

RJ- This morning we are interviewing Earsel Lewis about his service in the US Army. We are here at Altrusa House in Gainesville, Florida on September 18th at 10am. With us as a videographer is Nancy Hult who is an Altrusan but also a Vice President of the Altrusans who sponsor Altrusa House.

Earsel, if I may use your first name?

EL- Yes, I will allow it.

RJ- I am Ray Jones and I am a volunteer at Altrusa House and I am also an Emeritus Member of the Board of Altrusa House. Thank you very much for participating in this program for the Veteran's who attend Altrusa House.

Would you tell us when and where you were born?

EL – I was born in Kemper County Mississippi. That's about 15 miles north of Philadelphia, Mississippi. That's where I was born.

RJ- Can you tell us something about your family?

EL- My family was my father, mother, two brothers, & one sister. And I am the oldest one living from my family. All the rest are gone.

RJ- Can you tell us about your parents?

EL – My father was a farmer near Philadelphia, Mississippi, and then he worked in the shipyard in Pascagoula, Mississippi. My mother was a housewife. My mother was from the north half of Philadelphia, Mississippi, my mother's family both white & black. My mother, her mother was a Jew about this high. So on her side we have a lot of white people. My father was from the south side of Philadelphia, Mississippi. His mother and all them was white on his side so, white and black on my father's side. When I got to the age I couldn't court any girl there because the families were so large we were related. They would say that's so & so's son. You can't date him. I couldn't date anybody. My father farmed up there north of Philadelphia for the first seven years I was small. Then we moved south. He farmed south of Philadelphia, Mississippi about eight years. Then, we moved to Pascagoula, Mississippi.

The Ingalls Shipyard is there. It was BIG ships, and he worked there for years. It was real nice. He retired from the shipyard there.

RJ- How many brothers and sisters?

EL- Two brothers and one sister

RJ- All are gone except you?

EL- Yes Sir, all are dead and gone except me.

RJ- What were you doing before you entered the service?

EL- I was a farmer in Philadelphia. In Pascagoula, there I worked at a big grocery store like Wards in Gainesville. But then I got drafted.

RJ- What service were you drafted into?

EL- The United States Army

RJ- What happened when you departed for your training and the early days of training? Were they different from the life you lead before?

EL- Let me tell you something, the military then was training us to get us ready to go to Korea. And, they were hard on us. They were so hard. I asked the Sargent one day, "What you trying to do kill us?" He said, "No, I am trying to get you ready for Korea." I said, "What? You are going to kill us before get there." He said, "I am going to train you so I can sleep at night. I've been there and it's trouble there. We are going to train you all as hard as possible, cause when you leave here and get over there, I can sleep at night." Let me tell you something I hated it then, but when I got over there I appreciated it.

RJ- Was it easy for you to adapt to military life?

EL- No Sir, No Sir, No Sir! You see I came out of the cotton fields and I was mean cause I had cotton fields. I was mean, real mean. But let me tell you

something, I told them that they should put me in jail because I don't like this. They said that they would work it out of me. They did. (Laughing)

RJ- Where did you serve? I know you served many places. Was Korea the main one?

EL- Korea was the main one. I went from Ft. Sills, OK to Korea then back to Ft Carlson, CO. There I decided to get out. I got out and I went home and got a job. I was working and blacked out and fell into a vat of poison. When I came out, they did not pay me for that day. They said that was not their fault it was my head from the Army in Korea. I went back and enlisted in the Army. I went back to the service. And at that time I was at Ft. Lewis, Washington.

RJ- Were you in the front lines in Korea? What sort of combat did you see?

EL- When we were training, Infantry would be way up here and Artillery would be way back here. When we got to Korea that was no more. Infantry first but we were right behind the Infantry. I said this don't make sense, they trained us to stay back here and support them. They said that's not here. The Artillery was right behind the Infantry. When they fight we would support and fight for ourselves back here. Anyway, they trained us one way and when we got used to another way there. For a while it was hard. But let me tell you it didn't take long to figure it out.

RJ- Did you see the Chinese troops who invaded?

EL- Yes, I got to tell you. I got a chance to go to the front line up there. I knew someone on the front line. The reserve officer let me call some shots or rounds. I liked it. You get to see the troops and vehicles coming. You call the round for the big guns set up back here. You call in and they hit the vehicles coming. It shoots that way. I liked that.

RJ- When you were in the combat zone, what kind of friendships did you make?

