

Veteran: NAVA, Alfonso
Service Branch: ARMY
Interviewer: Coy, Marisa E.
Date of Interview: March 26, 2004
Date of Transcription: June 8, 2005
Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: **World War II; Technical Sergeant; Participated in liberation of Santo Tomas prison camp**

Interviewer: This is Marisa Coy interviewing Mr. Alfonso Nava on March 26, 2004, at Mr. Nava's home.

Are you aware that our conversation is being recorded, and that the tape and transcription will be placed in the Lee College library? Do I have your permission to do that?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: What is your name and age?

Veteran: My name is Alfonso Nava. My age is 82.

Interviewer: What was your rank in the military, and how long was your service?

Veteran: I was a technician sergeant, and I served five years in the Army.

Interviewer: How old were you when you joined the military?

Veteran: I'd say about 24 years old.

Interviewer: What made you decide that you wanted to serve in the military?

Veteran: Well, in my day I was serving in the CCC camp, the Conservation—I don't know what they called it back then—and we were working for the government. After we served our time working for them, they started sending letters to people to see if they wanted to join the service or later on they'd probably be drafted. See, the draft was coming in. They gave us a chance if we volunteered our service, we'd

have a better choice, or something like that. I volunteered, and the rest of them waited until they were drafted. They gave me a good chance to set up what ever I volunteered for, so they offered me a chance to go to school and I learned a lot of things in the service. They sent me Fort Riley, Kansas, and I was trained over there in the 1st Cavalry Division. See, this is my outfit. {Veteran showing photograph to Interviewer.}

Interviewer: Is that the area that you chose to be in?

Veteran: I volunteered to go in the Army, and they sent me to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, and then I served at Fort Clark, Texas, in the cavalry, and then later on I was transferred to Fort Bliss in El Paso. I served there, and then I was transferred to Marfa, Texas. I was put in a border patrol outpost, and we rode horses all along the border. In those days, the cavalry all rode horses. We spent time in different places guarding the border. After that they sent me to Fort Riley, Kansas, and I became a horseshoer in the Army, shoeing the horses. They always asked me if I wanted to volunteer for something else, and I always volunteered, because I wanted to go to school. That was my idea. I was shoeing horses in Fort Bliss, Texas, for a long time—maybe about a year—then we went to maneuvers and trained in Louisiana. We had maneuvers all over Louisiana, and every year we went there and had maneuvers with all the troops together. They asked me again if I was going to go school, so I went to school in Fort Bliss to become a bugler in the Army. They put me in regimental headquarters. In those days, you had to blow so many calls, and I had to learn them all, because that's the way the Army moves...by calls. Every call means something for the soldiers. They know what to do.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of different calls?

Veteran: I had about 48 calls. We had a bugler drum corps, and we trained with soldiers—drilling the soldiers. It was very military in those days. You had to go through all that training, and then after that they teach you how to fight with machine guns, rifles, or whatever they had—they gave you training in all that.

Interviewer: How long would it last?

Veteran: Oh, I stayed about three years all over Texas doing the work for the Army as a soldier. After that, the war was declared with Japan after they bombed Pearl Harbor. They took all the horses away from us, and gave us tanks and trucks and everything was mechanized.

Interviewer: So ya'll had to learn about those things?

Veteran: We had to go back to train again, and stayed in training for a little while—maybe about six months—learning what to do in case they sent us overseas. I was sent over to Australia and was trained there. When we got over there, they had jungle training, so I was trained with the Navy there for amphibious training to make landings on the islands. From Australia, we went to different islands making landings. We stayed awhile in Brisbane, Australia, training. There was a base there where they trained all the troops.

Interviewer: When did you go to the islands?

Veteran: It's been so long ago that it happened. I went to the southern Philippine Islands, Luzon, New Guinea, and we made our first landing in the Amorty(?) Islands. The Japanese had an airport there, so we took all of that, but it took a little while to take it. A lot of people died there, so we'd stop and get all the people and bury them. We stayed there to rest for awhile until we got ready for another landing, so it took us a little while. We built a cemetery, we built a church, we built a mess hall—we built everything there on the island to stay there to be trained. Then we hit Leyte, which is another island that's going up to the Philippine Islands. It was full of Japanese. The Marines, the cavalry, the infantry, the Air Force, and the Navy went in—everybody went. It looked like a movie, but it was pretty bad, so a lot of people died there. Some of them was brought in from ships—LSTs—and more boats after that, and then they landed—landing barges they called them. You could just walk out of them, but sometimes you didn't get to, because they bombed them and flipped them over, so some of them didn't make it. The ones that made it kept on going. The Japanese had pill boxes formed where we couldn't get in, so they got us to stay a long time trying to get in. The Marines were there, but they couldn't get in. It was too hot for them, so

we had to let the Navy shell some more and the Air Force drop bombs. It was day and night that we'd fight. We had to be careful at night because they would come in in boats and submarines. They'd give us a lot of fighting at night.

