

Tedoso Samora  
Veterans History Project  
Interviewed by Steve Estes  
San Francisco, CA (June 6, 2003)

Tedoso Samora: My name is Tedoso Louis Samora.

SE: I'm Steve Estes. Where are we?

TS: We're at 1310 Fulton in San Francisco.

SE: And it is June 6, 2003. Why don't we start with the background questions to repeat what I asked you a second ago? When and where were you born?

TS: I was born in Madera, California in 1943.

SE: What did your parents do for a living?

TS: My dad was a vulcanizer. He worked with tires. And my mom owned a restaurant—Mexican food.

SE: What was the name of the restaurant?

TS: Mexican Kitchen.

SE: And where'd you go to school.

TS: For elementary school, I went to Washington Elementary. For junior high, I went to Jefferson Junior High. And then I went to Madera Union High School.

SE: You hit all the early presidents there. So how did you get into the military?

TS: Well, I volunteered. I joined. My dad and my uncles were in World War II, and we always thought that it was our obligation to go into the service—a tradition, I guess. So I was the first of my father's sons that joined. At first, I tried to join the Marine Corps. Well, let me step back. I tried to join, but they told me I couldn't, because I had a cyst on my lung, and I was kind of disappointed. Of course, they removed it, and then two years after that I joined the army, and they took me during the Vietnam conflict. I guess they were taking anybody. But you know, I was ok. I was physically OK.

SE: So it wasn't life threatening?

TS: No, they just removed the cyst and that was it. I have a scar here. [Points to his rib cage.]

SE: Now that was 1965 when you joined? [Yes.] So I have some assumptions about how your family and friends felt about you joining, but how did they feel—your dad, your uncles, and your brothers?

TS: My dad and my mom were happy and they were proud that we joined the service. I think they were proud. Since my dad served, they were proud that we served. Plus, they wanted us to do something so we could stay out of trouble. But I was a good kid. I didn't get into that much trouble. They were happy. Of course, I was wondering after the other three sons went—I'm pretty sure it took a toll on them.

SE: What about your friends? Did you have friends who joined? How did they feel about the war?

TS: During that time, it was pretty early and there were no bad things said about it. They were just kind of concerned. They would tell me, "Ted, you know if you join, you're going to Vietnam." And I'd say, "Oh, no. I'm going to go into administration. I'll work in an office and all that." But that wasn't the case.

SE: Can you tell me what you remember about basic training?

TS: It was hard, but I enjoyed it. I liked being with all the other soldiers. And I liked my lieutenant. They were very friendly to me. There was one instance in basic training where we were running towards the rifle range, and I couldn't handle it. So I dropped out of the thing and got into the truck. When we got to the rifle range I jumped off of the truck. There were about four of us. The lieutenant—I think it was Lieutenant Day—he kind of singled me out, and says, "I want you to see this 'girl' in the platoon. He had to get out and get into the truck. He called me a sissy, and I felt kind of bad. We were going to ride back on the truck, but I didn't. I ran.

SE: To prove it to them?

TS: Yes, to prove that I could. That was one of the things in basic training that I remembered. I was very happy when I graduated. My mom and dad came, so it was kind of nice.

SE: Where was that basic training?

TS: Fort Ord.

SE: What was your first assignment in the military?

TS: My first assignment when I got out of basic training was that I got orders to join an MI [Military Intelligence] battalion. I went to business school, and that was the same thing at Fort Ord. After I finished business school, then we got orders to join this MI battalion in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. But I didn't know what "MI" stood for. I thought

it was a missile battalion or something like that, but when I got there, I found out it was Military Intelligence.

SE: And what kinds of stuff were you doing for MI?

TS: At that time, when I got to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, they were supposed to send us to MI school. But we didn't ever see a school. We did see a lot of jungle training. They'd take us out into the woods and teach us how to survive. So that's basically what we did at Fort Bragg.