EL- When I first arrived in Korea I got assigned to my first company there. We had a PFC there and I was given his job. He said, "I am going to kill you!" He said that I had taken his position. I have been waiting a long time to take over

so I can be a corporal when I go home. I said, "Look here son if I can." He said, "He would give me three days and then he would kill me." I said, "What's wrong with you. That don't make sense the government sent me here." He said, "You have three days." The rounds were coming in like rain and he is talking about killing me. Man! I prayed everyday and every night and watched him. I didn't want him getting behind and shooting me. But then I got a chance to get him promoted, because I got him to move up he was satisfied and I was satisfied. He had me scared. But, other than that you have brothers. Everybody helps everybody. There was no such thing as hate. Everybody helps everybody.

RJ- You were there when everything was segregated and desegregated? Did you see some incidents where white really helped the black and so forth?

EL- One night, I was the watch on guard duty. You needed guards all the way around the base. Guards were on two hours and then off. One night I went around checking, I went to the bunk to lay down just resting. I dropped off to sleep and I hear the sound of a weapon being loaded. I jumped up and bumped my head; nearly fell out of the bunk. I said, "What is going on here?" They said, "Sargent Lewis, he don't want to go on guard." I got up and said, "Son, why you don't want to go on guard." He said, "The rounds are coming in like rain out there. Just like rain and I am not ready to die." I said, "Me neither but it's your turn." He said, "Uh uh! And pointed the rifle at me." I said, "Lord have mercy." Now I don't know what to do. A white boy got up; got down, put his steel helmet on. He walked up, put his arm around him. And said, "Let's go die together." Let me tell you, it's hard when you get over there. I had never seen nothing like that. I had never seen anyone say, "Let's go die together." I was not ready to die. The boy who was not ready to die was black. The boy who said let's go was white. They walked out the door with rounds pouring like rain. I said, "Lord have Mercy." That was God trying to show me something.

RJ- You probably saw other instances like that or was that the most prominent?

EL- Yes, that had an effect on me. Put your arm around someone and say let's go die together. That hits me now every once in a while. I did not know what to do. I had not seen that before. I had been segregated all my life until I got overseas. That just got me. I was shocked.

RJ- A Profound Experience!

EL- Yes Sir! Profound Period. You did not run into that everyday. But they came back together. There is no color barrier. You don't have time to worry about color. Cause everybody is fighting for himself.

RJ- You were there and experienced a remarkable revolution.

EL- Yes Sir! In that three-year period, 50,000 troops died. In Vietnam, almost 57,000 died in 10 years. Korea was bad. I mean bad!

RJ- When you left Korea and returned to the states, the Army was no longer segregated?

EL- Yes, we were all mixed up. When I got back to Ft. Carlson, CO it was all mixed up. No more segregation.

RJ- Where did you go when you came back?

EL- Ft Carlson, CO.

RJ- We have a number of medals that you won while in the US Army. There is a special one that I see; I believe it is a combat medal. You were honored due to you combat service and bravery. Can you tell us something about it?

EL- The Bronze Star, I received in Korea. There were constant rounds coming in it just never stopped. One night around midnight, we had big guns firing this direction. I was in eight-inch artillery. That's the big rounds. We were firing and then big rounds started coming in on us. Big Stuff! Then, I was mean & evil. We had to stop firing and run to holes and bunkers cause that stuff was coming in like rain. So, I'm so crazy I went to the Fire Direction Center and raised hell. I said, "Can't you do something to stop this. I'm tired because we can't fire." He said, "I need two things: I need the angle it is coming in and next I need to know the firing long range or short range." I said, "OK. I will get it for you." He said, "You are crazy." I said, "I am going to try." I said, "I would take God with me." I got myself out there. Every time a round was coming I would jump down in a hole then get up and run to the next hole. One time I was a

little slow about getting down and that stuff hit my helmet. But I kept going. I got in a hole. The Koreans did not put a round behind. So I could figure out the best path by the previous shot. It was eradicate fire. So, Bam! Bam! Bam! Just anywhere. So when I got a chance, I set up the aiming circle and searched. I jumped up and down in the hole. So I stayed to find what he wanted me to find. So I finally got the right angle, now I needed long or short range. I got back in the hole again. If the round hits the ground and skids it is long range. I got up with the measurements and then got down in the hole again. Then I started back, running from hole to hole again. He was hugging and checking me out. I said, "Get this data!" He said, "I am checking you out." I said, "Stop that. I am all right. Use this data." He said, "You mean there are no holes in you." I said, "NO!" So I went to turn ftwo big guns in that direction. So we got it set up and informed the air reserve. He had five minutes before we would be taking direct hits. It was coming in. We fired based on the information and were informed that the target was completely destroyed. That is why I received this medal for getting the angle and information to take out the enemy, before we were destroyed. I was crazy, but I was scared. I was so crazy that I went out risking my life to stop the rounds from destroying our artillery. I thought but I didn't say it. But I thought, a white boy if he saved one or two he would get a Congressional Medal of Honor. Why am I getting this? This just doesn't make sense. I saved the whole artillery division. But you thought and didn't say. That's the way it was.

