of us, there was six of us altogether, and we all decided that would be the great thing to do. We were going to be heroes. So that was kind of a great thing to do at that time.

And this was in 1960?

Casey Wilkes: In 1960, right.

OK, so tell us what basic training was like in 1960.

Casey Wilkes: Well in 1960, as I said, we got off the train in Yamsey, South Carolina. We were just raw civilians, and the drill instructors that took advantage of that, screaming like I never before heard in my life, and got right in my face like I never had before in my life, and I said what in God's name did I get myself into here? But it turned out, it worked out pretty well. So I made it through boot camp, and I guess the big thing to remember about boot camp is the drill instructor is, one drill instructor the very first day wanted to impress us with the fact that you know, he was in charge. And I didn't question that. I guess he had the feeling maybe someone else did. And he ripped off his shirt and showed the scars that he had from Korea. He said if any of you want to take me on, come on, come on, step up, come on out, come and take me now. And obviously nobody did. But that kind of set the stage for what these guys, these guys were gods. So and then going through boot camp, I guess the one big thing everyone remembers is the obstacle course, and that's where you're training, you're training, and just when you think you can't do anymore, you do a little bit more and they squeeze every little bit out of you. Everyone said the same thing and I've heard it time and time again ever since, I think the best shape I've ever been in my life was then after I got out of boot camp.

Sure, you're constantly being worked out and you're not eating any junk food or anything of that sort, and dressed out.

Casey Wilkes: That's right, no puggy base, nothing.

That's right, it's pretty hard core, and I think it's still that way today.

Casey Wilkes: Although there was, I'm sorry, I was gonna say that there was light moments, and at that time everyone smoked, you know, light 'em if you got 'em, so we did, and one of the things that they had inside, I still recall to this day, they had the silver wrapper that the cigarettes came wrapped in inside the package, and I took and I folded the silver wrapper and I made two silver bars like lieutenant's bars, and I put 'em on my utilities, the uniform, and I put it on and I stood up, and this is while we were in boot camp and we had some free time to clean the gear

and shine your shoes and doing that stuff, so here I am horsing around making lieutenant's bars out of cigarette paper, and I put them on and someone hollered out ten-hut! And now that was the word that the drill instructors told me anytime any officer came in, someone, the first one to see him screamed attention, and this way obviously alerts the drill instructor that somebody's in the squad bay. So they saw me, screamed attention, and he came running out and of course I hid the thing, I took it off right away, and he said who, who? And the guy who hollered it said I'm sorry sir, I thought I saw someone but I guess I didn't. So fortunately nobody got in trouble for it, but I still remember to this day I was shaking in my shoes, saying oh my God, don't point me out, impersonating an officer, I could see it all coming down.

You'd get some drill in from the drill instructors for that. I was going to ask, too, when you got there in 1960, that was not I guess all that long after the Ribbon Creek incident that happened at Paris Island. Did you know anything about that or was that ever, had you heard anything about that?

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, I did, I knew about it. Oh, it made the headlines in the newspapers, so we were well aware of it, all of us. On the way down we had talked about it, and no, we really didn't think that, well, that's not gonna happen to us. That happened to those guys, that's not going to happen to us.

It was an isolated case where a drill instructor was drunk and marched his platoon out into a creek in the middle of the night and I guess four or five recruits drowned and the horrible, I guess almost a low water mark on the Marine Corps in terms of basic training, so I don't think anything like that happened before or definitely not since. But because you were there, because I think that happened sometime in the mid- to late-50s, so it was close to when you got there.

Casey Wilkes: Yes it was, yeah. And the one thing that they did mention several times was that after that, they apparently Congress had passed a law that you could tell the Congressman, if there's any problems like that, tell your Congressman about it. So several times they mentioned, if you want to call your Congressman, you call your Congressman. You think I'm being too tough, you call your Congressman. So we heard that a couple of times. That I think came as an outgrowth of the incident back in '56, yeah. Fortunately we didn't have that.

