GOMEZ: This is Brandy Gomez. I’m interviewing Butch Chavez on October 15, 2010. This interview is taking place in the administration building of CSU-Pueblo. The interview is sponsored by the CSU-Pueblo University Archives and Special Collections, and is part of the Southern Colorado Ethnic Heritage and Diversity Archives Project. I want to confirm that Mr. Chavez understands that this interview is being recorded, and that this recording will be preserved at the CSU-Pueblo University Archives.

CHAVEZ: I understand.

GOMEZ: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed with us. We look forward to hearing all your information. Now, can you please state your name for us?

CHAVEZ: I’m Butch Chavez.

GOMEZ: And when and where were you born?

CHAVEZ: I was born May 8, 1946, here in Pueblo [CO].

GOMEZ: And, did you grow up in Pueblo also?

CHAVEZ: Yes, born and raised, and got into a lot of trouble.

GOMEZ: And have you just lived in Pueblo all your life?

CHAVEZ: No, no.
GOMEZ: Where else have you lived?

CHAVEZ: I’ve lived in Denver after I got out of the service and Littleton [and] in Aurora.

GOMEZ: What jobs have you had?

CHAVEZ: I worked at Martin Marietta, working on the Titan IIIC missile. I did that for about five to six years. And then, I went into the real estate business, and I’ve been in the real estate business for 38 years, up until just last year.

GOMEZ: And what do you do now for a living?

CHAVEZ: I’m retired.

GOMEZ: Retired.

GOMEZ: Enjoying the nice retired life. We know that you’re involved in many veterans’ organizations now.

CHAVEZ: Yes, I am.

GOMEZ: Can you tell us a little bit about those organizations?

CHAVEZ: Yes. I am a past Vice President of American Legion Riders. It’s a motorcycle organization. It’s not a gang. We are just a group of veterans that like to ride motorcycles. We all have the same passion and that’s helping veterans. One of the major things we do is—or they do—is raise funds to buy care packages for soldiers overseas, and to have a little extra money to help soldiers out in need and veterans as well. But, lately, it seems like when the soldiers deploy, the families are having problems financially, with utilities and stuff. So, we kind of help out if we can.

GOMEZ: That sounds like a wonderful organization.

CHAVEZ: Yes it is. It is.

GOMEZ: And what were you doing before you entered the service?
**CHAVEZ:** Nothing. That was one of the problems. I graduated from South High School and—I don’t know what it was—my parents had always instilled in me that I would never go to college. I don’t know if it was the money portion of it, or they just felt that way. So, I graduated, and just partied throughout the summer till my folks said, “that’s got to stop,” and they were going to kick me out. So I said, “well, I’m going to show them.” So I joined the Air Force.

**GOMEZ:** And, so that’s how you entered the service?

**CHAVEZ:** Yes.

**GOMEZ:** And so you were enlisted—you weren’t drafted.

**CHAVEZ:** Well I was close, and I figured, “if I don’t do something, I’m going to be drafted.”

**GOMEZ:** Right.

**CHAVEZ:** So, I was pretty high up on the [draft] list.

**GOMEZ:** So you just took the initiative, and just went [inaudible] –

**CHAVEZ:** Yes. Actually a good friend of mine—Geno Blagg—I called him. We called each other cousins. We weren’t really related, but Mickey Two-Feathers, [and] Martinez, we all just decided to go in on what the Air Force called the ‘buddy system,’ which I could say a little bit more about it, but I won’t.

**GOMEZ:** It was kind of nice to have somebody there with you, huh?

**CHAVEZ:** Yes, the three of us. Yes, the three amigos.

**GOMEZ:** The three amigos, huh?

**CHAVEZ:** Yes.
GOMEZ: Why did you choose to go into your specific branch of service?

CHAVEZ: Well, we did do some research, and we all agreed that we felt that we could possibly get a position in the military that would be something we could use when we got out, because the Air Force, that’s what they push, you know. There’s some, they don’t. The Army pretty much gears their recruits towards fighting. And, it’s not that I was afraid. It’s just I thought, “well, I’m not going to go to college and hopefully I can learn a trade.”

GOMEZ: Right.

CHAVEZ: Yes.

GOMEZ: Carry on something. When did you depart for training camp?

CHAVEZ: September 8th, 1964.

GOMEZ: What were the training days like?

CHAVEZ: Rise and shine at 4 a.m. You had to clean the barracks, which literally sometimes you ended up using your toothbrush to clean the floor. A tooth brush! I’m not saying one that you use to brush your teeth!