Interviewer: So when would you sleep?

Veteran: We didn't get no chance to rest. We went through lots of misery by the time we got out of there. After Leyte I was wounded going to Lucina Tayavas (sic)—it's a big town. A lot of people know that place. We were going through there, but they broke all the bridges, they broke all the roads, and we couldn't get through. We had to walk through the water and everything, and build bridges for the trucks, and a lot of things because the Japanese would mess it up, so we'd just keep on going anyway we could until we'd get to Manila. Manila is the capital of the Philippine Islands. When we got to Manila, then we had to get all the prisoners out of Santo Tomas University. They called it the liberation. They had the civilian people there locked up at the university for three years, and we had to get 'em all out and put 'em in trucks. They gave us one hour to do that, and then after that they shelled everything again. The engineers went in to break all the lines for mines so the tanks could go through. After we got to Manila we had to fight it out in a bunch of buildings, and we didn't know much about fighting in buildings. You can't hear where the sound of the shells comes from. They echo. It's different. We had been fighting in jungles. By the time we got to Manila, got all the prisoners out, and took over the capital, we only had about 300 men left. The 1st Cavalry Division was the one that was there first in Manila, and was sent by General MacArthur. I'm just telling you a little part, and later on you can put it all together. MacArthur wanted us to be there first, but by doing that we lost a lot of people. I say that a lot of people died in those days, but the government never brings it up. They never say anything, and the people never say anything. They just say, "Aw, just forget it!" No, you can't forget it. You went through something. You can't forget it. I say that was something we need to talk about because it was real! It's not just a movie. After I was wounded they sent me to the hospital, and I was there maybe about two or three weeks. It was an outside hospital in the jungle, but they kept me there for awhile. See, they threw a grenade at me, and when that grenade exploded, pieces of shrapnel hit my neck

and blew my rifle away, so what I had was just the butt of the rifle hanging on my shoulder. I was just hollering like I was crazy, but the sound of the explosion—I guess I just went crazy when they picked me up. They pick you up and drag you out. They said, “You was hollering, and hollering!” And I said, “Well, I was burning up.” It was hot! I was trying to get those things out of my neck. They say pieces of shrapnel—or steel—got inside there, and when they got me to the hospital, they opened it up and took it out. The doctor said that I was lucky. He said, “A little more and you’d be out—you’d be gone!” I told him, “Man, I knew something had happened, but I didn’t know what had happened.” But see, that’s what they do when you’re out in the jungle. The enemy may be out there but you don’t know.

Interviewer: How did you know where they were?

Veteran: They had snipers all the time in the trees that were shooting everybody they saw. Even if we couldn’t see them, they could see you with a telescope or binoculars. You had to get off of the trails if you were gonna walk. Hide yourself to go in. Don’t walk through the trails, because they’re looking at you. You’d have a better chance. Those people were really dug in with pill boxes as big as this room but under the ground. They had it all camouflaged, and they had machine guns. They were shooting through there, but you can’t see them. The only way we could get them was to get close to him and then telephone back to shell the place. Give the order to shell right there, and then we’d push in and throw grenades at them, and we’d keep going until we got the machine gunners. Once you got a machine gunner out, then the men could start coming in. It was pretty hot. They were just waiting for us at the time, and people were just falling down. We had to take care of the snipers first, then the pill boxes, and then we made a way to get the troops in. When I blew the bugle, they knew. I’d blow retreat, attack, charge or whatever the general or the officers tell you. So when they started charging, I just started blowing my bugle. {Laughter} It’s something that looks like a movie to me. I didn’t see why they didn’t make a movie, because there were some people there taking pictures at the time. When we were making the landing, I said, “Hey, what are ya’ll gonna do?” They said, “You’re gonna be in the

movies.” I was always thinking I was going to be in the movies, but I never did see nothing.

