

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

# Sean J. Cannon

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## Box 4 Folder 7

Oral Interview conducted by Theodore Larsen

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Brigham Young University - Idaho

TL: You were born in Orem Utah, is that right?

SC: Yes.

TL: Your father was a professor at Brigham Young University is that correct?

SC: Yes.

TL: Your brother served in Vietnam, is that correct?

SC: No, my father, well I had several relatives who served during the Vietnam War. My uncles served in the war, and my dad served in the war but he was stationed in the Pentagon at the time.

TL: What was his position at that time?

SC: He was with military intelligence so he was monitoring incoming radio traffic from Europe. He was a German linguist. He was also intercepting and analyzing traffic from the Middle East. During that same time the six day war was going on, 1967. He was actually the one who predicted, based on intelligence, the six-day war.

TL: Wow.

SC: Yeah so that's our little claim to fame.

TL: Yeah that's cool. I haven't heard of the six-day war, what's that?

SC: The six-day war was the war in 1967 between the Arabs and the Israelis. The Arabs were concerned that the Israelis were principally taking control of the water supply in the Middle East. And the Arabs never like the Israelis there in the first place. So, the Egyptians, the Jordanian, and the Syrians, and others ganged up against Israel and launched an attack. Israel proceeded to beat them back and actually take over more territory. Those territories that they took at that time were the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The ones in question today.

TL: So did he (your father) also have skills in Middle Eastern languages?

SC: No, I can't remember exactly why, I think he was just analyzing information.

TL: So, what are your first memories of Vietnam?

SC: Well, I was young at the time. I was born in 1964 so basically my early years were spent during the Vietnam War. I do remember the public reaction, I remember the Hippies and I remember the protests. My father was teaching American History at the University of Maine until 1972 after he got out of the Army. So, I was, even as a young

boy, aware that there was a conflict going on. The people of the United States couldn't seem to agree as to what was going on.

TL: What were your father's viewpoints; obviously, being part of the military they were different from the general public.

SC: They have changed dramatically. A lot of that had to do with the Nixon campaign and Watergate in the 1970's he was a republican up until that point then switched to a democrat. He also left the military in I think 1968. He was not actively involved in the war so he changed his point of view somewhat. But, he's never been somebody who is really hard-core...I wouldn't say he's ever been a flaming liberal.

TL: Well, that's neat...Your uncles that served in the war, were you close with them?

SC: Um...My uncle Charles who now lives in Washington D.C., well I'm close to all my Uncles. But he never took the time to really tell us of his involvement. But I think he was...he definitely was...he was a foot soldier. He did get to see a lot. He didn't get taken as a prisoner of war but he did have some experiences over there that were quite memorable. I can remember one time in particular. This was fairly recently. I think 1998. We were visiting him in Washington D.C. and we went to the temple there to see the Christmas tree display. One of the sisters there was from Vietnam and she recognized my Uncle. He proceeded to explain her story because he had known her during Vietnam. She was a member of the Church in Vietnam. I don't remember a lot of the details from the story very well but my recollection is that during the Vietnam War she was a young girl. The Book of Mormon was in the process of being translated into Vietnamese. When the Communists took over her part of the country, one of their goals was to do away with any form of religion so they would actively persecute any form of religion. So the fear was if they found the manuscripts of translation they would destroy those. So she took the manuscripts and buried them in the sand and kept them there until the war was over. Kind of a dramatic story.

TL: Yeah, you don't hear stories of faith from Vietnam very often. What were the subjects you taught at West Point when you were there?

SC: I taught Geography, basically the same classes I teach here, I taught Physical Geography, World Regional Geography, Geography of Russia, Eastern Europe and I taught Geography of the West. What else did I teach? Um, I think that was about it.

TL: Okay, Geography being such a spatial topic, I'm sure you also taught matters of history and culture. Are subjects like history, especially the history of war, approached differently at West Point than they are here at BYU-Idaho or at even more liberal schools?