GOMEZ: Right.

CHAVEZ: But, it just depends. They’re pretty tough on you, and it’s to instill discipline in each individual. In a way, it’s kind of geared to weed out the undesirables cause they’ll break.

GOMEZ: Right.
CHAVEZ: Then, when that was done, we had calisthenics. We went out and ran four or five miles, and exercised and then we would have breakfast.

GOMEZ: Sounds like a lot of hard work.

CHAVEZ: Yes, yes.

GOMEZ: Where did you serve?

CHAVEZ: My first station for basic training was in Lacklund Air Force Base [San Antonio, TX] and that’s eight weeks, if I remember right. Then, from there, I went out to Amarillo, Texas for tech school. I trained to be an aircraft sheet metal repairman, maintenance and repair, which I enjoyed. I mean, once I started classes, I realized I liked it. So we were there another eight weeks, learned how to do that, learned about flight—you know, what makes an airplane fly, and how to do our repairs. When an airplane flies, they pull what they call “G’s”. They fly so fast that they sometimes pop rivets, and they rip skins and, underneath the skins, there are what they call ribs and spars, and they’ll crack those, and so those have to be maintained.

GOMEZ: Wow! That must have been a lot of work.

CHAVEZ: Yes, it was.

GOMEZ: We’re going to talk a little more about your combat experience [and] some of your emotions. What were some of your emotions while in combat?

CHAVEZ: I wasn’t actually in combat, fighting and firing a weapon. I did qualify in basic training on [the] M-16, but the Air Force really doesn’t teach you how to fight. That’s one of my major PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] issues, my anger. I’m still very angry that they didn’t train us the way they should have, and then put me smack in the middle of a combat zone.
So, basically, a lot of my training was geared towards just keeping the planes flying, to support the Army, and the Marines, and what have you. So basically, my combat experience is dodging and trying to get away from mortar fire, and, rocket fire.

GOMEZ: It would have been nice if they offered the training.

CHAVEZ: Yes, I gave her [Beverly Allen, Archivist] some pictures of our air base that I’m glad I took, because it certainly proved that we were under fire. So, that’s basically the scope of my combat.

GOMEZ: So do you still experience—because you said you were shot at—

CHAVEZ: Yes.

GOMEZ: Do you experience—like when you hear loud noises—do you?

CHAVEZ: Yes, I do. One of the major triggers for me is—one night, I’d gone up to the evac hospital, 71st evac hospital. We had just been hit, and I was about 30 feet from one of the planes that got destroyed by mortar. It knocked me down, and knocked me out for a while. So, when I woke up, I had blood coming out of my ears, just a little trickle. So, they sent me up to the evac hospital, and the triage nurse said not to worry, that it was probably just a mild concussion, and they said, “stick around, we need your help.” So I just sat there, and finally she told me that there were some helicopters coming in, that they needed help unloading. Well, I thought it was just medical supplies or something. The first chopper came in, and it was [gets emotional, fighting back tears], excuse me—[wipes tears]

GOMEZ: You’re ok. You’re ok.
**CHAVEZ:** It was loaded with dead or wounded [and] body parts. We began unloading, taking them to triage. This went on for two and a half hours. It’s helicopter after helicopter. It was then that I gained a whole new respect for Army and Marines, because I used to get into a lot of fights with them. I mean, they would tease us, because they were kind of jealous [that] we weren’t in combat. So they would call us wing-nuts, and sissies, and pussies, and what have you. Nobody’s going to tell me that without me smacking them in the face.

**GOMEZ:** Right.

**CHAVEZ:** So, I would get in a lot of fights. That was the last time. Some of the guys we’d carried off were of course still alive, and talking. A lot of them would ask me to please write their mom or girlfriends. I didn’t know who they were [*wipes tears*]. I’d just tell them ok, I would do that. And so, when I hear the sound of a Huey [nickname for the UH-1 series helicopters]—and, there’s a lot of difference between the sound of a Huey helicopter and more modern helicopters. But, it’s a trigger, and if I’m not careful, it sends me into a rage. But I’ve learned to cope with that. [*Inaudible*]

**GOMEZ:** I can only imagine how hard—

**CHAVEZ:** Yes.

**GOMEZ:** that is to have to deal with every single day. So, it’s—

**CHAVEZ:** Yes. Yes, with a lot of helicopters around these days.

**GOMEZ:** Yes. I’m sure you can still see those images—

**CHAVEZ:** Yes.
GOMEZ: in your head—

CHAVEZ: Yes, I can.