What were most of the men like in your platoon? Where were they from and kind of some of their backgrounds?

Casey Wilkes: Well as I say, we were a small group from New York and most of them were from the South, a lot of them from West Virginia, Virginia, Georgia, but as a matter fact, going back, I think I may have mentioned to you, we have our 50-year reunion coming up, and so we're going back to see a graduation, and it's October 7th we're going to go see, it's going to be a graduation just like we had 50 years ago, so a whole group of us are going back. Somehow we located most of the platoon, Platoon 159, he found us all – not all of us, but most of us.

Well that'll be something.

Casey Wilkes: That'll be different.

That'll be neat to see that and I think as much as some things have changed there, I'm sure a lot of things have not changed.

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, I'm anxious to see that. Now one thing I should ask you, too, is that I was a pickup, and that was kind of you were looked down on as a pickup in a platoon. I started out originally with the one platoon, and I ended up, I got pneumonia, and standing at attention, I said sir, I don't feel well, and he came over and felt my head and says good God, he says you've got a fever, get over to sick bay. So I get over to sick bay and it turned out I had like 106 fever and they put me in an ice cold shower, freezing cold. I'll never forget that. But I ended up in Buford Naval Hospital for two weeks while I got on the mend. So I fell out of that platoon. Obviously they kept going. And then I was a pickup for this new platoon.

So yeah, you get a whole new set of drill instructors and I'm sure that wasn't fun.

Casey Wilkes: No, completely different. And the one thing I should mention while I'm in the hospital, the Red Cross lady came around and she had the paper, you have to write home and let your family know you're OK, because back then we didn't have cell phones or anything like that. So she had a paper and a pencil, and then she charged me a nickel for the paper and then I think the stamp was like 6 cents or something, I don't remember what it was. So I'd already sealed the envelope and I didn't realize that she was going to charge me for the paper, so I went and I asked for another one back, another enveloped, and I put a P.S. on the letter to my family, do not contribute to the Red Cross.

Yeah, that's pretty horrible.

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, they charged us in the hospital for the paper, and to this day, I will not give to the Red Cross, and my family didn't and I don't either. Salvation Army, USO, but not the Red Cross.

I've heard those stories, too, from troops during World War II. They talked about how there were field messes that were set up by the Red Cross near combat zones and they were charged for coffee, yeah, that's kind of unbelievable.

Casey Wilkes: Well, it stayed with me. To this day I refuse to give to the Red Cross no matter what.

Sure, I don't blame you. That makes a distinct impression. So when you were in training that whole time, did you know what your MOS was going to be? Had that already been established with your recruiter?

Casey Wilkes: No. No, we didn't have that option. I had asked for biological and chemical warfare. I kind of thought that would be fun, but obviously I wouldn't qualify for that. But I did end up in communications.

Was that based off your score on your test?

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, the GCT. Yeah, I took the GCT and based on that score they put me in communications. I was a radio operator and then from there I went to the message center. I think I was in radio probably about two weeks and then went to the message center, and I ended up as a photographer.

Where did you do your radio school training?

Casey Wilkes: I never went to school. I never got that far. Right there on base, it was Camp Geiger as ITR.

OK, it was Camp Geiger in North Carolina.

Casey Wilkes: North Carolina, yeah.

So you graduated from Paris Island in South Carolina and then your next duty station was at Camp Geiger.

Casey Wilkes: Exactly.

And then eventually you went to two-six.

Casey Wilkes: Two-six, 2nd Battalion, 6th Marine.

And they were there at Lejeune at that time?

Casey Wilkes: Yes.

Tell me a little bit about what Two-Six was like when you got there.

Casey Wilkes: I was very surprised. They had brick barracks. It was lot of different. I'd been living in Quonset huts and things like that. It wasn't bad. There was like 80 guys, well 40 bunk beds, and 80 men to the squad, and it was, I thought it was very nice. It was well kept, the grounds were well kept, because we kept it. But I think it was very, very nice. I was very impressed with it.