SC: That's a good question. I...I think that there's...West Point is an anomaly. The academies are anomalies in the military system. There is a surprising amount of freethinking going on there. They have a mix of military professors and civilian

professors and they have a wide range of views. The history department is not the most liberal department, like the English and Philosophy departments. But there have been who, for example, have been very critical of our role in Vietnam and have written books and articles about that and the military feels it's okay. I think we have come to a point this is a military culture where we recognize diverse thinking. So I've found that it is freethinking at least as much as BYU-Idaho. But the study of military history is more the study of military science and art. It's an art form. There is a way to wage war, so the battles are picked apart, analyzed and criticized for their merit. And so it's definitely a big deal there.

TL: Considering the different ways and methods of waging war, is there a difference in the way you wage war when it is declared by congress and when it is not such as in Vietnam, and Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom?

SC: Well, actually war was never declared in Vietnam. Desert Storm was declared, and your right Operation Iraqi Freedom was never declared. At least there are different levels of engagement and mobilization. The president has the authority to call up certain numbers of people for a certain amount of time to wage short-term conflict. Full-scale war needs to have the full approval of congress. In the case of Desert Storm, approval was sought and confirmed. In the case of Operation Iraqi Freedom, congress has said early on that if the president feels like he needs to go to war that he could make that decision. In Vietnam, started as a police action, we sent military advisors over there to assist the South Vietnamese army and it eventually grew into heavy involvement in which we were not just advisors but participants and in some cases...in most cases actually feeding the war and that's what upset people, congress was bi-passed.

TL: I may be a little rusty on my facts about the beginning of the Vietnam War, but the Valley of Dien Bien Fu the French tried to take, but were beaten. Was American forced into it because of the French's actions?

SC: No, I don't think you could argue we were ever forced into it. I think you have to see the big issue. Considering that this was the cold war. We were fighting the cold war. The domino theory we have heard about and talked about was definitely in play here. The French were trying to keep a former colony. They were hanging onto that colony with just an influence there. Did we need to go help them? I don't think so. Unless you want to consider that we were trying to consider their colonial interests. The bottom line is we were concerned about the communist insurgency. If Vietnam was taken then the theory was the rest of South Asia would follow. And that is the same thing with Korea.

TL: One more question concerning West Point and your time there. How do they treat such controversies such as Son My?

SC: I have heard of that, I'm not too familiar with it.

TL: It involved the 11<sup>th</sup> brigade, when they inhumanly massacred.

SC: Are you talking about the Mi Lai incident or is this another one? There were several.

TL: Well any such incident.

SC: Yeah, well I think that you could argue to a point that Lt. Calley, who was platoon leader at the time, was a scapegoat. He did receive orders that were unclear to handle the problem at the village and so on one hand you could say that given unclear guidance and the fact that this is the fog of war, there were heavy heavy casualties on both sides the soldiers were frustrated by seeing their buddies blown up all the time, on the one hand you could say it was too much to expect. It's impossible to judge soldiers no one but a soldier can judge a soldier. That's one argument. The other argument is that there is a law of war. Soldiers have the right and responsibility to not obey unlawful orders like going in and killing villagers. Those laws of war are set out in the Geneva Convention to define those types of war crimes. If war crimes are committed, I can tell you they are actively prosecuted. Now the question today is not whether or not soldiers will be held responsible, but who is going to hold them responsible. It's a big debate internationally about whether or not the international court of justice has the right to try U.S. military members for war crimes. The United States says they still maintain the right.

TL: To try their own soldiers?

SC: To try their own soldiers, even though they may be in international conflict like a peacekeeping situation.

TL: Lets move on to your personal experiences with the Gulf War. Are these awards you have here, these plaques?

SC: Those up there are personal awards, the rest are just plaque and souvenirs. Plaques that I have received from different units I have served in.

TL: What are the awards you received for the Gulf War?

SC: In the Gulf War I received an Army Commendation Medal for my participation there, just for my general involvement. And then the Kuwaiti government gave awards to those who serve there and the Saudi government did so as well. Three international awards and one U.S. medal.

TL: What were your responsibilities?