SE: Was that your first sense of, "Hey, we're going to go to Vietnam"?

TS: I had a kind of feeling, and then the build up started occurring. Then the orders came down that we were going to Vietnam. It kind of bothered me. I never expected it. Because at that time we were hearing about it—you know, bombing and people getting killed—and I think I called my mom. I *did* call her. "I really don't want to go, but I guess I have to." As they say, "You're in the army now." That was it. I didn't want to, but I went. And that was it.

SE: What was your first impression of Vietnam?

TS: The smell. It was wet, dirty. It felt like a difference. It didn't feel like the United States. And it was dark when we landed, and then we saw all of these Vietnamese. Basically, we were waiting for a truck to take us to our compound. Mostly what really stood out was the smell. There was some particular smell about it.

SE: Where was your base?

TS: It was outside of Saigon, going towards Ben Hui. It was a small military intelligence compound. We had, I think, two battalions. They had the "spooks" and then of course, they had MI, our group. I think the "spooks" were the ones that went out to the jungle. They would gather the intelligence. We remained back. And then they took us to Ton San Nut Air Base, and that's where our Quonset huts were. That's where all equipment was, where we did our data processing. We gathered intelligence. That's when I got into data processing and computers.

SE: Could you talk about your average day at work in Vietnam?

TS: My average day at work is that we got up in the morning, got into formation. And we had breakfast. We got on these military buses, and they took us to Ton San Nut, which was about three or four miles away, and they'd drop us at the Quonset places, and we worked until about six o'clock. And then we got back on the buses and went back to the compound. That was basically it. At work, it was mostly keypunching, handling the sorters, and other collators, and other IBM [International Business Machines] equipment.

SE: Had you ever worked with computers before?

TS: No, that was the first time. Of course, it was scary being at the Quonset hut. We used to hear the bombs, falling on the outskirts. It used to scare us. And we used to have drills. But I know that MAC-V and CIC-V were building us a huge Military Intelligence complex near Ton San Nut. We were waiting for that to get completed when we got there.

SE: I don't know if the stuff that you did was classified Secret or Top Secret or what have you, but can you talk about any of the intelligence that you were gathering?

TS: It was all Top Secret at the time, because we all had Top Secret clearances. Mostly we had, I can remember, Imagery Interpretation (with airplanes taking pictures of the jungle and villages of Vietnam). There was Order of Battle and that was basically how many troops were on the other side. There was another one, but I can't remember what it was called. It was basically the weapons that they had and different coordinates in the area. I was there for three months, and then, even though I was an E-4, I became the head of the MI keypunch handling, and we had Vietnamese that came in and did the key punching for us. I used to watch over them to make sure they were keypunching the information and making sure that all of the information got into our computers.

SE: Did you have a sense from the intelligence that you were gathering of the strength of the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese?

TS: No, intelligence didn't tell me that much, but I knew that they were very good military rebels. They knew the jungle. That was always mentioned. Of course, when we were in Saigon, we didn't know who was the enemy and who was not. That was another thing that we had to watch over our backs. The Viet Cong, I didn't think were that much in strength, but we knew that they had the help from the North Vietnamese with all of the equipment. We had that in the intelligence coming out too. Me, myself, I considered them very strong. That's why I was scared. Because at that time, I really thought that this war was never going to end, that it would be inconclusive and it was going to be a long war. The Vietnamese love their country, and that's why I left it. Those were the thoughts I had, but I didn't tell anybody.

SE: Was there any sense that other soldiers were feeling that way too? I mean this was pretty early in the war.

TS: Yes, it was pretty early, but I'm pretty sure that there was. But I didn't feel it. None of my friends were people who didn't want to be there. We were. There was one instance, when I was out in the truck. I think this is where my change in the war occurred. We were going to the new MI battalion place, and our bus ran over a Vietnamese. I was sitting with all of my soldier friends, and they all yelled, "Hey, gook! We killed a gook!" You know. And I was just shocked. I just sat there quiet, because I was hearing the people I was with saying that. They were all happy that they saw us run over this Viet Cong, I mean, Vietnamese head. They were all happy and screaming, "Gook! Gook!" I

looked at everything differently at that point because that was the first time I had ever seen a person die. That's what changed me.