GOMEZ: every single day. You said that you did—you wrote to their families [inaudible]—

CHAVEZ: Well, I wasn’t able to because, like I say—I told them I would—

GOMEZ: Right. [Inaudible]

CHAVEZ: just because they were injured. Some were mortally wounded, and—

GOMEZ: But you really couldn’t know them.

CHAVEZ: Yes. I—there’s no way for me to get an address, to ask—

GOMEZ: Exactly.

CHAVEZ: them at that time, so—

GOMEZ: With that, did you form any friendships with anybody else in there?

CHAVEZ: Yes, of course. I had some good friends, and one of them was shot and killed by a sniper. Not only [did] we have to work 24 hours a day, just about—I mean, we would work at night and when we worked on our airplanes, you had to light it up, to be able to work on it. So they got these big, big lights and generators, and that just makes you an easy target for a sniper. And that’s what happened. We were working on an airplane, and he was shot in the head by a sniper. I have a good buddy now that lives in Michigan. We keep in touch by phone.

GOMEZ: It’s probably nice --

CHAVEZ: Yes.
GOMEZ: to have someone to talk [to] about what you went through.

CHAVEZ: Yes. He did something different. He worked on the older C-147s, which had a lot fabric instead of aluminum, so he was—which was his specialty working on fabric. I also ended up—I would be sent over sometimes, to be—to Camp Holloway (Pleiku, Vietnam) to work on helicopters. So I formed some friendships with some Army guys. But, unfortunately, I haven’t been able to find any of them.

GOMEZ: Right. I assume [that’s] pretty hard.

CHAVEZ: Yes, it’s hard remembering names after 40 years—

GOMEZ: Exactly.

CHAVEZ: I can see their young faces, and wonder what they look like today and—

GOMEZ: And after everything you experienced—

CHAVEZ: Yes.

GOMEZ: it’s hard to even remember those—

CHAVEZ: Oh it is.

GOMEZ: minor details. Yes. What are your post-war feelings? What did you feel when you came home?

CHAVEZ: Well, that’s another trigger for me—happy, I mean. I was excited I was coming home—coming back to the real world, we called it. We had a nice flight back. Luckily, we came back. I think it was on Continental Airlines, and we landed in San Francisco late evening—mid-
evening, I would say. As we pulled up to the concourse where the planes park, you could tell there was something going on inside. You could see out the windows. So, we kind of thought, “wow, this is our welcome home.” It wasn’t. It was an organized war protest, and – [gets emotional, wipes tears, says to himself] “Gosh, I thought I was ready for this.” A Marine and me were the first off the plane–there were several guys behind us–but, they ended up throwing buckets of urine and human feces all over our uniforms, called us baby killers. Of course, we started to fight, and the MPs [Military Police] stopped it immediately. They said, “well, they have a permit to protest.” They escorted us to our different connecting flights. I asked them if I can get my duffel bag and change, [and] he said “no, your duffel bag’s already on the plane. You’re just going to have to –“ So I went to the bathroom and did the best I could to wipe off my uniform and–but the smell–so, when I got on the plane [gets emotional and wipes tears] nobody said anything [inaudible]. They just all moved, looked at me–just, just staring at me. And that’s the way we was–that’s the way the flight was on the way home. My folks weren’t exactly happy with the Vietnam War either, and even though my dad was World War II, he seemed nonchalant–I don’t know if that’s the proper term–about me returning home.

GOMEZ: He didn’t seem to – [inaudible]

CHAVEZ: Yes, and so I thought well, I got some high school friends, that got college deferments–and at that time it was Southern Colorado State College, and Pueblo Community College campus. So I said “I know how to get to the cafeteria” so I went there to wait for him [friend] at noon time. This first time it was, he smiled, obviously glad to see me. But I don’t know if it was uneducated or what, but he hollered, “hey, the baby killer’s home.” So we chatted for a while, but as I looked around, I could see anti-war protest signs and it bothered me a little bit, because I really didn’t know–when I was in Vietnam, I knew what it was about, and I thought I
was doing good, fighting against communism for their freedom—but I really didn’t know what was going on back home.

GOMEZ: You didn’t expect to be—

CHAVEZ: I didn’t expect to be—so I—

GOMEZ: tortured like that.

CHAVEZ: Yes. So I just stayed home. I had a 30 day leave but I only took a week of it. That’s about all I could take—the silence at home—my mom and brothers. Of course, they were always at school, so I just kept my leave short and went on to my next base.

GOMEZ: So you continued to be in the Air Force afterwards?