RJ- You have two Purple Hearts? Are they connected with the same action?

EL -Same area. One was that and the other. I can't remember. "Lord have mercy."

RJ- You came home highly decorated from Korea. You landed at Ft. Carlson, CO and you were at a number of different places. Are there any particular ones that were significant for you in your career or interests that you would like to share?

EL- First, I was in the Dominican Republic. That was a terrible place to be too. You had to get the rifle and a steel barrier and you had to push those people. They would throw rocks and everything. They were terrible. They would throw rocks or anything. Let me tell you what I liked about that assignment. You wake up in the morning and it is 80 degrees and night it is 118 degrees.

Being Americans we were not used to that. When we would be shaking at 70 degrees, we would need blankets. We were not used to that. The weather was beautiful. The scenery was beaches, blue water, & white sand. But, the best part was the food. I would go to this place for a big lobster and everything. He would have a big glass of tea for me. I would eat and drink. I enjoyed that. The next thing I enjoyed was from the Dominican Republic I went to Ft Benning, GA. I did not want to go there but I wound up there. I had one of my Major or Colonel. When he got relieved of the Dominican post, he came and visited me. He said, "Earsel let me tell me why I am here." I was surprised. He said, "I respect you all the others were yes - men. When you say something, you stop me and you correct me. I listened because you would correct me. All the rest said Yes Sir! Yes Sir! You told me the truth. I liked that about you. You always correct me. I don't worry about that creed or color. When you are wrong you're wrong and when you are right you're are right. That's what I like about you. I am on my way out of here. What can I do for you? Do you have your orders?" I said, "Yes, I am going to Ft Benning, GA. I don't want to have anything to do with that place. You have all those paratroopers up there. I don't want to be in a mess like that." He said, "OK. I'll take care of that." I went home. And, I did not think about that conversation any more. When I arrived at Ft Benning I was given the best assignment ever. They put me down at the quartermaster laundry for the whole post. It was disorganized but I organized all of it. And I had it organized well. I came home one morning, I needed to take a shower and go to bed. My wife said, "That you better wake up. Your first Sargent called and said you have to go." I said, "What do you mean I have to go I just got here." She said, "He told me, you were a day late." I said, "What do you mean a day late?" She said, "I don't know but you better go." So I went and the First Sargent told me, "I was a day late. We have orders on you, and we spent the whole day trying to figure out who could transfer you because you just got here." I had only been there two months. "We tried to find out my company commander everyone, but we could find nobody to stop this." I said, "Well don't ask me." (But I thought about that conversation in the Dominican Republic.) "Go get your wife and take her back to Florida. When you return we will process you out that same day." I was a crazy driver too. I always drove fast on those turnpikes. I was driving like a race driver leaning with the turns. When I came up on cars they would pull to the side, they were scared. So was I, but I was already a day late. I drove to Ft. Knox, Kentucky. I reported and said, "I know I am a day late. But let me tell you why." Then I hear someone in the back yell: "I know that voice. Send him back here." The girl at the desk said, "You better head back now. He is mean." Here I thought I was the

meanest thing around here. I walked back there. And here was a guy I had served with through the years. He said, "What are you doing coming here?" We laughed. He said, "You have the wrong kind of MOS to come here. I am going to change your MOS." He gave me a book. He said, "You have three months till you will be tested. Where is your wife?" I said, "I had to take her home to Florida." He said, "Go get her." I just got here. He called the one in charge of all the housing and told him to give him an apartment somewhere. We had houses there and there was just one three - bedroom house next door to him. "Give it to Earsel and then go get your wife." I said, "We don't need a three-bedroom." He said, "Give him that." So, I got back on the road and drove all the way to Florida. I am telling you the truth because they were wearing me out. My wife said, "How did you get quarters so quick? I said, "I am not going to tell you till we get there." I knew the wives knew each other. So when I got back, I said let me tell you something. She liked to have a fit, because of Georgia. But anyhow, we stayed in Kentucky for a while.

RJ: Well anyway when did you go back to Korea?

EL: Then I was in Ft. Lee, Virginia and then back to Korea again. That was my second service there. From Korea, I returned to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. Let me tell you, I took my basic training in Ft. Sill and eighteen years later I came back there. They had changed it with all new buildings. And I stayed there for one year. And then I received orders for Germany.

