

Oral History Transcript

Interviewers: Michael D. Milligan and Sharon Milligan

Oral History Candidate: Len Cordoza Class of 1941

May 12 2011 in San Diego, CA

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*What brought you to the military academy?* Well I guess I'd say my parents. They just wanted to make sure I got a good, sound education, and being an only child, they felt the discipline would be beneficial, and it was; there's no question about that.

*You came in the first days of Brown...* Yes, at the time our application went in-my parents did the application-it was San Diego Army and Navy Academy, and when I arrived in September, it was Brown Military Academy. It was 1937.

*That was the first year it started?* Yes, under the Brown...

*What was your first impression?* Well, I didn't of course, I had an impression of a military academy. I couldn't differentiate between what was San Diego Army and Navy Academy and Brown Military Academy. I was-I felt lost my first weeks there, just totally lost. And I made friends with some of the other new cadets, and we got by, but it was kind of like 'gee, I wish I were home,' you know, I missed being home that first year, and we went through the program. I finished the year and I wanted to come back. Yes, after I completed that first year, I wanted to come back. I had friends there now, and I knew my way around a little bit and so I just planned to come back and I came back. I was living at that time in the San Walking (?) Valley and in the meantime, my parents moved down here because they had an affiliation with some people here in San Diego. So I stayed at the academy. I wasn't much of a student academically; I never really could get serious about my studies. In fact, the whole time I was at Brown, I worked at it-I took the ROTC classes, I took all the courses, I passed them, but I wasn't highly enthusiastic about academics at the time. When I finished or graduated, I went back to RCA Institute in New York to study radio engineering and at that time I came back for the Christmas holiday and the war broke out in the meantime. So I decided I wasn't going back to New York; I went back to the academy. I was on the Junior JC level and that was in December and I turned 19 on January 27, '42. And that month, the war department lowered the commission age from 21 to 19, and I became a second lieutenant.

*So as the first year in the academy, you guys set some of the traditions, or did you just kind of feel your way through?* Some of the traditions existed. They were carry-overs from the San Diego Army/Navy Academy when they were good. The things that I found a little bit restrictive for a high school level at that time, there were no co-ed activities (*There's no girls on campus, are there?*) No. There were no social activities until Colonel Davis returned and everything just changed around. It was my Junior year. We had dances, we had more social activities. It made it a little more pleasant.

*Do you feel it really helped the morale to have these social events?* Yes I do.

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*The living on campus, what barracks did you stay in?* That would be B-Company Barracks, I was in B-Company Barracks the entire time I was there, although I was offered captaincy for A-Company, however I declined it because I wanted to stay with people I knew.

*My father was in B Compan. Yeah I have a picture of him having the guys come at 6:30 in the morning and there's a picture of him walking the line to make sure everyone was...your uncle was, I think was in A-Company. (Michael Roberts, he didn't last long did he?)* He was only there a year. I have...(You have a picture of him in his annual?) Yeah.

*I'm looking through the annual of 1940. There's a machine gun here!*

Yes. We had drills disassembling and assembling, we did not actually fire the machine gun. It was set up for simulating firing. *(That's not fun. You don't get to shoot it! That is just amazing.)* The thing is that between the Junior and Senior year, what I mean, if you were in the ROTC program between your Junior and Senior year, you did 6 weeks with the army, and at that time, it was, we were at Camp Roberts, before it was Fort Roberts, Camp Roberts. *(Where was this at?)* It was up in Monterrey, over at Colinas Alley. *(What time of year did you guys go up there?)* In the summer. *(So when school ended, you had to do your ROTC...)* ...summer duty. *(How was that?)* It was interesting because here are high school kids between our Junior and Senior year; all the other kids were off in college, between their Junior and Senior year. So we took kind of a rubbing. But it was fun.

*What were some of the thing you did at this camp?* Rifle range, actual firing, we had to go through the gas mask drills, going at the tents with the gas, so we had to be able to put on our gas masks. The things we almost, the things identically we did when we...in fact I was commissioned and taking the recruits or draftees through basic training, what was the condensed version of that.