CHAVEZ: Yes, one more year. One more year after that, I went to George Air Force base in Victorville [CA] and worked on the F-4’s [F-4 Phantom II]. It’s a training base for pilots going to Vietnam. During that time period, I just decided I’m not going to tell anybody, ever, that I was in Vietnam.

GOMEZ: So you just kept it to yourself afterward?

CHAVEZ: I kept it to myself for pretty much 35 years. I would have my nightmares and flashbacks and—I wouldn’t—I didn’t tell my wife. I didn’t tell my son or daughter as they grew up.

GOMEZ: Now, when your wife talks to you about the war, is she very supportive and—[inaudible]?

CHAVEZ: Well, during our early years, she—we had some tough times. She was the strong one to stay with me for so long because I wouldn’t open up. About 2000-2001, she had enough and
she says “you know I love you very much. Either you get help or I’m divorcing you. It’s one or the other.” So that’s when I sought help. Actually, I waited another—it was 2001 maybe—year and a half before I went to the V.A. [Veterans Administration]

GOMEZ: That’s a long time to go with suffering such harsh conditions.

CHAVEZ: Even at that time I didn’t think I was suffering. I just felt this is the way I am. I just kept to myself.

CHAVEZ: I got in a couple of fights—I know it’s not very professional, but I did. I got pretty angry, so I ended up basically working by myself, being alone. That’s pretty much what I did. I just worked by myself. Then I went into the appraisal business and had my own office all to myself, which was perfect, just me and me.

GOMEZ: Were you like that before you went to work? Were you more to yourself or did it just—[inaudible]?

CHAVEZ: Yes, when I worked at Martin Marrieta, a lot of guys at lunch time—they would all get together, play cards, play hearts, and eat lunch, and joke around, and I would go by myself. For some reason—I like to put it this way, and maybe I shouldn’t now—but Vietnam vets can tell who another Vietnam vet is. We just can. I would approach that individual, and find out that he was, and we would just become good friends. We would talk to each other about our experiences and if somebody would come in that we knew that wasn’t a veteran, we would just change the subject.

GOMEZ: So, these organizations that you are in with other veterans—is it helpful for you? Does it help give you some release?

CHAVEZ: Yes, it does. It’s a strong therapy for me. It’s my passion, yet it’s a trigger. There are times I can come home after doing something and I do feel good about what I’m doing but it’ll cause flashbacks or nightmares. Trying to recognize them is difficult.
They have a seven week PTSD residential rehabilitation treatment program up in Denver. It’s a lockdown program. I went through that. It’s very intense therapy where they teach you exactly what is going on with you, with what you’re doing. The thing about it is, when I was there, there were 19 patients. I thought it’d all be Vietnam vets, but it isn’t. It’s a mixture of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghan veterans. You just wouldn’t think a 60 year old man would get along with a 20 year old kid, but we did. I mean, it was a very good experience for all. I think one of the programs in there that I thought was going to be most boring turned out to be the catalyst for me to really realize what was going on. That was the biology of PTSD and exactly what’s going on in the brain.

GOMEZ: So you got to see exactly what you were experiencing?

CHAVEZ: Yes, and basically—basic training for the Army and the Marines—it is felt by some doctors that they really set you up for trauma. That’s what they do. They teach you how to handle trauma. They want you to be able to survive. They’ll tell you in basic training, if you’re going into combat, that 10% of you will die. But they want you to be able to act and react as quickly as possible in combat. I didn’t think I got that kind of training, but I did. I knew what to do if we got hit. I did my job. I did it, [and] I think I did it well. It’s just that now I’m learning what the Army does to an individual in basic training. So, they’re setting you up for PTSD.

GOMEZ: So most everyone would experience it.

CHAVEZ: Yes, some sort.

GOMEZ: Would you say that that program helped you greatly, or did it help you?

CHAVEZ: At first, during the program, everybody has the same feeling. You hate to go through that door because you know it’s going to be locked behind you. The first thing they do is search you completely for weapons, contraband, marijuana, drugs. Then you get to meet everybody and you start feeling a little comfortable. The first two weeks is tough because they tear you down. They want you to remember things. They want you to go into a flashback. The reason is so that they can develop a specialized treatment plan for you specifically, based on what you’ve gone through and what’s going on. So, those first two weeks were very exhausting
and tough. There were two or three guys that went in when I did that left the program within those two weeks. They just walked out, never came back.

**GOMEZ:** Cause it was such a hard experience, to experience everything else all over again.

**CHAVEZ:** Yes, I wanted to leave, but I knew if I left, it may be years before I had another chance. I said, “I’m tired of this. I want to get better.”