SC: I was more involved in logistics, the supply system. Which was a major challenge during Desert Storm. This has always been a problem for the Army, how to get not only soldiers but also their equipment and supplies to a theater of operations. It was a problem in WWII with D-day, with the whole history of the world that has been an issue of major concern. Napoleon finally figured out how to do it in his day and he did it much across Europe. And so the same problem presents itself today, how do we get all these soldiers and their equipment from the United States to Saudi Arabia, a place that we are not

familiar with. And so my involvement, as a logistics officer, was first of all to plan the deployment of my battalion and to a lesser extent the Special Forces units from their home station to Saudi Arabia. Once there, we had a wide variety of functions that we performed. My unit gave equipment maintenance, supply and transportation to all of the Special Operation units: the Special Forces, Delta Force, Rangers and Navy Seals, wherever they were the country. Specifically my involvement was moving northward before the war started right along the border and running an Airport, the airfield would later be the centerpiece of the war as we moved forward into Iraq. I saw the build up of that planes flew in every day unloading supplies. I coordinated all the air traffic, flights coming in. At the same time we were responsible for getting these supplies to the Border Patrols. We had Special Forces units helping out the Saudi Border Guards all along the border. So, twice a week we would bring them supplies. For most of the war I was stationed right on the border. Once the ground war started in February of 1991 I led the convoy of the Kuwaiti Army, it was like 300 vehicles. The Kuwaiti Army had a symbolic role of re-taking their country, which means they really didn't do it, we were just supposed to make them feel like they did. And so the Special Forces had to be training them during the build up of the same city I was in. And when it came time for them to convoy forward, it was about 100 miles between our location and Kuwait City, this began day two of the ground war. That is when I ended up leading the convoy, in the lead vehicle going towards Kuwait City. That was kind of an adventure because we didn't know what the first Marine division had done, we hadn't received any intelligence, we hadn't gotten any news, we didn't know whether they had taken the city, whether they were still in battle, we didn't know where the enemy was. All we knew was that there was this road, it was straight shot, 100 miles from where we were to Kuwait City and there were lines like this on each side. So it was a good example of following the straight and narrow path. It had been carefully cleared by the engineers and you had to stay on that path. If you decided to wonder off and get souvenirs from the Iraqi soldiers who had abandoned their weapons, you'd get blown up. So it was important to keep moving. AS we moved forward, we noticed oil well fires that Saddam Hussein's troops had started. The sky at mid-day was black. If I ever get cancer, I'll know why. Yeah the sky was totally black. And so, we got to Kuwait City, and my job...we found out first that the First Marine Division had been successful. Our job then became to retake the U.S. Embassy and arrange for the U.S. ambassador to return to receive the country because he had left since the war had begun. And so I re-opened the airport, the Kuwaiti international airport, just before the Air Force arrived and the Ambassador's plane came in, we off loaded his equipment and took it to where he needed it and then for me basically the war was over.

TL: Was that an emotional moment?

SC: Yeah it was emotional until we saw that all of the supplies consisted primarily of liquor. You couldn't buy it in the country so they had basically an Air Force pallet of alcohol, which we carefully escorted to the Embassy. The Navy seals escorted it with machine guns on each side, which is kind of a laughable scenario. But that is the way the war was. That is how war is, there are comical, ironic things that go on all the time. You just have to keep positive about things.

TL: How did that affect your family back here? Did you have a family at that time?

SC: I did yeah. We had been married four years. We had one daughter and a brand new baby boy. He was born in March of 1990 and I left in August of 1990 and I returned in April of 1991. To give you a brief answer, it was difficult for them. I think they took it well. I had the opportunity periodically to call home. AT&T set up a service where we were able to have free cards and they had a phone center set up there in Saudi Arabia to call home, so that was nice. There was also a system set up where we had video tapes given to us we could record a message to our families and send it to them. Mail came and was sent, and lots of care packages, kind of like the mission field. I remember on New Years Eve of 1990 going into 1991 my wife had sent me a little can of Bordons Egg Nog, it comes in a little can and some fruit cake or something like that. I saved that and went up on the top of the roof and I took a cassette player and I put on Ode to Joy from Beethoven's ninth Symphony and my headphones and I drank my egg nog and looked up at the stars and cried a little bit. That was kind of a dramatic moment for me anyways. Particularly it was a time of separation, but we knew it would end and we knew I was relatively safe. Although we had some fairly scary moments with scud missile attacks. Threatened scud missile attacks. When I got home, in April, I flew into Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina and my family was waiting for me. I looked over at them and I went over and I hugged my wife and my daughter and I looked at my little boy and I said who's this, who is this kid? For some reason I was tired or whatever and I didn't recognize him, he had totally changed, and my wife still kids me about that. But he had grown up so much, he had his first birthday, I missed his first birthday. I was hard but I think we handled it pretty well.

