

HHA# 00817

Interviewee: Taylor, William

Interview Date: March 17, 2014

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

Interviewee: William “Bill” H. Taylor

Interview Date: March 17, 2014

Place: Eric’s Restaurant, University of Houston

Interviewer: James Wang

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

Keywords: William “Bill” Taylor, Cullen Rifles, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Hugh Roy Cullen, Houston Corps of Cadets, Houston ROTC, First ROTC Quartermaster Regiment, US Army Airborne School, University of Houston, Queen Anne’s Salute, Armistice Day Parade, Mardi Gras Parade, Colonel Michael Zwicker, Houston Regiment, U.S. Army, Cold War, Vietnam, Germany, Fort Hood, David W. Meyer, drill team, 1950s, 1970s, anti-war protests, Texas A&M, Baylor University, Louisiana State University, military marching, military uniforms, military, Cadet Corps, Cullen family, Walter Cronkite, varsity shooting team, The Spirit of Houston,

Abstract:

William “Bill” Taylor was a member of the 1955 Houston ROTC Quartermasters Regiment and a cadet 1st lieutenant in command of the Cullen Rifles, which were named after long-time UH benefactor Hugh Roy Cullen. Taylor attended the University of Houston from January 1952, graduated with a bachelor’s degree in business administration, and also received his commission in the US Army as a second lieutenant in June 1956. He was medically retired by the Army after nine years of service at the rank of captain as an armored officer. The Interview centers around Taylor’s recollection of his time in the Cullen Rifles, its daily routines and annual traditions, uniforms, and a few of the events where they were privileged to perform, such as serving as the Honor Guard to President Dwight D. Eisenhower when he was in Houston. It also features his insights into how the anti-war sentiments of the Vietnam War era led to the Rifles’ decline and informal disbanding in the 1970s as well as his optimistic thoughts on the Rifle’s resurrection in 2014.

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William Taylor

Interviewed by: James Wang
Date: March 17, 2014
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Houston, Texas

JW: The following interview takes place at 2:12 p.m. on March 17, 2014 in the Eric's Restaurant at the Hilton College at the University of Houston, Houston, Texas. My name is James Wang a University of Houston student. I am interviewing William Taylor, a University of Houston Alumni who in 1955 was a Cullen Riffle for the Houston Battalion Army ROTC. Mr. Taylor can you please state for the record your full name?

WT: My name is William H. Taylor.

JW: Your date of birth?

WT: 26th of May 1933.

JW: Place of birth?

WT: New Orleans, Louisiana. Saints fan.

JW: Alright sir. Saints fan. I always try to follow the Saints but my heart has always been with the Texans, born and raised. I know where you are coming from exactly born and raised so I know where you are coming from exactly. This last season wasn't kind to us.

WT: Yes I know.

JW: When did you start attending the University of Houston?

WT: I started in January of 1952.

JW: When did you graduate?

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WT: In June of 1956.

JW: With what degree did you graduate?

WT: With a bachelor of business administration.

JW: And you were in the Houston Army ROTC Battalion, correct?

WT: That is correction except it wasn't a Battalion it was a regiment.

JW: It was a regiment. How many people were in your regiment?

WT: There was approximately, I'm going to have to take a guess here, around 2,000.

JW: Do you remember when the regiment was founded?

WT: No I don't, because I wasn't here. It was after World War II I believe the PMSNT was a Colonel Michael Zwicker. At that time the regiment was all Quartermaster. The Army at that time saw fit to make the various schools branch designates. In other words if you had a large detachment, you may have two or three like infantry and artillery or whatever but the case of the University of Houston we were the only one that the Quartermaster outfit in the country at least as far as I know.

JW: So pretty much all the Quartermasters during this time then came from the University of Houston.

WT: That's right.

JW: We provided all the beans, bullets and ammo for the entire army?