*So if things did happen, you guys has already gone through it in a sense. Yes.*

*I'm looking through this annual, this is 1940, again, I see the change here. You have hosts and guests here. There are women. Trying to think what this is, this is Halloween?* They had the Bound Girls School in Glendora. And they would bring girls down for a day. *(You wouldn't imagine that today.)* No. *(I got to be honest with you, I kind of like the idea. Kind of get things straight and normal.)* They had a beautiful bus that the associate director designed. He was the son of...Brown's son-in-law, he designed it. They were good people. His picture's in there someplace.

*I just found out that he died, Mr. Brown...died in the 1970s. What a beautiful picture of the campus in this catalogue. You know, I drive by this every day, and it's just heart-wrenching to me. That's a beautiful campus.* It was, it was a nice campus.

*And Dr. Brown, let's see, I don't see him listed here...So what do you know about Colonel Davis?* He was involved in WWII as I understand it, and he started the academy in fact around 1917. *(Do you know where it was at?)* I think it was here at Pacific Beach. When it was San Diego Army and Navy Academy,

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it was at Pacific Beach and at that location they had the wood huts and it was quite a while before they had the barracks and things.

*I'm looking here at the Easter reception in 1940. There's young kids, so was family invited? Yes.*

*So I'm reading here how at the beginning of the year, Dr. and Mrs. Brown held a reception for you guys? Yes, they did. Yeah, it says that 'the social event of the year was reception for Dr. and Mrs. John E. Brown held on Wednesday evening, September 20, attended by all members of the faculty, staff, with their wives and by old and new cadets.'*

*So what was the normal week like when you went there? How the day started? At...we had to get up, get our beds made, and then go out to formation. Then there was the same formation and a recall and then it was called to go to breakfast, we would fall in formation and we marched to the mess hall and we would march back and we might have to do a little close-order drill and then we had about 45 minutes or so for classes to start. We'd go attend the classes and then break for noon, go into formation again, march. Initially, they had a dating chapel service before lunch. I'm not sure if that continued all the way through.*

*Was it once a week or every week that you had to go to services? Every Sunday. Somewhere on campus, they had a service for those who went to church off campus and I could tell you about the study hall. If you don't maintain a grade average, you got with the study hall Friday. If you still-Friday night you went to study hall, and Saturday morning you'd go to study hall if your grades weren't up and you'd go to study hall Saturday afternoon, no weekend pass if you were in study hall and they had study hall during the week as well in the evening, but that weekend thing, that was could tail your week(?). I spent a lot of time in study hall as a student.*

*Do you feel though that it helped? Oh yeah. It did. As I mentioned, I was an only child and the discipline at the academy really did help me.*

*If you were to go to a high school at the time, they didn't have a study hall like that, so the chances of you being as successful...No, I'd be off doing something else in the evening. I think that that happens, you know, it's the system of the day.*

*The guys that you know in Company-B that you experienced with, were a lot of them there because their parents put them there for better education? I think from a stand-point of education, yes. I don't know of anyone who was there on the disciplinary problems. I didn't sense that, but I think it was just that their parents wanted them to get a solid education, and it was, even though I was no star academically, I did learn.*

*I found that their classes were one or two steps above in terms of what was being required of you and what was being taught to you. It was geared towards college entrance. There were no vocational courses. It was strictly academic. We had math, we took language, we took math, we took history, the whole sphere (?). (Yeah, I saw physics, the math, the level was just amazing.)*

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*What do you feel the academy taught you in terms of leadership and camaraderie?* I think it...loyalty the core type of thing, the pride in citizenship we really instilled. During my four years there, we had magnificent professor of military science and tactics, Colonel James Donnahue(?) and his assistant was an army sergeant, John Barnham and they were absolutely magnificent. *(What did they teach you?)* Oh, military procedures, things like military correspondence and in training, they taught us tactics, military tactics, they taught us weapons and they had a rifle team, put that, that they had a rifle team there and Sergeant Barn., and he...we had an arsenal downstairs with the old (?) Springfield rifles. We had to take those apart, put them back together and in the beginning they were all in cosmoline and we had to take them, clean up, get all the cosmoline off of them.