What were your memories of Jacksonville and the surrounding area?

Casey Wilkes: Oh yeah, we did spend out nights in Jacksonville, and that was the first time I ever had a hush puppy in my life. I had no idea what they were. And we spent many, how do I phrase this, a drunken night in Jacksonville, yep.

When was the last time you were back to Lejeune?

Casey Wilkes: Oh golly, I haven't been. I've never been back. Coming up this will be my first visit back to Paris Island, so I just have never been back to either place.

I know it's a little bit of a drive from Paris Island to Camp Lejeune, but if you get a chance you'd probably like to go back and see it. Jacksonville I think has grown a lot. The last time I was there was in 2004, but I did a tour on active duty there with Five-Ten, and what I think you might find interesting is that all the battalion headquarters buildings, the CP's, are the old brick-style barracks, have been converted. So those H-style brick barracks are where all the battalions have their individual offices and you can tell in each one of those they used to be old squad bays, because for example let's say you walk into the S4 shop, it's a big, huge, open area and then there's a couple of offices down at the end of the corridor where you might have the individual S4 officer or the alpha or whatever, but everybody else was out in the big kind of opened up area. They built probably, it looks like probably sometime in the 80s, and then even today

they've built more of the barracks that look more like motel-style barracks. They are three-story tall and each room, there's only two Marines usually to a room –

Casey Wilkes: Really. Oh my god -

They share a head that connects to the room next to them. So there's four Marines usually that will share a head. So you definitely have much more privacy than what you were in.

Casey Wilkes: Oh yeah.

But those buildings are all still there so you could go back and Two-Six very well might be actually in the barracks that you lived in. They just converted all those into battalion headquarters.

Casey Wilkes: That's amazing.

But I'm sure you'll remember all that going back there.

Casey Wilkes: Oh yeah, I'm sure I'll have flashbacks, yeah. I don't know how widespread you're going to use this or if you're going to edit this at all, but talking about the privacy, for privacy and things like that, the very first time when they put you in the shower with 40 other guys, it's like you're talking about a weird feeling, and then the strangest thing is when you went into the restroom, you walk into the head and then six commodes there all out in the open, and you just sit down and do your business, and I tell you, I think I was constipated for three weeks. I just couldn't sit there while someone else is sitting there across from there watching me.

It's a little different, but after a while you kind of get used to it I guess.

Casey Wilkes: Exactly. Oh no, you finally do get used to it.

So what was the operational tempo like for Two-Six when you got there? Were you in the field a lot? What was kind of a typical week or month like for a battalion?

Casey Wilkes: Well, not really, we were in the office a lot and we definitely had field training, we definitely did. But I would say probably maybe one week for every three months we would go out into the field. So it really wasn't a whole lot at that time. We were gearing up when I was in, again in Lejeune, we were gearing up for the two Viegas cruises. I cruised down around Puerto Rico and back, and then one Mediterranean cruise, a Med cruise. So it seemed like we were always gearing up getting ready to go somewhere.

And how long were those deployments? Were those six month floats or shorter?

Casey Wilkes: The Med cruise was six months, but the Viegas cruise I think was only like three months, two or three months. It was fast.

And then I know at some point you ended up at Guantanamo Bay. I was wondering if you could tell us how all that came about.