WT: Yeah, you didn't have a choice. There was another stipulation. If you were fortunate enough to get an appointment to the regular army, and as you know at that time and I imagine it still is, graduates today were reserve officers but very few were selected to go to the regular army. Then you had to go into a combat arm which was the armor, artillery or the infantry. If you did that then you were required to go to jump school or ranger school or both.

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JW: Did you ever go through those schools?

WT: I was fortunate enough to get a regular army commission and I went to armor school airborne.

JW: Of course going into the Houston Regiment at this time, you did branch into Quartermaster and then eventually went to active duty army where you would go to armor.

WT: That's correct. I was a reserve officer for one day with an eight digit serial number and you get the West Point graduate's date of rank over us. This is the literal truth. They came out on June the 1st, we were commissioned on June the 2nd but our regular army commission was a six digit serial number but it came a day after the West Pointers.

JW: So it kind of gave them a little bit of, an extra feather in their hat?

WT: In the end of the road it gave them a lot. At that time you had the United States Army and that was the West Pointers and then you had the Army of the United States' regular component and that's what we were. AUS.

JW: Yes sir.

WT: If you ever see anyone that says AUS that says AUS behind their commission they were regular but they were Army of the United States.

JW: Yes sir, well thank you for that distinction.

WT: Kind of a boring history.

JW: I wouldn't say history is very boring. It's pretty enlightening, especially once you get into something that you are very interested in. How long did you serve, how long did you stay in the army?

WT: I intended to make it a career but my career was somewhat cut short. I was on active duty for 9 years. At that time I was a captain and I was medically retired.

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JW: You got a medical discharge?

WT: No, I was medically retired. I spent seven months of my career at Walter Reed Army hospital being screwed back together again.

JW: I know this will be a bit of a sensitive topic but would you mind disclosing where you were deployed, what deployments you saw, things like that?

WT: I spent most of the time going back and forth to Germany being an armor officer waiting for the Russians to come see us.

JW: Especially during that time I can imagine I bet that was a bit tense.

WT: That was the Cold War period and I have Vietnam service time but I did not go to Vietnam. When I was injured I was injured in a training accident at Fort Hood, Texas. They played with live wires as well.

JW: Fort Hood hasn't actually changed all that much if I recall.

WT: Only place I ever saw that you could run a trite vehicle down the road or down the trail in a rainstorm and still get dust.

JW: That sounds like Fort Hood, alright. Alright sir, well thank you for this background information. Just one last tidbit. After retiring or being medically retired from the military what did you do then?

WT: Well I decided not to starve since I had a wife and a couple of kids. So I went into business for myself and I basically, well... what did I do? I was an agent for Allstate Insurance Company for a period of time and decided that was still starvation. So I became an entrepreneur and set up my own offices and basically I finance things. Not with my money, someone else's money. I charge a little fee for it and hopefully things work out. I pretty much did anything that is legal and legit that would enhance the pocket book. Is that fair?

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JW: I think that should be enough background information at this time. Moving on to the Cullen Rifles themselves, my records show that in 1955 you were a cadet First Lieutenant in charge of the Cullen Rifles and your advisor was a Captain David W. Meyer?

WT: That's correct.

JW: Can you elaborate more on exactly what were the Cullen Rifles?

WT: Well the Cullen Rifles at that time were a precision drill team. When I first got in, in 1952, this was a volunteer outfit by the way you had to be selected by the members. You tried out and if they deemed you worthy enough they would vote you in but we had three squads of roughly ten men and a guide on there.

JW: Yes, sir.

WT: As the unit got bigger we went to four squads and 10 men which enabled us to do a few more what term can I use? A few more, I hate to say, tricks... formations.

JW: Formations and maneuvers and such.

WT: Yeah the bigger we were, the better it got. We performed at most football games including at home and away and we were pretty good. We performed at many different parades. We performed at the Mardi Gras parades in New Orleans for the years that I was there plus it continued on. We were Honor Guards for President Eisenhower a couple of times. We drilled in competition against pretty much all takers and we usually won.

