

4-3-1990

Interview with Master Sergeant Edwin Cunningham

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Interview
M/SGT Edwin A. Cunningham
1445 Hours, Thursday, 3 April 1990, by telephone
Battlefield Training Division
Military Police School
Ft. McClellan, Alabama

Q: Bill Keyes tells me you served at one time with Major Norwood Jackson.

A: Yes sir.

Q: Could you tell me about it?

A: I didn't actually serve with him. He was the Provost Marshall in the Mannheim community when I was stationed there.

Q: When was this?

A: 1970-1971.

Q: So this would be after he served in Vietnam.

A: Yes sir.

Q: I understand you had occasion to observe him.

A: Well, I observed the aftermath with a military prisoner. He had everyone leave the room and I observed the aftermath of his counselling session.

Q: What happened?

A: Well the furniture was turned over. Papers were strewn about. Books and everything else. The prisoner was--showed the effects of some, some, maybe, how should I put this? Excessive force.

Q: Had you occasion to observe the prisoner before you left the room?

A: Oh, yes. Yes. This was a disciplinary and adjustment board. A kind of mini-court in the military.

Q: How does this work, Master Sergeant?

A: Well, in the military correction system, when a prisoner violates a rule, you write a disciplinary report on him and depending on the severity of it, he can be placed in disciplinary segregation. At that time they had a reduced diet he could be placed on, depending on the rule he had broken and the severity of his actions.

Q: Any recollection of what this prisoner had done?

A: No, I don't. I was actually in charge of the -- all the prisoners who were appearing before the board and I was letting them in and out and maintaining what control I could at the time.

Q: Well that sounds almost like a civilian court clerk's job.

A: Similar. Yes. That was not a permanent duty. I was assigned that day.

Q: Was the prisoner white, black, yellow?

A: He was black.

Q: And you did have occasion to observe him up close?

A: Oh yes. Matter of fact I escorted him back to disciplinary segregation after the board.

Q: But you had also escorted him into the room then?

A: Yes.

Q: And what changes did you see in the prisoner?

A: Well, there was visible marks on the face. No bad, no bad or deep cuts or anything but you could tell he had had contact with his face and that area and uniform was in a state of disarray.

Q: Could that have been caused by falling off a table, you know, if he was sitting on the end of a table?

A: It could be caused by a table being turned over on him, maybe.

Q: Well . . .

A: How is this information going to be used?

Q: I have no idea. Probably just for my own interest, Master Sergeant.

A: O.K. I'm telling you this because Mr. Keyes told me you were interested in the information and I wouldn't want to be part of any civil suit.

Q: I understand that. I understand that. I've visited with some inmates who served in the Stockade in Vietnam while he was running it and they speak of him--you check this out and see if it fits.

A great big black man.

A: Yes.

Q: carried a swagger stick.

A: Well, he didn't when I knew him. I have heard that, but it was strictly rumor

Q: that he was very bright.

A: Yes. Seemed to be.

Q: a mathematical genius.

A: Well, that I wouldn't know about.

Q: and a sadist.

A: I don't know if I would classify him as a sadist. I think he was a strict disciplinarian and he tolerated very little, if any, insubordination or question of authority. I won't say that he was firm but fair; I won't go that far [STRANGE CHOICE OF WORDS, FOR UNKNOWINGLY, SGT CUNNINGHAM USED THE SAME PHRASE THAT JACKSON DID IN MY INTERVIEW WITH HIM TO DESCRIBE HIS POLICY.], but I think, you know, he had a job to do. You have to understand at the time the prison, the military system anyway, was in a state of turmoil. Racial problems. The Vietnam situation. I was an E-5 at the time. Mannheim was my first duty station in the army.

Q: You did not serve in Vietnam?

A: No. No, I did not.

Q: Well, he was deputy confinement officer from 1967 to about two weeks before the riot in August 1968. Inmates there at the time tell me "he just loved to beat on guys."

A: Well, I think he was a very physical person by nature. I don't know this to be true, but I heard a rumor one time that he had--was a semi-professional or professional football player in his younger years. He could have been, I tell you. He had the size for it.

Q: Did anything result in Mannheim in the way of rebuke for Major Jackson? By then I suppose he might have been a light colonel.

A: No. No. Not at all.

Q: How did the guards receive this sort of thing?

A: Well. I guess it depends on individual personalities, but I would just speculate that most of them kind of appreciated the support because we took a lot of abuse at the time and our complaints most times fell on deaf ears. I would imagine the majority of guards kind of appreciated that kind of support in his actions.

Q: Were you aware that this happened more than just the one time you

spoke of?

A: Not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge.

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