SE: What were your relationships or other relationships with the Vietnamese where you worked or just in the city of Saigon.

TS: I don't remember this family name. But when I went to Saigon, I tried to get to know the people and talk to them—mostly in the bars. I was very friendly. Even on the streets, I met this one family, and I went to their home. It was a poor family, but they served me soup. While they sat on the floor, they got me a chair, because they didn't want me to get on my knees like they were. They wouldn't give me Nut Nam, which was a sauce that smells horrible, so I didn't partake of that, even though I wanted it. They didn't give it to me. But the dinner was friendly, and I took their son to the Saigon zoo. They wouldn't let me take their daughter. I used to teach them algebra, because they wanted to learn some math. I wish I would have got their names or address, because when I went back to Vietnam recently, I didn't have their address. I was hoping maybe that someone would recognize me, but they never did.

SE: Well, you were kind of getting here, but did you have any R&R where you saw other parts of the country, or did you spend most of your time in Saigon?

TS: When my brother Arthur arrived in-country, he flew into Saigon and he called me. I talked to my commander and told him my brother was here. They were always so good about me and my brother Arthur. The commanders always did something special. An aide got me a jeep and a person to drive me to the airport to pick up Arthur and bring him back to the compound. I introduced him to all of my friends. Of course, that night, he had to fly to where he was stationed at Na Trang. He was mostly an air traffic controller. I did go to Na Trang. Then, since my brother was in-country and two months before I was supposed to go back to the United States, I asked my commander if there was some way that I could go visit my brother. They were going to send some military intelligence to that area, so they gave me a .45, some handcuffs, and a briefcase to take this intelligence up there. So that's how I got to Na Trang. When I got up there, me and my brother visited for three days, and then I came back. That's one of the things I liked. The commanders were very understanding, and they let me do a lot of things, like visit my brother. They were very caring, especially when family were in-country.

SE: How did Na Trang compare to Saigon?

TS: It was beautiful. The beaches, that's what stands out—the water and the beaches. I really loved Na Trang. I don't know how to explain it. It's just nice. I love the beach and the ocean. For my brother and I being together and sharing that was really nice. The town of Na Trang, I didn't bother to go into town very much. We just mostly stayed out at the beach. There's less rain in that area than in Saigon.

SE: Here's where I ask you about the Green Weenie. Could you tell me about getting the commendation?



TS: The commendation was given to me because I had this room full of intelligence that they wanted onto the computer, and I was able to get it on in the timeframe that they asked me to. So I got a medal. But at that time—you know, I told you about the incident with the truck—I was drinking more, so I started having a problem with drinking and smoking marijuana. One night before I got the medal, I got drunk. I didn't know I was going to get the medal. I had no idea. I got drunk with my friends and went to the compound where I slept and I went out and started throwing up. The officer of the day saw me, and he told me to stop, and I told him, "I can't." I started throwing up again, and he got very angry. We almost came to blows. I was arrested, and he took me to the officer of the day area. Me, being drunk, I kept on saying, "I have one phone call." But I wasn't in the civilian world. I said, "Call up the naval commander of military intelligence." So he did. The officer of the day told the commander everything that happened to me, and then they hung up. A little while later, the officer of the day got another phone call, and they told the officer of the day to let me go—that I was going to get medal the next day. They told him to let me go to bed. Even at that time I didn't know that I was going to get a medal. The next day, they told me, "Ted, you're going to get a medal." After I got my medal, after the formation, I was walking toward where I slept and the officer of the day came up to me and said, "You don't deserve that." I can't answer for why I got it, but he was very upset. And there's where that story ended.