JW: Who were some of the teams you competed against?

WT: Well one of our specialties was beating the Ross Volunteers of Texas A&M.

JW: Always got to beat them Aggies!

WT: Yeah we had a fish drill team we beat them like a drum pretty regularly. We competed against LSU and Texas... I don't know if they had a drill team at that time, they must have I just

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don't recall what their name was. Most of our time was spent in shows if you will. If the Livestock Show wanted a performance we'd do that. The Shriners... they had things. But most of our time was spent at football games.

JW: Football games, home and away?

WT: Yes. Not all away games but we'd load up and wherever we were going we'd have a chartered bus. We'd load up that thing, we'd have a nice party before we left. If we were conscious when we left we were conscious when we got there anyway.

JW: You mentioned that you did several maneuvers and you did different marches could you please elaborate on that?

WT: We perfected the Queen Anne's drill which is forming a line going through various... you march onto the field in a platoon formation, we always did this at the end of the performance. You'd break formation as a platoon, you'd come out, you'd line up in a single file line from about the thirty yard line to the thirty yard line on each side, you'd go through a ripple drill type effect and at that point you'd go through various manual arms movements. At the end of the performance we'd do what is called a Queen Anne's salute where you would right shoulder arms and you'd flip the rifle at that time we'd, as far as I know, always carry 1903 chrome plated spring fields and you'd flip it off your shoulder, come down in a kneeling position, head down, the rifle you know in a 45 degree angle. You know at the end of that at the end of the formation we also did formations where you would do what we would call "Five Sixes To The Wind." You would split the unit, the platoon, it would march off 180 degrees to each other. One would go to one side of the field and one would go to the other side of the field and then that unit would break and split into squad formations. It would go in four different

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directions. Then of course I would do some maneuvers like that and then reassemble and hopefully it all came back together the right time. It always did when I was around.

JW: Now this obviously doesn't sound like traditional military marching, the type that you see at final reviews and such. This is more intricate, more ceremonial.

WT: Yes, this was pure show.

JW: Did the Cullen Rifles actually march in standard parades?

WT: Oh yeah. You'd have Armistice Day parades and we would be in those and we would just do traditional marches but we'd always put in some bit of drill, something that would distinguish us. We wore unique uniforms in the summer that was khaki with a red stripe down the side. It had chrome plated helmet liners. I say again the old '03 Springfield we wore bloused pants, the uniform pants, and just straight military dress shoes but with a blouse and what do you call those things? Leggings. The leggings and the winter uniform, pinks and greens, which was then the standard officer's army uniform and the same basic attire, the same chrome helmet liners. The commander carried a saber, the Calvary saber, and that was used occasionally. If someone would get in your way a little probe every once in a while was beneficial.

JW: Just a gentle prod.

WT: You have to do that every once in a while to New Orleans.

JW: I imagine with all of these parades and of course with all these victories over the Aggies they were obviously very well known on campus?

WT: I believe so I don't think anyone didn't know the Cullen Rifles. We wore distinctive patch. The left sleeve had the U of H insignia and the right one had a cougar. I can't describe it very well, it had Cullen Rifles on it. There was one or two on display in the showcase at the armory over there. I don't know whether it is still there or not, I gave it to them.

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JW: So we've gone over some of the drills that you did but how did this affect your status as a regular ROTC cadet? Specifically how did your daily routine deviate?

WT: Well we attended all the classes based on our unit designation. This was all extracurricular. We wore the uniform. We didn't wear the our drill uniform unless we were in a performance. The only thing that would distinguish us from a regular cadet then was the Cullen Rifle patch and we wore the fore gear which was red and the khaki uniform and white I believe in the winter uniform.

JW: So it's essentially the same as any other cadet then, you wake up in the morning, I presume you did PT?

WT: Well, no, you have to understand that... you said we did PT?

JW: Yes sir.