*What about in terms of getting you guys to work together as a group. The academy prepared you for teamwork, but not necessarily in terms of athletics, but you had inspections that had to be done, and there were consequences if the inspections weren't up to snuff, correct? And so you always had to make sure your roommate...Oh yes, there was a cooperative effort, because if your roommate goofed off, you got in trouble too. It was a close camaraderie. Within the company, competition between the companies, A-Company and B-Company, was rather intense. (you feel that that was kind of built into the program?)* Yes, I think it was. *(What do you think it instilled in you guys?)* Loyalty to the group and it was a discipline because we respected our cadet officers. *(I find that that's a very positive thing.)* There was a feeling of teamwork and we got to know each other socially; we got to know other cadets' parents and things like that. It was a good life-experience. *(Do you feel that it prepared you for later on in life? How did it help you in terms of becoming a lieutenant in the army?)* I was 19 years old and I was a Second Lieutenant and I was scared to death, but the academy, my experience at the academy really benefited me. I started out, I went to Camp Robert's, working there training draftees and stuff, basic training and then I went on to Fort Penning (?) Communication school there, infantry communication school and then I was assigned to a division and that's where it began to come together because I didn't really know enough I felt to have been a second lieutenant at that age, but it came together there and then I was shipped to the Pacific, and I spent a short time teaching weapons and such at a replacement depot and then I was assigned to the 147<sup>th</sup> infantry, which was a separate regiment and that was a tremendously wonderful experience. It was hectic, but I felt I had come into my own now; I knew what I was doing. *(What were you, 21, 22 at this point?)* I just turned 21, I voted for the first time.

*Did you actually see action in the Pacific?* The 147<sup>th</sup> was a separate infantry regiment. It was leftover from the old Ohio National Guard division, when they triangulized, that was leftover, so they shipped them out as a separate regiment. I joined them on New Caladonia(?), they'd been on Glottal Canal(?) and we went through intense training period and we wound up with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine division on Iwo Jima.

*Believe it or not, you were there with my uncle Roberts' other brother. My uncle Ed was in the Marine Corps. I had two uncles, my uncle Reubel, who married my uncle Robert's sister and then my uncle Edwin, who was the third youngest. He was in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, my uncle Reubel was in the 4<sup>th</sup>. Uncle Edwin was wounded in the wheat grinder on Iwo Jima. My uncle Reubel was wounded twice or three times on the beach there facing the Sarabache. So we had this connection there. You were there with my family. We were committed to doing a lot of the mopping up. We worked caves and things of that nature. You*

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know, working caves and doing that, it's not pleasant, but you do it. (*it's war*) yes. And I came back to the United States and I had to go an EKG, you know, they put you in the tube. I had claustrophobia. They had to put me on the thing...I don't know where that came from!

*What's interesting, one day we were talking to a neighbor, and he happened to be the first pilot to land on Iwo Jima while the fighting was still going on, when they had captured the air-field. He was the first pi-he lived right down the street from my parents and he was the first pilot. And my uncle Reubel was a mailman who delivered mail and they didn't know this until long past his actual retirement. It's just amazing that, "yeah, I was the first pilot to touch down, and get out of there!"*

You know, after Iwo, we were sent to Tenian, my battalion was sent to Temian, the rest of the regiment was sent to Zaipan, and things were pretty (*war starting to...*) well, almost over, but there were still hold-out Japanese soldiers on Tenien and one of the jobs we had was to try to dig them out and get them to surrender. We also had guard duty down at the airport on the Inola Gay before it was getting ready to fly. So we had been a security detail down there on the Inola Gay.

*I just met a man working at Western Palms who was a survivor of the U.S.S. Atlas, who delivered the bomb to the Inola Gay and he was in the water for four days. It's just amazing! So you got to see the Inola Gay. Did you ever get to meet DooLittle? No, I never did.*

*I'm in awe. Seriously.* It was interesting because after they dropped the second bomb, course, they were calling it quits over there and they were going to fly the victory mission, B-29s and heavy bombers over Japan, and we were invited as passengers on the plane, but our commanding officer refused because of insurance problems. Can you believe that?