SE: Well, let's talk a little bit about sexuality and the service. Do you mind if we switch horses? (No) How did your sexuality influence your time in the service or vice versa?

TS: I didn't have any role models in Madera. I knew there was something different about me. Every time I heard "faggot" or "gay" or "queer"—especially the word "queer"—I didn't want to be that. I knew that I kind of liked men, because when I used to go to the swimming pool, even when I was younger, I used to watch the older men undress. When I was in the military, I enjoyed it. There was a common bond between the guys. We were all friends. There was one particular person that I really liked when I went to Fort Bragg. He was from Pennsylvania. I don't think I'm going to use his name. Anyway, I really liked him. The only thing I could do was just be friends. Once and a while, we used to drink a lot. But I guess I had to watch out for my Top Secret clearance. There was no way for me to express, because I had no role models. There was no way for me to say, "Hey I like you, and these are the feelings I have." I couldn't say that then, because I didn't know how to do it. If I knew what I know about gay life now, and I was in the military, I would know how to approach it. When I came back from Vietnam, I went to the 19<sup>th</sup> battalion in Fort Gordon, Georgia. There were gay people there that I knew. One day, we went out to the parking lot to do some drinking. They knew that I worked in MI. They didn't work in MI; they were something else. They took me and we went out drinking in the parking lot. They started really feeling me up. I said, "I know you guys are gay, but I'm in military intelligence. But I won't tell anybody." That was the only experience I had when I was in the army—that affection from them. I wish I could find them. They probably live in the city and I don't even know. In Vietnam one time, my friend and I got drunk, and there was some kind of playful thing that happened once. I remember it, but I don't think he does. I'm just glad that nobody caught us, because I was mostly the instigator of it. I think that's the reason maybe now, that he doesn't have no contact with

me. Because I know he got married and had two kids. When I did get clean and sober, I did call to make amends, and he wouldn't talk to me. So I just talked to his wife for a few minutes. I used to call him when I was drunk, not knowing what I was saying. But that was after the military after I got out. But the sexuality part, I wish I had known more. I kept it to myself, which caused a lot of problems later, after I got out of the service. I was homophobic within myself. I didn't learn anything about it until after I got clean and sober.

SE: What's your feeling about the "don't ask don't tell" policy today?

TS: It was like that during Vietnam. They knew people who were gay. Unless they didn't come out or say, "Somebody came and did this to me," they'd be ok. I worked in G-2 at Fort Gordon, we used to handle cases like that. I knew people like this guys would come in and say that this guy was hitting on me. You better watch out for him. Then we'd call the other guy in, of course. And when that happened, both of them got kicked out of the service. I felt sorry for them. I wish I could have told them that you're both going to get kicked out. Even though you were both drunk and you claim that he did this to you, you're both going to get kicked out. It was kind of hard also, me having some of those feelings too, and kicking some of those guys out. It was very hard. I disagree with it very much, because I know that it has been going on since the military began. They've always had "don't ask, don't tell."

SE: So you didn't think this was a big change?

TS: I didn't think it was a big deal, because I knew that there were gay people in the service at all times. Even in Vietnam, I knew that some of the guys were gay, but nothing was said. I knew that when you get drunk things do happen as long as you don't get caught.

SE: Do you think it would be more likely to be kept quiet than back in the States?

TS: Back in the States, when I was stationed at Fort Gordon, I did go to gay bars. Nothing was said. I saw other military people there. Everybody knew it was a gay bar. The way I look at it, the military is saying, "Just keep quiet and don't say anything." But you can't express your feelings. That's what's hard about it, keeping it inside. There maybe a group of guys who know each other are gay and who go to the gay bar, but then, there's the other side. And there's a conflict there. There's a lot of homophobic military people.

SE: Why do you think that it's such a problem for the majority of straight soldiers?

