

Subject: Tom Baker (Vietnam, Logging)
Interviewer: Abigail Fox
Location: Smoky Mountain High School
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START OF INTERVIEW

Abigail Fox: So, have you always lived around Jackson County?

Tom Baker: No, I was an Army brat. I was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky. We lived in Germany a couple of years back in the early 50s, and then, Virginia for about a year. But my dad retired and we came to Webster. He was from Dillsboro so, when he retired he bought a place in Webster, about 1954. I was about, well, five years-old.

AF: Okay. Do you have any siblings or close family members?

TB: Not that are alive. I'm the last of the Baker boys. Now... Yea, they're all dead. My parents are dead. My grandparents are dead. I've got a wife, does that count?

AF: Yea. When did you meet her?

TB: Actually, that's my second wife. She teaches at the university. And I had been recently divorced, and so had she, and we become friends and went from there. So, about thirteen years ago. We just celebrated an anniversary, actually.

AF: So, when they told me I was going to interview you... They gave me a little brief synopsis. It said you were in the logging business?

TB: I'm a forester. When I got out of the service, I went to Western and struggled there for about year. I was in pre-engineering, and the math was killing me. I'd been out of school for a while. So, I wound up going to Haywood Tech and getting an Associate's Degree in Forestry. Then, after ten years, the state of North... North Carolina State had a little, they called it an extension program then. You could take classes and mail them back, and all that good stuff. I wound up getting my bachelor degree.

AF: So, which came first, your service, or the foresting?

TB: My military service. I graduated from this fine institute. It was called Sylva Webster then. It was 1966. I went into the service a year later, in '67. I spent three years in. I was with the 101st. I was a paratrooper. I went to 'Nam. I made it back, and I got out in '70. I spent a year at Fort Campbell after I came back from 'Nam. Three years. My daddy was a career man. He spent twenty-seven years. I figured they'd send me back to 'Nam, but once was enough for me.

AF: Now, my grandfather also served in Vietnam, and my mom was telling me that when he came back they faced a little bit of conflict because the media, they kind of angled what was going on. Did you face any of that kind of conflict when you came back?

TB: Oh yea. You know, not every plane load of GIs faced crowds, but ours did. Flew into Seattle, and it was... You'll have to forgive me if I get a little emotional. I still do. It was a little traumatic. We'd been briefed about how there might be some crowds, you know. I was a door-gunner my last seven months, and we lost a lot of good men. Normally, they let door-gunners quit flying when you have about two weeks left in the country, but we were shorthanded, and I flew until I had three days left. Three days later, I'm getting off the plane, and we go in the terminal and there's a crowd there. I don't know, twenty-five, thirty protestors cussing and hollering. Luckily there was a screen, a wire mesh screen separating us, because they was throwing bags of stuff at us, you know, calling us names. You know, we just looked at each other like... You're over there trying to do right for your country and you get this reception, you just don't really get over that. I think the country, it took a long time for the country to get over it. They're receiving these young men and women back from overseas a lot better now than they did us. We were probably the only... The Koreans they just ignored, the Korean vets. Us they just sort of chastised so, it was not a good welcoming back. And I thank your father, did you say your father or grandfather?

AF: My grandfather.

TB: ...for his service. Do you know who he was with?

AF: I do not. He doesn't like to talk about it much. That's all I could get from my mom.

TB: Most combat vets can't talk to other people. They can talk to other vets, but... Consequentially, I have started a veterans' support group at the university. Trying to have a group that could create an atmosphere where these young vets could come in and talk, or listen, or laugh, or cry, or whatever they want to do. That's been rewarding. And it's still ongoing.

AF: So, when you got out, did you immediately go into foresting, or did you take a gap?