TL: Thanks for sharing that. You talked about scary moments with scud missile attacks. If you know in advance, how do you prepare for such a thing?

SC: Well we had equipment that luckily we never had to test. We had protective masks, gas masks, and protective chemical suits, boots and gloves, and so I think it happened about three times in this military city that I was talking about. We would get a report that there was a missile on the way. We were trained to hunker down and put on all our gear in a couple of minutes, so we would put it on and hunker down and just hope that nothing would happen. In both cases patriot missiles intercepted the missiles, by the air defense artillery. But there were some that made contact in the capitol city. But, you're prepared for the fear that he would load it with some kind of chemical weapon, which he liked to do. That was a really scary moment.

TL: Obviously there are major differences between Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Did we have the chance in Desert Storm to capture Saddam Hussein and if so, why didn't we?

SC: I think we did. We knew where he was. We had been conducting deep strike operations into Iraq well before the war actually started. In the process we had collected a lot of intelligence and we knew well what was going on. The problem was, and it is

easy to say that was the thing we should have done because it would have prevented a lot of this from happening. Although in hindsight, although we would have had to fight a war, we would still have had to do the same nation building we are doing right now and that has been the hard part. The other part was relatively easy. So, yeah we could have taken care of it but we would have upset our allies because no one at the time supported us actually assassinating Saddam, and in principle I believe since the Nixon administration we have had an anti-assassination policy. Which means we won't purposefully take some one out. Of course we could have captured him but there wasn't the support from our allies. We had some people in the coalition that were really behind us in terms of taking back Kuwait. The Syrians for example, I worked along side many Syrians, they were very cooperative in terms of retaking Kuwait. They saw the wrong in that. They saw that one country doesn't have the authority to take over another country. But when it came to taking out the president of that country that was an entirely different issue. So, I think there were a lot of complications in doing that. Yeah I would have liked to see it done but I think that is just the U.S.

TL: What is it like working along with coalition forces, with people of different languages? How does that affect morale of U.S. troops? What is it like working with people who don't share the same language?

SC: Most of my experience is positive. On the troop level where you're mingling, we spent some time with the French, the foreign legion that you hear about, they were there. On my level it was a positive experience. I had a lot of interaction with the Saudi Army at the airport. We worked with them on a daily basis to run the airport. I had some good conversations; a lot of them are educated in the United States. So, some of them did actually speak English. I had a lot of time in the country to go out and mingle with the people and I really enjoyed that cultural experience. But, I've heard from General Schwartzcoff and others that at higher levels, in fact, trying to get other armies to obey your command because you're the supreme leader is actually very difficult. There were lots of little problems, but somehow everything works, but its not always a pleasurable experience. And that is a problem, it looks like, in the future that we are going to continue to face because coalition warfare is becoming more of the norm. Very rarely will you see a situation, like Iraqi Freedom where we will unilaterally just go in. Its going to be more of international cooperation in peace keeping and nation building and it is a difficult task at a variety of levels, the language barrier is one of them. For example in Bosnia right now we have, well there is a Russian Sector if I remember correctly, there's a British sector, there is an American sector, is there a French sector, I can't remember, but anyways each one, in fact has its own reputation. The Russians apparently are kind of lax, there is a lot of prostitution over there and the U.S. seems to run a tighter ship and so there is some animosity there over the way things are run. Just a sign of the times I guess.

TL: When America is directly compared to other troops, is it obvious that we are better trained?