*Okay, let's go back to the academy. That's an amazing story, and I'm glad to see that Brown was able to help you, prepare you for the military service in this time.* Well, Brown Military Academy was a very important part of my life at a critical time in my life. *Well, I'm finding out with most of the men that I'm interviewing that the impact is tremendous. I mean my father was forced to go to Brown. The court ordered him to Brown and he always talks about how it was the best time of his life, you know, in terms of maturing and stuff. One of the things that was interesting is the parades. How often did you guys do parades? Once a week. Was it just for practice or... No, they were done as kind of a public relations thing for the community. We always had some military high-ranking officer, usually from the marines, army or the navy review the parades and it was practice, but they were full-dress parades. The key there, it was practice and drill for the cadets, but it presented a nice image with the community.*

*When you were there, was it just primarily high school, or did they have the younger grades also? They had the junior school. That was in C-Barracks. And they were pretty much isolated. I'm starting to see that they really were at a good job of keeping you guys isolated. Their lunch time was at a certain time. They were gone by the time you came in so there was no mixing in there. Yes.*

*What was the athletic program like with you? I participated in track. I played for one year, my junior year, when I played football. Did you guys have a standard P.E. class like they did in public schools? No,*

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we would have calisthenics. That was morning. We were brought up to calisthenics class, we would have calisthenics. That was usually in the morning. The afternoon program, the athletic program, but there was no thing like a P.E. class. We had intramural sports, but then they offered a lot of opportunities there for you: tennis, biking, track and swimming.

*Did you go to any of the football games?* Oh yeah, I always attended the football games. *Those were kind of disheartening, weren't they?* Yes. *I'm reading, and you guys never won a game hardly!* In all the years, I can't find...Well, we had some pretty good teams. *You didn't have the draw like the public schools had.* Right, when you have about 120 students sometimes. *Did you know that Brown Military Academy was one of the fifth largest high schools of its time?* I still need to verify that. It might be in terms of age range, not in terms of population. *I'm trying to research to find that.* I think practically all the local schools were much bigger than-student body-wise-than Brown Military.

*What about the accreditation?* You guys, the thing I'm totally in awe of is Brown Military's reputation as the West Point of the west. At that time, under the war department, Brown Military was designated an honored ROTC unit. It was accorded the same level as a college ROTC unit. But you could earn your commission from Brown Military Academy. *Was that pretty rare?* Yes, I think there were only two or three that called for military academy. But that was a designation through the war department and we had fulltime military staff running, we had the professor of military science and tactics and his assistant. We had classes, I mean regular classes in ROTC that we had to attend. A lot of...?...we attacked...?Mon Soladay in many, many tanks?...*Did they ever attack back?* Well, there was nothing there then either. There was a cross. *The cross was there? Really?* The cross was there before the war? Yeah. *All this fight for nothing; it's just amazing to me.* And we used to go out there; we would have big-wacks like out at the old Capitan. We'd go out and pitch up tents and simulate attacks and defenses and such. *Did you guys ever have outings together?* We used to get together in I mean certain groups. Especially like with the ?? group it would happen. We'd go out for the weekend. *Any excursions to Mexico?* There were a couple. *Okay, well that's okay. I'm hearing this as I'm going along. There were some excursions to Qui Juana.* Yeah, there were. *Was the academy aware or unaware of this?* Well, I don't know how, but they sure as hell found out. Dan Terry, I don't know if you've heard of Dan Terry. He was a commandant of cadets. That's another great man, Daniel. *Dan Terry. You think he's still alive?* No, Dan passed away. He was a commandant of cadets and I don't know, I think there was some sort of falling out with him and the school and then he wound up as an instructor at San Diego Army and Navy Academy. *There it is, Daniel Terry, T-E-R-R-Y. See that? There he is.* Yeah, he's a West Point graduate. He left the surge to become an opera singer and his voice cracked. *He was musician, literature sportsman and dispodarian.* Yeah, he worked with the glee club and he was a pretty tough taskmaster. He was a good man. And this is colonel Donahue who, I think he wound up as a general during the war. *Oh, professor of military science and tactics, James H. Donahue, D-O-N-A-H-U-E, colonel in 1941. Wow. These dress uniforms are just classic. I have this one and I have the regular, this one. So tell me about polishing the buttons.* And the button boards. It was like a scissors, two sheets of metal with notches, and we brought it together and the buttons fit through those notches. And you'd just polish, you'd polish the button boards and the buttons. *One person said you had to polish 'til the lacker was off. You*