Interviewer: How did the American public react to you and the other soldiers when you came back?

Veteran: I need to say something, even though some people don't want you to tell the truth. In Australia, they separated the black people and the white people. They put a red light district, and you couldn't go over there, just over here. I wondered why we couldn't go over there. They had guards and we could go there, so I went to see what happened. There was nothing but black people in that area going with people in Australia. The Australians say, “OK!” They don't discriminate like we do. They're nice people. I didn't like that because they separated us. Then, when we got over here at Fort Sam Houston, coming back on a train from California we came over here to be discharged, and they separated us again. They separate the blacks, the Mexicans, and the whites in the barracks. “You go there, you go there, you go there.” I said, “Man, what's going on? What did we go to fight for?” Discrimination was all over in Texas. When I was discharged, they said I was OK when I went to have my physical to get discharged. But a week after I was discharged, I got sick, and I had malaria. This is true. I had a hard time getting the government to take me back to the hospital. They wouldn't take me. They said, “No, he's alright. We don't having nothing to do with him no more.” Just like I was nobody. I had to go to doctors, and the Red Cross told me, “Look, Mr. Nava, you have to go back to the government because this is their case.” I didn't know what malaria was, but it can knock you out just like you're going to die. Pains come in your chest and fever. You stay in bed for a month, and then you can't eat or anything. You suffer a lot. They didn't want to take care of me, and that's what I don't like about our government. They mistreated me after I done a good job and volunteered, and I don't understand why they treated me that way.

Interviewer: When were you discharged?

Veteran: In '45. Then I went to get a job and got one, but in those days they didn't pay but seventy-nine cents an hour. I said, “OK, whatever,” but I couldn't stay on the job

because the malaria got me. I had it for about three years, and I had to go to the hospital, and finally they took me into the hospitals because the doctors wrote letters and the Red Cross wrote letters to Washington, and then Washington wrote me that I was fifty percent disabled. The doctors over here didn't believe that I was sick. What I'm saying is they gave me a hard time. As a citizen of the United States, if we want to bring it up on politics, this what we need to bring up. As a human being and a citizen, we need to have rights and get everything for you, because you've got it coming. A lot of people are coming into this country and are getting what they want because of the politics. They get jobs, they get houses, they get food, they get clothing—whatever they want, and I can't even get nothing. I've got the letter showing what Washington was saying right here {showing letter to Interviewer}, and that's why they don't like me, because I'm telling the truth. This is my Purple Heart that they sent me from Washington.

Interviewer: Did you get this before or after you wrote Washington?

Veteran: After I came over here, they sent it to my house. This letter came from Washington. It's about the disability because of my health. This is my picture in those days when I was young. My daddy had that picture, but he passed away and they sent it back to me. It was taken at Fort Bliss in El Paso. I took some pictures, and then I sent them to my family because I was leaving the United States and going away. {END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A—SIDE B BEGINS} My grandmother moved to Carlsbad, New Mexico, and when I left I took a picture over there and they put it with all the soldiers from New Mexico. This newspaper is from New Mexico.

Interviewer: When you went off to war, were you able to write letters to your family? What would you write them about the war? Would you tell them what was going on?

Veteran: My aunt received a letter from me while I was overseas, and I told her I was wounded.

Interviewer: When you were in the war, what did you miss most?

Veteran: Well, I'll tell you, I didn't miss nobody, because all of my family went back to Mexico. I had half-sisters, half-brothers, and they all went back to Mexico. I was

the only one to stay here. Most everybody had wives, some of them had girlfriends, but I didn't have nobody. I had my grandmother in New Mexico, and I wrote to her so she could keep up with me. When I was discharged, it was in New Mexico, but I was born in Alpine, Texas. My mother died there way back. I'm talking about at the beginning my life, my mother died when I was born, and I was raised by my grandmother. Then later on my daddy married again, and that's why I had half-sisters and half-brothers.

Interviewer: What conditions did you see while you were in the war? How was life over there?

Veteran: The people were good and they were nice. I tried to help the people because they were poor by giving them some food, and they gave us fruit. They would bring us baskets of bananas, pineapples, oranges, and would give it to the soldiers.

Interviewer: Was it mostly jungle?