RJ: What your assignment in Germany?

EL: They sent me to North Bavaria, which is a Erlangen Engineer place. At this post, I was in charge of engineers. You did not need big names, you just need to make sure the post was operating and make sure everything works. I had 103 Germans working for me. I had two military installations. I was not getting any rest at all there. In the wintertime, I had to make sure when they came in on post early; I had to make sure the place was salted and prepared for incoming military. You just couldn't go home at night. Sometimes I had to wake my wife and she said I am not military. I said put your clothes on. I made her drive the big rig, while I stood in back and threw the salt out. My base commander said that since I was there. He did not need to worry about anything. I had everything prepared and ready. He had no accidents because I was here. I made sure that all the buildings were ready. I made sure the buildings were ready with all the lights, kitchens, and stuff like that. So, up at

the headquarters I knew the first sergeant major there so he told me that they going on field duty. He wanted me to sleep up there at night with all the women because they are going to be gone. This would be my responsibility. I told him he better call my company commander and get permission from him. He said he would worry about that. He wanted me there. I would check the doors and lock up and sleep on the first level. I said, "Lord have mercy. Trouble up here and trouble out there." So at night when I got there, I had to see that all the women were there and then I locked the doors. That was beside all the other stuff I had to do. One day the company commander called me and said, "Look Here! We are going to help you because I didn't know you were doing all this stuff. You aren't getting any rest at all. We are going to sign in someone else and you will be responsible for them to do some of your jobs." There was this one quarter with a wife when she called you had to take electricians, plumbers, & everything. She tore up her place. She would work on the place she would tear it up. I said, "Please call us don't tear the place up." She said, "Look here if I can fix something I will." I said, "No you just tear it up." All the quarters there were my responsibility too. I wondered how I got in this mess. But anyhow, it was hard but I liked it.

RJ: Well, you said that you had 103 Germans working for you. How was that?

EL: Yes, Sir! I had four Americans but the rest were Germans. That was like that when I got there. I couldn't change it. They were good, they worked real good. The one post all I had to do was go over there and it was taken care of it. But, I had no problem there. It's just two. I had to make sure all this stuff was taken care of and working hard. One day my company commander called me up and he said, "Son, I want to talk with you." I said, "Look here, when you called I am in the middle of working on a job." He said, "Sit down. I am your boss." I said, "I don't care if you my boss, what you want?" He said, "Since you have been here I have not had a complaint or nothing on the whole post. No kind of complaints! All I got is congratulations." I said, "You called to tell me this." He said, "I am your boss. I can call when I want." I said, "I have all this work." (I thought I'm Crazy! He's my boss! I'm Crazy!) But I said, "I could be working on my job!" He said, "Shut Up! Sit Down!" Anyway when he got through he sit down and he said, "I want to "Thank" you personally for what you have been doing." I said, "I haven't been getting any rest." But I enjoyed my work in Germany. On top of that my secretary, her husband, and son would take my wife on trips all through Germany and all the places. I watched

a bull run down the street. They said you could jump in and run. I said, "You are crazy! I am not going to jump in those bulls will run over you." Then they took us up into Austria. In Innsbruck, Austria, they had a great big ski jump. Where the best in the world came to ski. We got a chance to see that. German people will ride a little way and walk for miles. I said, "What we walking for they have a train." They said that they like to walk outside. I watched those skiers walk up and go down all those different poles. They went way down the hill and let me tell you if you don't hit it right you break your neck. I said you all crazy! I thought they crazy! My wife and myself! (Laughing) They came down and tried to talk with us. But, I couldn't speak German. Our friends told them he doesn't understand German. You know some of them had not been close to a black but anyhow I enjoyed it for a while. But, that was something to see. Let me tell you!

RJ: Where else did you travel in Germany?

EL: Another trip I went to Switzerland. You know with the good food. Let's see there were quite a few places I can't remember right now.

RJ: Austria, Switzerland. Did you get to Berlin?

EL: No, I do not think I have been there.

RJ: But you and your wife did travel?

EL: I liked that from Germany you could go to all these different countries over there. My wife and I had a chance to go to a lot of different countries.

RJ: Well, after you left Germany you left the service.

EL: Yes, Sir! When I returned I retired and got out. Then I went to school to be a builder. I wanted to build my own home. I had a construction crew and we built and repaired a lot of homes.

RJ: But finally you decided to go into the ministry.