TB: Well, I got out on a Friday and went to work up at Western on a Monday. I got out in April so, I worked through the summer. I was recently married to my first wife. I say recently, it was right before I went to 'Nam. We were at Campbell a year then, I got out. She was pregnant so, I worked through the summer, and started at Western in the fall in pre-engineering, thinking I would be an electrical engineer. Sadly then, Western wasn't... Nobody was really military friendly and Western was no exception, and I had an advisor that really disliked GIs, and I think I got some... I was pulling two math . . . It was a quarter system, and I was pulling two math courses a quarter. Should've been in some sort of remedial math to get me back on track. Instead, I was taking introductory to trig, introductory analysis, and just "Woosh!" Over my head. Anyway, I struggled a year up there, and couldn't decide whether to get . . . I was a

history buff. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to get into history, or do something else, and a buddy of mine said, "Let's be a forester. We're in the woods all the time." So, I said, "Okay." So, I went to Haywood Tech, and never regretted it. I really enjoyed the timber business. Having been a grunt and combat vet, I think that being alone in the woods has been good therapy for me. Plus, it's a good business. You meet some pretty good, hard working people. And I've enjoyed it.

AF: Forgive me for not knowing the full details of the foresting job, but what do you do, as your title?

TB: Well, when I graduated, Georgia Pacific offered me a job in Arkansas as a forester, and I went out there. It was just flat country and I didn't like it. So, I came back, and WC Hennessee, the lumber company that is now the T&S Saw Mill, needed a forester that could handle logging supervision. Well, I was fresh out of school, and I had never logged when I was growing up. So, to get thrown right into supervising rugged, old, individualists who had logged all their life was not an easy step. I had a couple of them that I'd become friends with, and I would work on weekends with them just to learn the trade. You know, how to cut a tree, how to lay out a logging road, how to know what's possible on stream crossings. Logging supervision is basically, making sure your logger gets the logs out in the proper manner that does not create siltation in the streams, or damage, unnecessarily, the timber. Eventually, I worked my way into procurement, which is the dealing with the land owner and the U.S. Forest Service. So, you negotiate with the land owner a particular price for his trees, and then, you bring a logging crew in and supervise his work. So, it was rewarding. Difficult sometimes, but... Then, after about thirty years, I got like a lot of people that have been in business for thirty years, you think you know everything. I went to logging for myself. It was an education again. Being self-employed is very similar to being unemployed. At the end of the week, you put your money out and you look, and you say, "Wow, is that all I get?" But there were some good times too. But that's pretty much... Forestry is just the cutting of the trees. Luckily, in the Appalachians, we are blessed with species that are prolific sprouters and prolific seeders. So, you don't have to do too much replanting like they do in pine country or out West. Occasionally you do, if you're trying to change from an oak ridge to a white pine ridge, you're going to replant. Normally, most private individuals don't want their land clear cut. Clear cut, sadly, has become a dirty word. It's just a tool that foresters can use. They prefer to call it "even age management," but it's good for wildlife. You know, you clear cut an area and the young trees come up and they create browse and cover for many, many different types of game. But it gets a bad name, and so the forest service has steered away from it, and most landowners, you couldn't even talk to them about that. And that's okay, because we do selective thinnings. They get money off their land and it doesn't look too terribly bad, and in three or four years Mother Nature can heal it, and you go on from there. Right now, as tough as times are since the Great Recession, people are selling their trees. So, it's not a bad time to be in the logging business.

AF: Are you still in this business, today?

TB: Well, all the above. I retired. I was one of those lucky individuals that had two full time jobs. I worked in the woods during the day, and I worked a night job in the university, supervising the fitness center. So, after twenty-four years at Western, I retired from them, and they hired me back part-time. After forty-two years in the timber business, I retired, and then, I'm working back part-time. I'm doing some logging on my own. Logging by yourself is not the smartest thing I've ever done. My wife and my kids quarrel at me, but I'm safe. Reasonably. So, yea, I'm retired, but I'm still working. It's the American Dream, honey.

AF: Yea. So, you started your own veterans' program, and you log by yourself. Do you have any other kind of hobbies that you like to do, little things that you picked up?

TB: Well, I am an extreme sport individual. I started out doing 5k runs and 10k runs, and I'm not real fast. I gravitated into triathlons. I've done many, many sprint triathlons, international. I've done two half Iron Mans. Never done a full Iron Man.

AF: Those are rough.