Casey Wilkes: Sure, that was right after the Med cruise. We had gone to the Mediterranean and did some exercises with the NATO troops and things like that, and then when we got back, we

were heading back to base, and we figured well, the cruise is over. And having been on two other cruises, we know the routine. You pull into port, you unload everything. Well, we pulled into, it wasn't Borham City, it was in Virginia. I can't even remember the base there. In any event, we pulled in and we were standing on deck watching them bringing stuff on board. Well wait a second, this isn't right. We just got back from the Med. What are we doing? We're supposed to be off-loading, not on-loading. And we were taking on supplies, and after they had loaded everything up, probably the next day or two days later we were out to sea and that's when we learned that it was starting to heat up between the U.S. and Cuba, Kennedy and Khrushchev, and they found the missiles and then they were talking about we told the Russians to take the missiles out. The Russians came back and said no, we're not going to take them out. Then they said well we did take them out. First of all they're not missiles, and now we've got proof, we've got these satellite photos, we're showing you the proof. So they went back and forth probably for a couple of months, no, I wouldn't say a couple of months, a month or so, a couple of weeks, and then what happened was it ended up that again, as a photographer, I was the battalion photographer, so if we were to go make any landings or anything, I was the guy who was going to encode the messages and send them on. So in the Navy, only ___ officers had access to the crypto, we were the photographers. As an enlisted man, you couldn't be a photographer, however, in the Marine Corps they didn't. I guess they took anybody they could. They got me, so I was the, even though I was enlisted, I could still be a photographer. So the traffic started getting so heavy going back and forth as the situation heated up that they called me into the, they allowed me into the Navy comm room and let me start translating and encoding some of the messages going back and forth. Interesting is that one of the messages from our battalion commander since we had just come back from the Mediterranean, they were sending messages back about the battle plan, how we were going to invade Cuba, what we were gonna do, and he sent back a message saying that he made a recommendation that 2nd Battalion 6th Marines be the first ones to go in since we were already battle trained and we'd just come back from the Mediterranean, so we were ready. And I looked at this message and said, am I nuts? I'm going to send this message? Well we did, we sent it, but fortunately it worked out we didn't have to. But so we sent the message, but when the set up the blockade, they officially announced there was going to be a blockade. We went to sleep that night and when I got up the next morning and I walked out on deck, and it was, it's hard to describe and unless you were there you really can't appreciate it, if you got up on deck and you looked either side of the ship from left to right, there were ships lined up as far as the eye could see. I had no idea that there were that many ships in the United States Navy. Amazing. I mean just from left to right and lined up in perfect military formation. Now how the heck you do that on water is beyond me. But they had every ship was lined up in perfect military precision all across, you talk about a blockade, this was truly a blockade. So that was kind of just an eye opener to me, and I only wish I had a camera to take pictures of it because that's the one thing I regret. I was so impressed with that when I went on the deck that morning and saw that lined up, it was just truly impressive. So well, you know the rest of the story. Finally they backed down and the blockade went away and we went home.

When all that was going on, did you think that war was imminent? Did you think it was gonna happen?

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, we did. We did, and again, I was in the message center, and they would pull me in to do some more crypto, then I'd go back to the message center, and they would do unclassified messages and that stuff. So yeah, and that was the scuttlebutts, I mean we were ready to go, it's gonna happen. So we really thought it was.

Did the battalion commander or XO, did he ever address the entire battalion and tell them kind of what was going on, or was it all just kind of through the rumor grapevine?

Casey Wilkes: It was all pretty much through the grapevine. There really wasn't a lot of big mass meetings or anything like that, no.

And on board the ship, and by the way, do you remember what ship you were on?

Casey Wilkes: I was on a couple. I was on the USS Cambria, I was on the Spokinaw was the communication ship. That's where I did the crypto was on that one. The Spokinaw, the Cambria, the what the heck, there was about four or five different ships.

So you were on a ship separate from the rest of the battalion when you were doing the cryptography?

Casey Wilkes: No, well yeah, but then we had, there were groups of us that were there as well. It wasn't just me, maybe 20 or 25 of us. Not all of them were in crypto. They were all doing different things.

So how well do you think the average Marine aboard one of those ships, how much news were they able to get? Were they able to listen to the radio at all?