Veteran: The Philippine Islands are built out of mostly jungles, and they've got a rainy season where it rains all the time. We were all the time wet, wet, wet. Even the rifles wouldn't do nothing, because they were so wet. They call it the monsoon season over there. And I learned a little Filipino. You hear people say they can't learn English, but they can do it if they want to. The government gave us a little book, and the Filipino language is called it Tagalog. I said, "Hey, let's learn some of this language so we can talk to 'em," so we were all playing together and everybody learned different words, and then they'd pass it on. So I learned the Tagalog. {Veteran says some words and phrases in Tagalog.}

Interviewer: Did the training you received prepare you for combat?

Veteran: Oh, yeah. They prepared me for combat, they trained me, they taught me how to fire rifles, machine guns, bazookas, and everything. So I knew all of that.

Interviewer: Where you when you first heard you were going to be shipped overseas?

Veteran: They give you a warning. They say, "Get ready." They didn't know where we were going, but they told us that later they would get more orders and would tell us more. About where we were going to attack, what we were gonna do, and how

we were gonna do it, who's gonna go there. The Marines, the Navy, the Army, and everybody was called by numbers: first wave, second wave, third wave, fourth wave, and we were going from the water to the shore to do the landing. We had a number for every landing crew, so you'd know what wave you'd be in, and what time and how they were gonna get there.

Interviewer: What was your reaction? Were you scared or excited? Did you have any feeling about going like "this is it"?

Veteran: There were old people and young people with us, and the old people helped us by encouraging us by saying, "Don't worry about it. There ain't nothing to it. Everything is going to be alright." When you see soldiers falling and dying and hollering and all, there is nothing you can do but just keep going, keep going. There were some soldiers there that would say, "Hey, give me a cigarette." I told them, "I don't smoke, but let me see if I can find you one," so we went to the dead people and got a cigarette for them, because they were wounded and were dying for a cigarette. I'll never forget the people.

Interviewer: What was the daily routine like for you when you were in or out of combat?

Veteran: I served as a bugler, as a rifleman, machine gunner, bazooka, and then when we had to climb the mountain we got ambushed up there. We had to bring the wounded down, and I was serving as a medic, too. I was in charge of all the wounded people, and we had Filipino people that were helping bring all the wounded down. They were hired by the government. We had to tie them with ropes, and the mountains are wet and slick, but we had to just take them to the bottom the best we could so the medics at the bottom could take care of them. We'd just give him a shot of morphine, and he'd keep quiet.

Interviewer: Was that the only war you participated in?

Veteran: No. There were four wars that I served in. I was in Australia six months, New Guinea five months, Philippine Islands five months, Manila eight months. I went to four battles, so they gave me four stars in my record. {Veteran shows his medals to Interviewer.} This is the Purple Heart, my combat badge, and my ribbons. They're all in there. This was my outfit—Loyalty and Courage—that

was my 5th Cavalry regiment. I was serving under that regiment. The 1st Cavalry is divided into different branches—1st, 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 7th, 8th, 11th, 12th regiments or outfits that belonged to this cavalry. I belong to this association of cavalries at Camp Hood, Texas. There's more history up there, and they've got pictures and a lot of things there of people from way back. [At the reunions] they give you a hotel and celebrate about a week all together, but they tell you from here where they're gonna be. Probably this year it's gonna be in New York. They're gonna have a big turnout for the soldiers to get together, and you'll be surprised how many you know there. Very many have already died, and then some you wouldn't know because they're getting old.

Interviewer: As you were fighting, did your perspective change about the involvement in the war? Did you understand what you were fighting for?

Veteran: General MacArthur told us when we took the island, "Boys, you are dying now, but when you get back to your country, nobody will step on you." General MacArthur told us those words. He said, "A good soldier never dies, he fades away." I always believed everything they told me, but then after that it's not true what they say. They don't stand by what they say.

Interviewer: How did the American public react after the war ended? Did they treat you with respect that you did serve in the Army, and that you and all the other soldiers behind you helped protect our country? Did they act like that?

Veteran: After we got back, they forgot all about it—just like you'd gone to a picnic or something and came back. They don't talk about it—especially the Mexican people. Some of them were wounded, some were prisoners of war, and they won't say a word. Some of them were tortured, but they won't say a word. I don't know if they're ashamed, but they're citizens and soldiers. The government doesn't stop and find out about the people. They send them to war, and after the war forget it. They don't know you anymore. And that's not right. They don't say nothing about the people that went and sacrificed themselves, do something for their country.