TS: My idea is that most of these straight soldiers don't know their sexuality. Sometimes I don't like to put labels like homosexual, straight, or bi-sexual. I just say that if a guy doesn't understand his sexuality, he's going to have a problem. I have straight friends, what I call sexual friends, who understand and don't have a problem with me being gay. They go out with me and would probably even hold my hand and touch me and hug me,

but there's no sexual problem with that to them, even though supposedly they may be straight and they go out with women. Those are the type of people that I like to know. There are some gay people who don't understand the sexual part and they don't like straight guys, and that's the way I feel. That's the deal with understanding your sexuality, and if you understand it, you won't have any problems. But I got that idea after I started getting clean and sober.

SE: And living here [in San Francisco] I imagine.

TS: Yes, and living here.

SE: Well, let's bring you back to the States from Vietnam. You told me in an e-mail that you wanted to talk about how your relationship with your brothers changed. Is that part of coming home, or is that a different story?

TS: Well, when we got home there were many problems. All four of us were alcoholics. We were all drug addicts. And basically because of Vietnam. One of my brothers eventually killed himself. I wish there was a way that the Veterans Administration or the army could have helped him out more or helped us out more to understand what we were feeling when we got back. We were taught to hate, and we weren't hating people. So me and my brothers had a lot of problems. A lot of them were connected to me being gay and them knowing I was gay. I wouldn't tell them that I was and they wouldn't tell me that they knew I was, but it used to come out when we'd get drunk. One time, we destroyed a wedding in Monterey. One of my cousins got married, and after that we didn't really talk to each other. I could talk to Arthur, because Arthur and I were the closest. At that wedding, we were all drinking and my brother Leonard came up to me. Well, he got a cigarette. I don't know what the argument was, but he put the cigarette out on my forehead and called me a faggot. It was a big ordeal. After that, none of us were invited to any weddings or parties. That really hurt my mom and dad, because they were invited, but we weren't. There was no talking between us. I think the only time I started talking was when I was the first one to go to AA and clean up my act. Arthur kind of cleaned up his act because I cleaned up my act. But he didn't go to AA. He just cleaned up his act on his own. Leonard was kind of a heroin addict. He was having a lot of problems with our parents, stealing from our parents, which caused a lot of conflict. I kept on telling my parents that they had to kick him out. But eventually, five years after I was clean, he became clean. And Ricky continued. Me and my brothers confronted him and said, "You can't live with Mom anymore." He was doing speed. So he started hallucinating a lot like he was still in Vietnam, getting a gun. He scared my mother. We talked to him and he did get help. For six months he was ok, but then he fell back. And then he committed suicide after that, which was a big blow to the family, especially my mom. She thought she was at fault, because she asked him to leave. I kind of told my mom not to feel that way. It was his addiction, basically. It was hard. Now, me and my brothers are talking. They know I'm gay. They come up here to visit. They've met some of my partners. I have pictures of them over there. I'm glad that we're able to talk now. It took many years for us to be able to do it. I think that this thing right here... [He holds up a framed newspaper article.] We all got together because the Unitarian Church wanted us



to speak about Vietnam, before, during and after. We all spoke. I think another thing that kind of brought us together. Our nephews and nieces, they look at us. They don't want to be like their crazy uncles. So that's one aspect of it.

SE: Have any of them decided to go into the military?

TS: No, they're very different. I do have one niece who is in the army, and she's stationed in Korea. She's my sister's.

SE: How many siblings do you have altogether?

TS: Six, plus one sister.

SE: You went back to Vietnam recently. Why did you go and what was it like?