Casey Wilkes: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah, they had radio and we had pretty much free access to getting mail coming in, getting magazines, and they had the ship's report of the day. I forget, every day they printed out like a little mini newspaper from the ship, and that pretty much had a lot of the news in it as well.

And at that time, what was your rank? Were you still Private PFC, or - ?

Casey Wilkes: No, at that time I was a lance corporal. And then when did I get promoted to corporal? I left, got out as an E4 which was unusual, because usually you would get out as an E3 after three years, but I can't remember exactly when that happened whether it happened before or after.

Tell us a little bit about the cryptography because I think that's kind of interesting and I think most people probably don't know much about how that worked. Can you kind of summarize for us the process of what you would do with the messages?

Casey Wilkes: There was a couple. You would have, there would be an official message form that's filled out from the commanding officer or whoever it is that's sending the classified message. They're all classified. So he would fill out the form and then we would take it and it depends on where you were. If we were actually in the field, and we were away from the ship or on land, I had mechanical things, I actually had strips of paper with random letters and numbers that you would put together. Each day it was a different comm name. It would change every day. So it was all truly an annual operation. It take probably a good 20-25 minutes to encode the message, and the same amount of time to decode one as well. And then on board ship, we actually had these little machines which we thought were state-of-the-art, and I see them today and I've got a couple of books on cryptography that show the machines we used. That's ancient stuff today. My golly, it's come so far today that I would have no idea how they do it today. But it actually was some semi-electronic equipment which was much faster, but it still required some

setup to do, so once you got the message, you translated it, and once you translated it to a code, you would give it to the radio operator or whoever would send it. You'd get the response back and then you would translate that, untranslate it and send it back to the commanding officer or whomever.

So the code changed every day. I guess that's what made it so difficult then in theory for the Russians to break the code or -

Casey Wilkes: Oh exactly yeah. It truly was random. You couldn't make rhyme or reason of it unless you had the key.

And so I imagine that was probably pretty fascinating to see all the stuff that you saw, and like you said before, it was classified so it wasn't something you could talk about with other Marines and that sort of thing.

Casey Wilkes: Right.

Because of that I would think that you probably had a better overall view then of the picture of the situation, at least with the tactics and stuff than most other Marines would have had.

Casey Wilkes: Not really. I probably had a better, yeah, it was probably better than the average, the guy who was on KP or something, but -

So you at least knew what your commanding officer was sending out.

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, but I really didn't know the whole picture. I still knew bits and pieces. I didn't know the overall.

And then at some point did you guys go ashore at Guantanamo?

Casey Wilkes: No. We never did. Just stayed part of the blockade, turned around and came back. That was it. Now I should mention, too, back before the blockade and go back to the Mediterranean a bit, we did the exercises and we hit Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Turkey, hit all along the Mediterranean there, and obviously you do your landings and then you go back on shore leave after you connect that night. So practically everywhere you went in these small towns and things like that, so and really had a lot of fun. Now this one time that we were in, kind of one of these war stories isn't it? Am I boring you?

Oh no, this is great.

Casey Wilkes: Well you can edit it out.

Well no, we won't edit it. We just want to get your memories and –

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, because on some, well all this stuff is coming back to me now.

Sure, no that's great.

Casey Wilkes: So we had pulled into and we were pulling into Italy, and it was with the 6th Fleet, and unfortunately the harbor couldn't hold the entire 6th Fleet so we had to split up. Half