SC: It depends on the level of the unit. There are elite forces in all the armies. The Foreign Legion, for example, from France is quite famous. I was very impressed with their abilities. I think that the training is not so much the concern among a lot of these armies, although if you get some of these armies from Africa and Asia they may be relatively poorly trained. I think the main difference you see is in the attitude of the soldiers. In many countries, particularly those that follow the Soviet model, the officers run the show. The soldiers blindly obey everything; there is barely any motivation to do anything other than what you are ordered. We have a reputation for independence. For...thinking things through, taking initiative, if you're not given specific guidance you can actually figure it out yourself. And that is our reputation. Many people, some people, observers would say this affects our discipline. My experience has been that is not at all the case. I would say it has more to do with reputations and stereotypes than with overall performance.

TL: Do you see a difference with Armies that are obligatory and Armies that are volunteer?

SC: I guess I haven't had enough experience with that to say one way or the other. I know a lot of men in the Foreign Legion in France were faced with going to jail or serving in the military and so there might be a criminal element there, but the ones I talked to were pretty good men.

TL: What advice would you give a young man about to leave for Iraq?

SC: I had that experience, because just yesterday...Of course with the announcement of the probable deployment of the Idaho National Guard, there are a lot of students here who likely to go. I know a lot of them through the R.O.T.C. but there are a lot of others out there too. I was talking to one of them, I asked him how he was doing, I saw him out on the street and he said oh not so good. I said what's going on? His main concern was his wife. They were just recently married and she I don't think really supports his decision to really be in the Army, he is in the National Guard so it's just a part-time thing, but they had plans to graduate and go to California and look for work but now he is prevented from doing that even though he graduates this April. He has got to stay here with the Idaho Guard. She is upset about that. I told him just to enjoy the experience as much as possible, you've got sometime so prepare your family as much as possible, just be supportive of your wife and understand that she is frustrated and that she doesn't want you to leave because she loves you and she needs you. It will all be over, just try to survive while you're there and do the best you can and think of it as an opportunity to serve your country. I do tell soldiers in this new type of warfare we are facing, they may be trained for one function, they may be in artillery, they may be infantry, but this is a peace keeping situation and a terrorist situation, the enemy is everywhere, and nowhere, and a lot of it is just guard duty, a lot of it is police work, helping villages rebuild their infrastructure, things that we are not necessarily trained for. So I told students in my R.O.T.C. class that are going that they can expect to do things they are not trained to do.

TL: I saw on the news lately a report about American troops searching for cell leaders, conducting night raids, are we hurting our position with the Iraqi People?

SC: That is hard to say we do hear one thing with the press that is always negative. Every once and a while I will read an article that will indicate that the majority of the people in Iraq don't necessarily want us there permanently but they see that they have it better under the U.S. occupational force than they did under Saddam Hussein. He did terrible things to his people. So, now as to our tactics, how we are going about this, do we let it ride? Do we just let the terrorists do what they want to do we take necessary action? And typically that's the way we do things. If you have suspected sympathizers in a village, you go to the village and you deal fairly harshly because you got to find the information you want. So, what I see is that, yeah, there is going to be some people who don't like the way we do things. I think if we handle it properly, and forcefully then we will be able to accomplish it gradually. That is not saying that it is going to be a democracy any time soon. That is probably not going to happen. It may never happen in Afghanistan. We may be there for years we were in the Philippines for years, we were in Japan for years, it's going to take a long time, we are still in Bosnia. If we learn from our mistakes, we have made many mistakes, then we will achieve some level of success maybe not a lot of success but we experience some success. I don't even know if Iraq will remain as a whole, as a single country. There maybe a Kurdistan, or a Sunni area and a Shiah area. I don't know.

TL: If that were to happen, based on your knowledge of the region, would there still be conflict, can you divide Iraq up to where there are equal resources for all?

SC: No, I don't know that could work. I am just saying that is a possibility. And its been suggested. The real question is, can the people of Iraq function together? Can they build some type of coalition among Sunnis who are a minority but have been in power over the years and then the Shiah who are the majority and feel like they have been spat upon all these years, and the Kurds who have never had a country? They are ethnically different. That's the real question can they stay together or will they fall apart? How are they going to make it work? Turkey doesn't want the Kurds to have a second country because they feel that if the Kurds have a separate country they will agitate the Kurds in Turkey. Turks are very nationalistic. I can't think of a way you could easily divide it up, no.

TL: No easy answer I guess. Well that's all I have. Thank you for your time.