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had to, they got to looking kind of funny. *How much time did it take you guys to do that? I mean, you had your casual and you had your dress. You had to polish the buttons on both of them, did you not?*

The casual uniforms, it was the regular...*The underclassmen would have the standard...oh, there's no buttons on there.* These are what we normally wear, everyday uniform, but there's a terrific picture of Dan Terry right here. Have him looking at you across the table. *'Although his job is not an easy one, Major Terry handles it with a great deal of finesse. A graduate of West Point, the Duke, as we know him, best knows what cadet life is like from actual experience. He revels in the building of youth character, mental, moral and physical and is always ready to help us with our problems. A little awed by his piercing, straight-forward gaze, we soon found that he was a friend as well as a disciplinarian.'* What kind of discipline did they issue out? We had, there would be a daily delinquency list. You could get on the delinquency list for any number of infractions and you could be reported by cadet officers. *So what would happen to you?* Well, you might get assigned extra duty. You might have to go walk with a backpack or with a rifle and you walk back and forth or there might be an hour of extra duty where you have to just stand out there and walk around the quadrangle. *Was there ever corporal punishment issued? Or do you even know that they practiced corporal punishment at this time?* No, I don't, we used to have the belt line, but that was not really sanctioned by the academy. That was within the officers who...?...The company officers and non-commissioned officers would usually take care of minor discipline within the company, I mean running someone through the belt line. They'd take their belt off and swung them as they ran through there. *I'm sure that the academy itself made sure that it was never, that if it got out of hand that someone would pay the price.* There was a hair of a hazing at some of the schools to date. There was just the normal traditions of coming in there as a first year leave, or whatever you want to call, learning or being taught. The procedures and the customs and such. For me, it was a little bit harsh at first. *Well, I understand in talking to some of the men, it didn't matter if you were a Senior, Junior, Sophomore or Freshman, your first year at Brown was a plead (?) year and you had to do the stuff that was required. What I found interesting in talking to some of the guys that went to Glendora, they did have corporate punishment, in the 60s, where you had the paddle, which to be honest with you, I'm a little awed, with the change. With everything that was shared, you guys had an honor code. And it worked.* We were able to take care of minor problems within the company. What I mean...no hazing or brutelling. These were things that...

*Was there anybody that was actually removed from the academy when you were there?* Yes, there were a couple, one I'm not too sure. One cadet apparently stole a can of peaches or something from the kitchen and he was expelled. But I don't know if that was the only reason, that was one, but I don't know the details. *In my discussions with other people, it usually took a lot to get to that point.* Yes, it would, that's why I say that I'm not sure that can of peaches was the total picture.

*How about the Baptist atmosphere? I believe John Brown was a Baptist. I'm not sure, but that Christian atmosphere.* You know, it didn't seem to bother. We had several denominations (?) in there. We had Catholics, Protestants, we had several Jewish boys in there. *They tell me they can recite every one of the Baptist songs they know by heart.* I don't think it bothers...*It wasn't a hindrance to you?* No, I don't think it was. In fact, we often joked about it, but no, it wasn't a hindrance. Everybody accepted it pretty

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much. *Were there any extra rules that they had on you? You couldn't smoke, could you?* Yeah, we had a smoking room. *You did! They didn't have that when my father, well the only thing they were allowed to smoke was a pipe when my father went. Then in Glendora, you weren't allowed to smoke at all.*

There was a period that they didn't, but they had a smoking room and there were certain hours in that smoking room, and I was in charge of that smoking room one time and it got to be kind of a mess. Terry happened to spot it and boy he raked me over the coals. I mean out load...*And of course, it never happened again!* No, and he was good at that. I really liked Terry, but it was almost like we became friends after, because I encountered him several times after. I always had the highest respect for him. Smoking was allowed. I smoked. *I know drinking wasn't allowed.* No. *Of course, you were all underage anyway.* Yeah, well there were times...