WT: We did not have the same situation that you all obviously do. The only PT we did was perhaps chasing a pork chop or something because we would PT only if you chose to. It was no formal... if you wanted to stay in shape you'd stay in shape but you didn't have any I think most of our activities in the Cadet Corps was classroom.

JW: Classroom instruction?

WT: Yeah.

JW: I presume after all this classroom instruction, as you said, extracurricular the rifles would set up some type of time to practice their drills and such?

WT: This is true, every morning at 7:00.

JW: Every morning at 7:00 in the morning. It's obvious that they were pretty important to the campus and you mentioned Armistice Day so did y'all march in a lot of parades within the city?

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WT: Not so much in the city other than you know things like that, the Armistice Day, and I can't recall any other that we marched in for the City of Houston. We marched in parades all over the country.

JW: Oh really? Can you elaborate?

WT: Well if you were going to a city and they were going to have, if it were homecoming or something like that, they would have a parade and we would be in that usually not always. I met Janice, my wife, at a function at the University of Wichita. That was my first performance as the Commander of the Rifles. That was in October, no September of '54. October of '54.

JW: Now you also mentioned earlier being in President Eisenhower's guard. Can you please elaborate on that? I imagine that was a tremendous honor.

WT: As a matter of fact there's some pictures around here somewhere. They gave me one but there are some over there. When Mr. Cullen and President Eisenhower came to the University of Houston we provided the Honor guard for him there. It's amazing to me looking back on those pictures. They were virtually no secret service agents if there were any we didn't know where they were. It was literally just us.

JW: So you were in fact the actual "guard-guard"?

WT: Correct.

JW: You also mentioned Mr. Cullen?

WT: We used to see Mr. Cullen on a regular basis. As a matter of fact whoever the commander was of the rifles once a year at least we would go down to his office in the First City National Bank Building I believe is where it was and we'd make a report because Mr. Cullen is the one that supported us and gave us the funds to do all of these things. He chartered a bus for us. He did everything. He furnished the money for the uniforms, this type of stuff.

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JW: This is Hugh Roy Cullen the bank benefactor?

WT: As a matter of fact an interesting side since you are a history student. In 1952, September I believe it was, the University of Houston played Baylor and it was the first time it played a Southwest Conference team and beat them. Mr. Cullen was so excited, we had a big assembly and we had what we called then a big Zeig Building which was then the Administration Building.

JW: Yes sir the E. Cullen Building.

WT: He gave the University \$2 million.

JW: \$2 Million!

WT: For the adventure of beating Baylor!

JW: Can you imagine if we got \$2 million every time we won against a big opponent like that?

WT: He gave this university a lot of money.

JW: My research shows \$88 million in total.

WT: Far more than my research shows so I'll vote with you.

JW: Mr. Cullen was a generous benefactor to this University and it's actually what helped contributed to them being reborn, the Cullen Rifles.

WT: Not Mr. Cullen, he's deceased but his family.

JW: Right. Now going back to President Eisenhower, the Cullen Rifles being their guard. What was it like? Just, you were the color guard, you were the honor guard.

WT: We were the honor guard as the unit, the whole platoon.

JW: Yes sir.

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WT: Where he went we went, while he was in Houston. Well they had, I won't call it a ball, but a large dance if you call it that and we were there as his honor guard. Pretty much what the President of the United States wants, he gets. So when after his reelection that would have been in '56 he was first elected in '52 and then in '56 we were the honor guard when he came to Houston for that election during one of his campaign stops.

JW: So it wasn't just bound to the campus it was for the entire city of Houston. It was wherever President Eisenhower went so went the Cullen Rifles.

WT: That's correct.

JW: So you saw him coming off the airplane?

WT: No we didn't greet him at the airport at that point. Past that point.

JW: Oh well that's all very interesting. Moving on to them being reborn.

WT: I was really pleased to hear that.

JW: What were your first impressions when you first heard that the first Cullen Rifles had declined and now they were being reborn? Did you know anything about their decline?