of us went to Lavarno, the other half went to Vespisia, and it's about 50 miles between the two cities where we pulled in. So I went as part of the message center, I said well some of us are on one ship and some of us were on the other ship, so we had this big lieutenant that we kind of took advantage of this guy and told him that we had some confidential messages that we had to retrieve from the other ship, and they couldn't send it to us, it was classified, so we had to go pick it up in person. So we had to check out a jeep and drive 50 miles to the other port and pick up whatever it was and bring it back. So he signed the motor transport chit to let us get the jeep, and as we were doing it, the battalion photographer came up and he says hey, I hear you guys are going to go and take the, go up to Vespisia. I said yeah. He said can I go with you? Sure, come on. We decided we're going to go and take this trip. Well we ended up going to some mountain in Italy that hadn't seen Americans World War II, and I was sitting in the back of the jeep like the president and they're hanging out the windows, Americana, and I'm waving like I was some dignitary or something. We never forgot that that was, it ended up we got back at 8 o'clock at night and they were just about to send, have us marked as AWOL because they didn't know where the heck we were. Again, we didn't have radios, didn't have cell phones or anything so they had no idea where we were. We were just gone. So we disappeared like 8:00 in the morning until 8:00 at night, but we – they're still telling the stories about that one.

And you got away with it?

Casey Wilkes: Got away with it. Boy, escaped again.

I guess you had a good enough cover story that the average Marine would not have had to pull something like that.

Casey Wilkes: Yeah.

I was going to go back, too, to the Cuban Missile Crisis. What did the average Marine do aboard the ship during the day to pass that time? I know you've got the blockade going, but are they, what was a typical day like for them during that time? There's only so much you can do on a ship.

Casey Wilkes: Right, from our perspective, for the guys in the message center, we kind of felt that we were half a step ahead of these guys, the regular grunts, but what they would do is they would line up in formation on the deck and they would do exercises. We'd see them out there. We'd watch them out the comm door, we'd look out the door and we could see them out there doing their jumping jacks, doing pushups and all that stuff on the deck of the ship. And it became obvious you got a group that size, you've got to keep them motivated. You can't let them just sit around because it's just not healthy, guys laying around there doing nothing. So they constantly kept people doing something, always doing something. Now they did, the Marine Corps was very strong on being clean-shaven and everything else, except when you went to sea. When we were on board ship, we were allowed to grow beards and mustaches, so and that was another thing I did. I grew a mustache and the captain saw me after about a week, and of course the first time he saw me he looked and he says that looks terrible, cut that thing off. So I did and I never grew it again, never had a mustache. But they do relax the rules. You don't have to, they're not as strict. However, they still had reveille, they still had man your battle stations at the sound – the general alarm – everybody go to man your battle stations and all that stuff, so we all did that kind of thing. Everybody would run to where they had to go.

Did they do any live fire exercises off the fantail or that sort of thing for marksmanship?

Casey Wilkes: No. That we did not do. Not that I knew of anyway.

Sure. And that lasted how long again were you part of the - ?

Casey Wilkes: The blockade itself? I think it was about a month if I'm not mistaken. I wouldn't swear, it's funny, I just have a very poor recollection of the time back then. The months flow to the years and I just don't know. I didn't keep very good track of it.

Sure. So when you finally got back from the blockade, you guys had already done a six-month float to the Mediterranean, and then you'd had the extra month tacked on from the blockade. What was it like when you got back? Were you able to get some leave?

Casey Wilkes: Oh yeah. We did have leave and as a matter of fact, it wasn't long after that, it was probably about eight months, not even a year after that, that the, I left _____ on a cut. Now I enlisted in June of 1960, and my discharge date is, not my discharge, my cutoff date was June of '63. I actually got out on a cut in April. For whatever reason the Defense Department made the decision to let people, whoever is going to be discharged between April and June could get out in April. So I actually got out early. We said before, a full three years. And in retrospect, I look back and I say, just as the Vietnam War is heating up, I'm really surprised. I don't know what the rationale was, but I wasn't complaining.

Sure. So you got out and what did you do after that?

Casey Wilkes: Well I got out and the first thing, I actually looked for a job and while I was in, one of the guys that I was stationed with, his father owned a funeral home in Florida, and you know, when you're stationed at Camp Lejeune, one of the big things that we did, just to make weekends – that was the big, you lived for the weekend.