*How did you guys fit into the community there at Pacific Beach? Was there any problem?* No, we fit into the community. We had a running feud with Loyola (?) High School. *But that was a high school thing?* Yeah, and it wasn't anything, in fact a lot of the guys became pretty good friends. We used to ride the street car from Pacific Beach into town. *Downtown San Diego?* Yeah. *There was a streetcar that ran from Pacific Beach to downtown San Diego. Imagine that. I wonder why they don't have one still.* I don't know, it was great. It was riding over the channel. (*San Diego River Channel*) and just right downtown. We'd go in on Saturday when we could. *They're actually working on the bridge, I believe where that...Yeah, heard that they were...As you drive over the 8 and onto the 5. I can see them work on that Morino Bridge there. It sure would be great if they had it today. It would save people a lot of money having that. So there was nothing to Pacific Beach per se...There were small stores and things. But the beach was a big attraction. We could go down to the beach on Saturday afternoon. It wasn't crowded back then, was it?* No, it wasn't. No, there was no problem.

*During the time that you're at the school, obviously you going hear what's going on in Europe, and you're aware of the tension building in the Pacific. Did the school in any way, was there any feeling that the war was inevitable, that war was eminent?* No, well, I didn't experience that feeling. I remember when I was up to camp. *The one up at Monterrey?* Yeah, I was out on the rifle range and Hitler had just invaded another country. (*It'd either be Poland, Czech Slavakia, Austria or France. Or Italy, or Africa, or Russia, or Scandinavia.*) And hear staff officers talking about it, and in my mind, I kind of formulate a thought that stayed with me. *You were at Brown as a JC student for the bombing on Pearl Harbor, weren't you?* What happened, I graduated in June of '41, and I went back to New York, to RC institute, came back for the holidays and that's when they bombed. *So you were kind of in between.* Yeah, and when that happened, I went back to Brown figuring, trying to figure out what I was going to do. And then in January, as I mentioned, the war department lowered the commissioning age and I turned 19, which was the new commissioning age. *I kind of admire your decision to wait and figure things out, whereas a lot of guys just ran down to recruitment and enlisted. And understand that at the moment...but I really admire your decision to think, 'okay what is it I'm going to do here,' and go back to Brown and go through that.* Yeah, I figured I would probably get some good advice and such and be close to people that if we got into the surge would be serving...*was commandant Terry still there at the time?* Yes, in fact he's the one that called me into his office and asked me how old I was, and I said 19,



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and he advised me that the commissioning age had just been lowered to 19 and suggested I go ahead and apply for my commissioning. *And you were army of course. Yeah.*

*I have two nephews. One's in Afghanistan and one's in Iraq. They love it, let me tell you, they love it. Well, they're special ops. The oldest nephew worked his way from reserve. He's a WO2 now, soon to be second lieutenant. I mean, this is a kid that never graduated from high school. And this is what he has done with his military career, and it's the greatest thing in his life, and I tell you, we're very proud of him and being special ops, they don't get killed too often, thank God. The other nephew is in Iraq. He also is green beret, but more of a clean-up issue right now. The oldest is a trained killer. What he does, I'm serious, that's what he does. You know, it's just amazing. But it's a lot different from in your day! Yeah, it is. I feel for these guys today. There's just no end of the damn mess. There hasn't been since time began, seriously. All right, do you have anything that you think we've missed? I wish the school was still around. I'm envious of you guys, I really am, that you were able to go to such a great school. It was, it really was. Again, I appreciate and thank you for taking the time to do this, but you know that this will be my goal, I'm going to pause this...*

...San Miguel and I was assigned to a training session where they run new officers through. And they had officers in charge of the training. It was kind of like, there was hazing and they really put them through and I wound up with Tom Games, who was my roommate one time at Brown and L. Frank. They both got their commissions just before me. And they were the ones putting me through the training. And if you think they didn't harass or work my butt. *But it was all in fun, right? Yeah, it was all in fun. Oh, they were two very good friends. That's great. Thank you very much.*