Interviewer: How was the life of the people living over in Australia and the Philippines compare with life in the United States? Did you feel like here in America it was better than how they lived?

Veteran: There's poor people over there. They don't have homes like we have. Their homes are made of bamboo. They build them real nice, but they're all made of bamboo. They grow pineapple and other kinds of fruit. It's good in the city, but then we tore it all up. We tore down the hospital, everything. Probably by now it's already built back. I asked the people over there if they wanted to go to the United States, and they said, "No." I asked one of the nurses why, and she said, "Because you see this color? They don't like you over there." I said, "Oh, well, I don't blame you."

Interviewer: Do you feel that the armed forces had an impact on your life that you would treasure in any way? Are you glad that you experienced what you did?

Veteran: Yeah. I can help somebody with my experiences and tell you who's who. I can tell when they're telling the truth. You know how I find the truth? In everything by listening to God, because God is the truth. He said, "You will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." For a long time I had my eyes closed and just said, "Yes sir, No sir," and that's all I knew to do. That's the way the American people had us going with discrimination. But I said I was tired of doing all this 'babysitting' for these people. Right now I'm fighting my way with the V.A. Hospital. In those days when I got out of the Army, they didn't take care of me, and I had to work. If I stayed sick and didn't work, I didn't get paid. I had to take money out of my pocket to get medicine and get somebody to take me to the hospitals. They sent me to Galveston and Fort Crockett, and I didn't have a way to go, so I had to pay somebody to take me. They gave me \$57.00 a month for two years, and after two years the government took it away. After that I kept getting sick, and I had to do it all myself. Right now I'm fighting that all that time they didn't listen to me, they didn't pay me, and as a citizen that went to fight, they should have listened to me and helped me, but they didn't. \$57 is just like a "tip" they gave me for my life. I feel like the government mistreated me, and when I told them that they started sending me \$200, but that wasn't enough. I got out in 1945 and in 1948 they took it away from me. I had to do it all myself.

Why? My lawyer asked me why I was sent back to the front lines after I was wounded, and I told him there was discrimination. Some of the soldiers shot themselves in the leg or acted sick so they could get sent back home.

Interviewer: Did you have any friends or family members that enlisted at the same time you did?

Veteran: Yeah. I had a bunch of them that went but some of them didn't pass their physical.

Interviewer: What did you have to complete at the physical?

Veteran: If anything is wrong with you, like being flat footed because you can't climb. But that's not true, because I saw people out there climbing mountains that were flat footed. I always thought that being a citizen, there's a lot of things that are worthwhile, but I always wondered why I wasn't treated as a citizen. I went to war. I went to fight, and then I came back and was mistreated. Why? And those people that are crossing the border, they're already up to date right now. They have it better than I had. {END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B }

{TAPE 2, SIDE A BEGINS }

Interviewer: Did you have a best part about being in the military?

Veteran: Well, it's a good life, but why be mistreated as an American? Why do you get bumped up and kicked?

Interviewer: What kind of food did you eat over there, and how did you get it?

Veteran: We didn't get no food. We got what they called K-rations. They were little bitty boxes, like those little weenie cans. They were emergency rations, and that's all you'd eat. A plane would come and throw it out with a parachute, and we'd go over there and grab it.

Interviewer: How did you find out the war had ended? Did they get everybody together, or how was it done?

Veteran: We were getting ready to go to Tokyo, Japan, and when they told us how many points we had (that was how much time you'd been fighting), and I had 108

points for my time. The rest of them that didn't have enough were taken to Japan. They told me I had too many points already, and I could go back to the states.

Interviewer: How many points did you have to reach?

Veteran: 108. Plus I had a Purple Heart, and that helps a lot. They asked me if I wanted to reenlist, and I said, "No, I've learned my lesson." If I hadn't died, I didn't want to die.

Interviewer: How did you feel about the war in Vietnam?

Veteran: I didn't feel good, because of presidents like Nixon, that war was a political war. It wasn't like the war we went through. We fought the Philippine Islands, the Pacific Islands, and then there was another war with Germany.

Interviewer: Do you have anything else you want to add about your time in the military?

Veteran: I'd like to say this in plain words. I like to be treated as a human being and as a citizen of the United States and like they treat the rest of the people that are not citizens. I just want to have respect.

Interviewer: Thank you for your time your willingness to do this interview.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}