It's still that way I think. It's pretty remote. Even though Jacksonville has grown a lot, it's still a very remote location that a lot of people don't know about, so it's still a very common, especially on a long weekend, to drive, go to Raleigh, or drive to DC, or drive five or six hours to go get out of there because it is, it's about two and a half hours to the nearest big airport if you want to go to Raleigh. You remember, it was probably more so then than it is now, but it's still kind of out in the wilderness of North Carolina, a long ways from anything else.

Casey Wilkes: And that was the big, they had the traffic circle down by the PX. Everybody would meet at the circle, and that's where you teamed up with your rides and I bought a car while I was there in Camp Lejeune, my end reprieve. Saved my money and bought a car, and we were making weekends to New York and back, to New York City. So Friday afternoon at 4 o'clock we'd meet at the circle, five of the guys, there'd be six of us. We'd drive nonstop, we'd take turns driving, and we'd get to New York around 3 o'clock in the morning, 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, and then we'd meet at the Port Authority on Sunday and it was always somebody wants to leave like 9 o'clock so you'd get back at 6 o'clock just in time to make reveille, and after driving all night. But so that's what we did there. You lived for the weekends and you tried to just going back and forth, and where was I going with that story -

Did your battalion not have boundary limits for how far you could go on a weekend?

Casey Wilkes: No, as long as you were back in time for the reveille Monday morning, that's all they cared about.

It didn't matter. I know now they have, they tell you like within a 48-hour weekend, this is how far you can go, and if it's 72 or 96, you can go this much farther, unless you get actual leave papers signed or you get an out of bounds chit or something like that, I think the theory is they don't want young Marines doing I guess like you guys did, driving all through the night to New York City and then all the way back, and I think they work a lot on trying to cut down on the accidents it seemed like a lot of young Marines would have in their vehicles from speeding or falling asleep while they're driving, so they really stress that now and to the point that a lot of the, they call them the 96, those four-day, those long holidays, they now don't start the 96's until that morning, so for example, really the 96's are longer than a 96 because for example they would start say that Wednesday morning before Thanksgiving, you'd have a zero-eight battalion formation and the battalion commander would just do a quick little safety brief, or the company commander would do a quick safety brief to his Marines and then they were free to go. And then the same thing that Sunday after Thanksgiving, everybody's got to be back for a 1600 formation, accountability formation. So they really tried to not have anybody driving through the nights and stuff.

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, we did that.

I'm sure the Marines still do it. I'm sure it still happens, but that was the big thing was that no, you're not leaving until zero-eight, and then the same thing, you got to be back by 1600 that Sunday. Those formations are real quick, it's just quick accountability, but then they would let you go. I remember that from my time at Camp Lejeune. I also remember once those zero-eight formations were held, just hanging around in my office for an hour or two because there was such a huge traffic jam of everybody trying to flood off the base at one. If you're not going anywhere, it's like I'm just gonna hang out here for a while and let the traffic die down. The whole base basically did the same thing and so it was horrible in terms of traffic getting out of there.

Casey Wilkes: That's true, you're exactly right. We used to do that every weekend. We needed to get a jump on it. We'd go 4 o'clock the day before, as soon as work was over that's when you left.

Exactly, yeah. As much as some things change, other things in the Marine Corps definitely stay the same in that respect.

Casey Wilkes: That's why I keep saying, we went on the Mediterranean, went over to Europe to help save this country, and we drank as much beer as we could to keep it from coming over to these shores. It's just tough. We did it but we did our part.

And then at some point how did you end up coming to Texas?