TS: Well, me and my brother Arthur kept on talking about it, because my brother had post-traumatic stress disorder. I had a little of it too, but I had dealt with it a little because of my AA, where I'd talked about it. I told my brother Arthur that I was going to go to Vietnam to see what it's like now. And he says, "Well, I'd like to go too." So we made arrangements and we went back. When we landed in Ton San Nut airport, I saw where I used to be, the Quonset hut. When I got off the airplane, the bus picked us up. The difference that I noticed was that there was no smell—the smell that I remembered when I first got there during the Vietnam conflict. The other different thing was that along the Saigon River, there used to be houses. They were all gone. That was strange for me to see, because there was a lot of sewage. It seemed like the Vietnamese government cleaned that all up, and there was no smell. Saigon was changed. The people were very friendly. We realized that there were Vietnamese soldiers who were often very friendly to us. It kind of made us think, "Here, we're back in the United States thinking the war is still going on in our heads." But for the Vietnamese the war is over. That kind of shocked us somehow. The Vietnamese were very friendly and they treated us very nice. It was like they forgot about the war. It didn't exist. But to us it did. We were starting to realize, "Hey the war doesn't have to exist anymore in our minds." I think that the second day we were in Vietnam, our minds kind of changed, and we started enjoying Vietnam again the way we remembered, especially me since I was stationed in Saigon. I went to all the places I used to go, but of course, some were not there. I tried to go look for my compound. I did go to Ton San Nut to see what I could find. My battalion had changed. The Vietnamese did something to the building.

## Side B

SE: You were talking about how things had changed when you went back to Vietnam. So the people that you talked to when you went back to Saigon—well first of all, do they call it Saigon?

TS: They call it Saigon. The Vietnamese who live in Saigon call it Saigon. The airport and the officials call it Ho Chi Minh City. The hotels call it both. It doesn't matter.

SE: Did the folks that you talked to know that you were an American veteran?

TS: Yes, they knew as soon as they saw us. Because of our age, they knew we were Vietnam veterans.

SE: You were saying that they wanted to talk to you.

TS: Yes, they wanted to talk to us. When we went to Na Trang, where my brother was stationed at, it was an experience for him. I remember my brother came up to me when we got there. He says, "Ted, I'm ok with it now. The war's over in my head. When I get back to my group in Portola, I'll tell them that they should go back to Vietnam." Because he had a lot of problems. He thought the war was still going on. He had a lot of problems and it helped him out a lot.

SE: So this is a huge question, but if you had to sum up the legacy of your military service, how would you sum it up? How did it affect your life?

TS: The effects on my life were that I came back as a drunk and an addict. When I did get back, I did get into the war protests and I did that for many years until it was over. I did throw my medal away. I wish I could get it back, now that my hatred of the war is gone. It also helped me out. I'm a better person now. It was a learning experience—the whole Vietnam conflict. Even my drunk and addict days were a learning experience too. I don't want to experience it again, but I'm glad it's over. I know during that time and even now the government lies. I look back during my intelligence days in Vietnam. Some of the intelligence that we sent out to our air force so that they could bomb. I knew some of the intelligence was wrong and we might have destroyed a village for the wrong reason. But I kind of let that go, because that used to bother me. The legacy—I don't know the type of answer you want.

SE: I only want whatever answer you want to give me.

TS: It taught me a lot about the government. I make sure that the government's telling the truth. I guess I became more liberal. In my family, I'm more to the left. I have one brother who wasn't in Vietnam who is more to the right. Most of my brothers who were in Vietnam are more to the left. That's a legacy that changed us, because we are from a conservative type family. Just my sister and my older brother are conservative. Of course, we don't have arguments, because we know how the arguments get to. I guess that's the legacy. I learned a lot about my country. I have to watch out for them, because they're not perfect. Just with the conflicts now, I'm against the war. I still feel that way. I don't think they're going to find any weapons [in Iraq]. I think we're being lied to again. I was in some protests.

SE: As was I. This is the last question, and it's kind of a catch-all. Are there any questions that you wish I had asked or things that we didn't touch on that are important to put down on the record.

TS: To other Vietnam veterans, I wish you'd go to Vietnam to visit it again. And I wish the government would put a budget out there for any veteran from Vietnam who wanted to go back, because it would help a lot of them out. Basically, that's it.

SE: Thank you very much.