WT: Just like all the military declined after the Vietnam War, military was not well thought of in this country, as you well know. That probably is what significantly diminished the stature of the military in the eyes of the American public. When you have people like Walter Crankite, Cronkite, not Crankite. That's the way I think of him. But when you have people like him declaring the war lost and so forth, calling military personnel baby killers, murders. You are coming home in uniform and you are being spat upon. Not everyone wanted into it. To join the Corps today was kind of like joining the army because you had signified or designated it was volunteer and you wore the uniform. Not everyone wanted to go through that abuse.

JW: Right and especially,

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WT: Particularly when everyone had long hair and you had short hair.

JW: Especially being on a college campus at that time with all the protests and anti-war protesters I imagine that must have been tough. I can see exactly what you are saying now. It is obvious how the decline came in around that era.

WT: It was so few people the unit couldn't exist. I don't know how many are in the rifles now. I don't know how many are in the Rifles now but you'd be hard pressed to function with less than about 30. You can function with anything but if you want a real outfit to do performances you are going to need a number of people to make it large enough to fill a football field if that's what your intentions are.

JW: The traditional platoon size, the three squads of 10.

WT: Or nine... something. Something it's just...

JW: Just something more standard.

WT: How many rifles now?

JW: At this time I honestly can't say mostly because our priorities are now putting towards training for camp when it coming in for summer. That type of extracurricular has currently been put on the back burner along with other color guard events. That actually reminds me, you mentioned a lot of marching and drilling. How did the Cullen Rifles how were they distinct from the color guard and the camp shooting, the Varsity Shooting team?

WT: They were all separate.

JW: They were all separate? So it was just the Cullen Rifles and then there were the Color Guard the people that presented the colors at events and then there was a Varsity Shooting team.

WT: That's correct, you might just call us the show offs.

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JW: The guys with the shiny helmets and the shiny rifles. Absolutely. So they were not in any way actually related?

WT: I can't say they were not actually related other than the fact that we were, insofar as performing together, no. Now you have to bear in mind we had a cadet band at that time. A lot of times for example in New Orleans at the Mardi Gras parades the ROTC cadet band would go, not the U of H band but the cadet band which was reasonably sizable.

JW: I bet The Spirit of Houston must be happy that they don't have to compete with another band on campus.

WT: I think the band on campus today is pretty spectacular. It looks like there is no comparison.

JW: Skipping ahead to last year, 2013 was when the Cullen Rifles were brought back to life. What were your first impressions upon hearing that?

WT: I was very pleased to hear it. It was a unit of outstanding character, outstanding abilities and showed very well for the university and I have every reason to believe that this new unit will do the same.

JW: What do you envision that this new unit will look like now that it's being reborn in the modern era?

WT: It's hard to say. If you can grow the numbers I see no reason why it couldn't perform in some manner the same way we did.

JW: Performing at football games and?

WT: As the instructor I still know the drills. You don't forget them.

JW: Do you think there should be any changes at all?

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WT: It's hard to say because I don't know how the unit performs. I think I better pass on that question.

JW: With this new batch of Rifles currently being trained and with Lieutenant Colonel Smith, Michael Smith the Battalion Commander of Houston ROTC is at that time, would his vision of them being a competitive shooting as well as a drill team, what advice would you give to these future rifles?

WT: I can only say that whatever you do, that you do it to the best of your ability and try to uplift the spirit of the University and put forth the best foot forward that you can.

JW: I think that's all the questions that I have for you at this time sir. Before I conclude this interview do you have any closing remarks?

WT: I think the only thing I say in closing remark is it's good to know that the rifles are being reborn. I feel confident that they will reach to the highest levels of performance of whatever they do. It was my privilege to be not only the commander of the Cullen Rifles but also the Regimental Commander in 1956 and I feel confident that you folks will carry on, do an excellent job and make the university prouder.

JW: Alright thank you sir. At this time this concludes the interview.

End of interview.