Casey Wilkes: Actually, oh that's what I started out saying that this friend of mine who I was in the service with, that I was in boot camp with, or in Camp Lejeune, we'd make these weekends and we'd always go to someone's home for a couple of days, and a couple of guys from Texas came to New York one time and a guy from Florida, and I went to his house for a weekend, and his father owned a funeral home, and he said, I said boy, it's pretty hard to get into the business. He said you're welcome when you come on down when you discharge, I'll be happy to give you

a job. So I said well if I still can't get a job in New York, I'll come back. So back to your question on what did I do when I got out, after I got discharged I applied for several funeral homes in New York and I finally, I was lucky enough to get a job with one and I was with them for two years. I served my apprenticeship. In New York, they have what they call an apprenticeship, and then you can also go to school for a year, or you can serve a two-year apprenticeship, either way. But the bottom line is you got to pass the state board's at the end, and so I was in there for two years, I served my apprenticeship and did all the required things, but I just didn't pass the state board. So I never got my license. In any event, so we were there, I was married shortly after that, and we ended up moving to Indiana. I was working, got a job with Bristol Myers Squibb working for ___ Pharmaceuticals, and they moved us to Evans, Indiana. We were there for a few years, and then from there left Bristol Myers and went to work for CBS __mark in Chicago. We were there for four years and then they had an opening in San Antonio and I volunteered for this one, so they relocated us there and we've been here for 12 years.

Oh that's great. And in terms of getting that thing going on with the reunion at Camp Lejeune, it was just a case of one of the Marines from your old platoon just I guess tracked you down somehow.

Casey Wilkes: Exactly. It was a minor miracle. I said when he called, how the heck did you get my name? He said he looked it up on the Internet. The Internet has everything, so who knew?

That's true, there's a lot of sleuthing you can do out there, but that's still pretty impressive that he was able to put that together for you guys.

Casey Wilkes: I think he's got about 25 of us now, not everybody, but he's got about 25 going.

Well that's impressive. I think when you go to that graduation ceremony, that will really be pretty emotional and pretty neat thing to see.

Casey Wilkes: Yeah, I'm thinking it's gonna be.

I'm sure they'll give you a nice tour of the base and you'll get to see a lot of stuff and like I said before, as much as some things change, the Marine Corps has got so much tradition and history that so many things stay very similar that I think you'll still recognize a lot of that, more so than probably any other branch of the service.

Casey Wilkes: I agree, I agree.

Yes sir. Well sir, I tell you, I really appreciate you letting me interview you today and you're the first person I've interviewed that actually took part in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and we've done a lot of focusing on World War II and Korea, obviously because those veterans are older and we're losing a lot of them, but we try to interview veterans of all times and all conflicts. What we do with these interviews is we save them in our archives here at the Land Office and we've got documents here that go back to the Spanish Land Grant days. We have Stephen F. Austin's original Registro that he wrote in his own hand.

Casey Wilkes: Holy cow.

We have all the original settlers that came to Texas, it's all in Spanish. We have paperwork that belonged to James Bowie. We have the Land Grant that David Crockett's widow used to claim land after he had been killed at The Alamo. So we have all sorts of amazing historical items and our hope with this program is that these interviews maybe a couple hundred years from now somebody might listen to them as well, and just learn a little bit about what that individual veteran did, kind of like we look at some of the paperwork we have from back in that time.

Casey Wilkes: Interesting yeah, good.

So like I mentioned before the interview, we'll be sending you copies of this interview on CD as well as a nice certificate from Commissioner Patterson and the Commissioner is a Marine veteran himself, served in Vietnam, so the program means a lot to him. I know everybody from the Commissioner to every employee here at the Land Office is thankful for your service.

Casey Wilkes: Well likewise, thank you.

Yes sir. Well sir, I'll be sending those CD's to you as soon as we get them all made up and you've got my number so if you ever need anything from us, please just give us a call.

Casey Wilkes: Thanks very much, James, I appreciate it.

Yes sir, and thank you.

Casey Wilkes: I'm sure my brother will be on your case anyway, right?

We'll give him a copy as well. I think he might like to hold onto a copy as well.

Casey Wilkes: Thanks very much James, I appreciate it.

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

Casey Wilkes: You too. Thank you, bye bye.

[End of recording]