TB: But I'm a lousy swimmer so, wasn't hard for me to find my bike when I came out of the water. About 1996, I was watching a program on the TV called the Eco-Challenge, where they're basically, out in the woods paddling or doing this stuff for several days. And I thought, "Now, I can do that because I'm a forester. I can read a map. I'm not fast, but I can go for a long time." So, I started doing adventure races, and I've done, I don't know, sixty or seventy. Two months ago, I just finished a seventy-eight hour one down in Florida, through the swamps. We mountain biked two hundred and forty-seven miles, we paddled in those swampy creeks and lakes forty-some, and then trekked forty-some. So, keep the young dogs in my eyesight as best I can. So, between that and working two jobs, that pretty well keeps me busy.

AF: So, after all you've been through, what is one of the most exciting stories you have that you'd like to share? It can be personally exciting for you, or just can mean a lot to you, but what's something that you remember that stands out?

TB: Well, kind of depends on what you want to hear.

AF: Something you'd tell. Like, a story you'd want to pass on.

TB: When I was in 'Nam, you know, there was a lot of stuff going on in the country. A lot of racial tension. It was the early Civil Rights Movement, and we had several black guys and Hispanic guys in our unit that were like brothers to us. We couldn't quite understand - even though I was raised in the South - we couldn't quite understand why everyone was just protesting and stuff back here. And I tell people that as a door gunner, part of my job was to send fresh troops in and bring out the wounded, and there were people of all races that bled on my helicopter. The one uniting thing was that we all bleed the same color, and that's a basis for togetherness if there's ever been one. When you're in a firefight and you've got this guy's back and he's got your back, you don't care what color of skin. So, that's a lesson that I learned early.

I was nineteen when I was in 'Nam. Came back a year later much older, but it was certainly... As far as a story on a lighter side, I can't think of any that comes to my head right off the bat. Unless that's the last question, give me some time as we talk, and maybe something will filter into my recessed mind.

AF: Okay. Well, your children, how many do you have?

TB: I got a boy and a girl, and I've got one grandson. He and I are hopefully going to do a... There is a twelve-hour adventure race up Highlands that they do every year, for the past fifteen years. And I am the only individual that has done every race that they've had. And they've had teams from the Army Rangers, Delta Force, Special Forces, and... It's just a twelve-hour race so it's very doable, but my grandson's going to do it with me this year. Which brings up a little story I'll tell you. It's not bragging, it was just kind of funny. Three or four years ago, we were doing that race and being a forester, up around Highlands I bought a lot of timber so, I knew the grounds real well. I knew the shortcuts. And there was this team of young Army Rangers, you know, really fit, twenty-four, twenty-five-year-old guys. And we was heading toward the finish line. Was on our bicycles, and gosh, they were trying hard to catch us. They were just pushing it, and I can ride a bike pretty good so we stayed ahead of them. Came across the finish line, and they're about two minutes behind us. Well, one of them just falls off his bike and collapses. He's okay. He's dehydrated, and the EMTs are hooking him up to an IV so, I go over there and... Forgive me this, but I pop a beer, and I walk over to him and I look down at him, and he's looking up at me, and I said, "It's tough out there, ain't it son?" And he just smiled, and he said, "Yes, sir." So, anyway, that was a fun moment, but it shows a little bit of the comradery between veterans and current military that I cherish to this day. I've walked where he's walked and he's walked where I've walked.

AF: Well, thank you for your service, and thank you for your time. It probably was a little challenging to answer some of these.

TB: Well, it's okay. I've got some recorded history up at Western. I've read a lot of books on logging in the mountains, but nobody had ever done oral interviews of the old loggers. And so, about four or five years ago, I started doing that, and I've got them archived up there through the Mountain Heritage department. So, this one may fit right in there on the corner of those. But I was able to get several of the old loggers, and hear in their words what it was like to log in the old days. That was neat so, I'm proud to have my little recording up there too.

AF: So, you are a little history buff. You're taking it down.

TB: Oh, yea. If you don't learn from history, you're due to repeat it. Times are changing so much that a lot of the old approaches to this land, people don't know anything about it at all. So, sometime, if you want to do an interview I could tell you some of the recordings and the history of this land, but we can do that another time if you want to.

AF: Alright. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

TB: No, I'm just proud to be a part of your project here, and I'm glad you guys are doing that. I'm not sure what category of people you try to interview, but the more varied the better. And you pulled all that from memory so, that's pretty sharp. I'd have had to had a list of questions, so you did pretty good yourself.

END OF INTERVIEW