EL: No, I didn't decide that. God called me. I didn't decide that. If you told me I would not believe. I was mean. Not as mean as I was. God called me. See, I would never of went in the ministry. I know the Army was hard. But, the

ministry is just as hard. I thought when God called me in the ministry I thought sure. I went through all the training. I graduated from Emory University in Georgia. I didn't know then just how hard the ministry was. I thought all the evil people were in the streets. Because I know I used to be in the streets. But they are not. You have a whole lot of them in churches. My first assignment was on the East coast. We had people who carried guns. Now I used to too. But I didn't carry to church. So, I liked to work so I would go down to the church and work around cleaning. But, someone said, you better watch it because you are taking that man's job. I said what do you mean? They pay him and I am doing it for free. What you talking about? I don't want the job. I am helping. You need to know that that man carries a gun all the time. I carried a gun all through military. I would put it under my pillow at night. My wife would yell at me. "Are you going to shoot me?" "No, I am not going to shoot you."

RJ: Well, after Germany you returned to the states and became a minister of the Methodist Church. How long did you serve as a minister?

EL: I served for 13 years full time and then part time. So I served 17 years all together. In the Methodist Church, when you reach a certain age you need to come out of full time and go into part time at different jobs. So when I retired, my district superintendent called and said I want you to be my trouble-shooter. So I worked in all these little Methodist Churches all the way through Gainesville. And all the other churches nearby because we had the most black churches in the Florida Conference. I had a chance to go to all of them. If something went wrong and the preacher had to be moved. I was the one they called to go in. Sometimes there were two at a time. And that worried me something awful. So one day my wife said to the district superintendent, "Look here you trying to kill him. He worked hard all these years. You need to let him go." And the superintendent let me go and I finally got out.

RJ: You had to be flexible as a minister and your ability to be flexible in the service and it carried over in the ministry and so on. And, I am sure it helped. We thank you for the basic part of the interview. And as we end, would you like to tell about any of these medals we have before us.

EL: Let me tell you some I don't remember and another thing. I got the medals and they are on my record and such but see some of the paperwork that goes with the medals was taken out of my papers. Some write-ups that were to be

in my records are not there. I had a difficulty time trying to get treatments due to my records being incomplete. Especially from my Korean service, but I finally got that taken care of. These are not all my medals. I have some more medals. They told me to call or write and they would send the other medals. I told my wife that I can't eat medals. So I never sent for the rest of them.

RJ: You have many, many letters of commendation.

EL: Let me tell you about some of those letters. When I arrived at Fort Bragg, NC, I was mean, real mean. I had some troops that would make me mad. Those troops had to get up and clean up for inspection everyday. The floor looked like spotless. I didn't let them wear shoes. We had our post on the back of the building. One morning the Colonel walked and looked in our barracks. He said, "Let's go take a look at the back of this building." The men said, "Sir, you can't come in here, not wearing your shoes." The Colonel said, "What you talking about?" He was tearing me up. The men said, "You can look in, but not step inside with your shoes on." The Colonel looked at the floor and saw how pretty it looked and all our section had everything ready for inspection and everything laid out just right. He told them that he wanted all the other buildings to look the same as this one. My boys heard him and from then on I had no problems. In Ft. Bragg, NC, I was a PT instructor there. I was hard and mean everywhere I went. But anyhow I took my troops out on a Monday morning and I would train them so hard. They ran and sweated till they said look here I trained them so hard that on Sunday they didn't drink at all. Because they knew Monday morning, I would tear them up. So one Monday morning, I got up there and going around and I saw a great big platform. There was someone in my spot. A Major stepped out. I did not see him. He said, "I put that up." I asked, "Why?" He said, "I have been watching you. Not only are you taking these men you are going to take the entire battalion. They are all going to do exactly what you tell them to do." So I had them all doing pushups.

RJ: Are you sure the word mean is the right word or do you think you were demanding of yourself and those that you had to train?

EL: I call it mean.

RJ: We don't want to end the interview on the idea that you were mean.

EL: Yes, I was very demanding. When I said something I meant it. I was so demanding that when I told someone to do something if they acted like they weren't cooperating. I would say, looky here, what part of me do you want? They said you crazy. I said I was born that way.

RJ: Is there anything you would like to tell us.

EL: First, I was drafted and I did not like it. But, after all, I am glad for the Army because I got to travel. I mean travel 49 states out of 50. New York was the only state. I know I had to travel through it to get to the others but I just can't count it. I worked in training. My wife and I would work after I retired and then take a vacation. And, we would visit people all across the country that we served with. We had a lot of fun.

RJ: Well, we thank you so much for the service that you rendered us and for being so confident and demanding. I know you contributed greatly to the services during a very difficult time. Thank you so much for sharing these experiences with this interview.