**GOMEZ:** Start your life over again?

**CHAVEZ:** Yes, what’s left of it.

**GOMEZ:** You said you do have children?

**CHAVEZ:** Yes.

**GOMEZ:** How many do you have?

**CHAVEZ:** My daughter’s 40 years old. My son in 38.

**GOMEZ:** How are they with this experience? Do they help you?

**CHAVEZ:** Well, we’ve been very distant all of our lives. I was a strict father. I like to say that my daughter is the cause of all these gray hairs. She was like her dad. She was pretty wild. But while she was going through her high school years, I just wanted to make sure she didn’t get in with the wrong crowd. She remembers me as being very strict and didn’t like me. I mean, she loved me, but she didn’t like me. My son, on the other hand, was more of a momma’s boy, and was a good kid. They both turned out great, no problems. But, for example, in my appraisal business, my son would help me while he was going to college to get his RN degree. He would go along with me, and we would travel to Trinidad to do an appraisal, or to La Junta, or to Canon City. There was nothing to talk about, and we had nothing in common it would seem. It was quiet. We never said two words to each other sometimes. It’s not that there was any anger or anything between us; it was just like—he knew what to do when we got there, because I taught him and so forth. The nice thing about the PTSD program is they give you a book for your family members, whoever you want to give it to. It’s about PTSD, and it’s broken down in laymen’s terms. You give that to your family, while you’re in the program, for them to read.
Both my daughter and my son said, “this book is all about you.” They read it and they said, “this is my dad.”

GOMEZ: They probably gained a better understanding of what you were going through.

CHAVEZ: They gained a better understanding, and from that point, even while I was in the program—you’re able to call out—I started talking to them on the telephone. My daughter especially—there’s a lot of unfinished business between she and I. I was able to call her and say, “I’m sorry I was the way I was.” She says, “now I know why.”

GOMEZ: I think it’s great that that program offered some kind of item for the family members, because it does help. It helps you, I’m sure, as an individual, so that they can understand you better too.

CHAVEZ: Yes, the V.A.’s goal is to include the families, that’s for sure. In the program, I got to the last portion, the last three weeks, [and] I did not want to leave that place. I said, “I could stay here the rest of my life.” It was so comfortable, so safe, and they treated us so well. I mean, you have a break down, and they’re there, and are able to help you. They’re able to pull you through, and tell you exactly what happened at that moment, and take you back to what they’re teaching you. Sometimes you just don’t want to leave. I mean, they’re doing some wonderful things, right now, for the military, which is just amazing.

GOMEZ: It sounds like a wonderful program.

CHAVEZ: It is.

GOMEZ: I’m glad it helped you get through everything that you experienced. Now, are there any life lessons that you learned from your service?

CHAVEZ: Oh, boy! Yes, I guess so. It did prepare me for adulthood. I tease my daughter—she’s 40 going on 10—because she still likes to have a good time, just jokingly, of course. It taught me how to be a man, I think. It taught me discipline. It taught me—90% of your veterans, you will find, are workaholics. It just gives you something to do, because in the idle time, you start thinking. There’s not a day that goes by I don’t think about Vietnam. And, especially in the last three weeks, it’s been though because—the [Vietnam] wall being here
[Colorado State University-Pueblo]. We rode out to meet it, and escort it into town. I mean—just so many things. It’s been tough, real tough.

GOMEZ: Very emotional few weeks.

CHAVEZ: Very emotional, very. [I] had a couple of flashbacks, but I knew how to deal with it. I came once in the day, and I just saw too many of my old friends. It was good to come and see them and talk to them, so I twice came at three in the morning to be by myself.

GOMEZ: It’s kind of nice to have a tribute to—

CHAVEZ: Oh, yes.

GOMEZ: all the lives lost and all the lives that are still here, but had to go through all the same experiences also.

CHAVEZ: One of the things you had asked earlier and one of the things that [I feel] besides anger is guilt. I feel guilty that my name wasn’t on that wall. For all these years, I just thought, I should be—I don’t know—was it my fault because I went the easy way and went to the Air Force as opposed to the Army or Marines? That kind of thing. It’s just—and I’ve learned over the years—now I look at it this way. All those names on that [wall], I still mourn for them all. I still cry for them all, but I do know this. They would not want me to do that. [Emotional] They didn’t die for me to mourn. They died for us to live, have children like you, and go on with our lives, and freedom. To think otherwise is not contrary to what we learned in the service, the discipline. It’s what upsets me when—I don’t know—everybody feels the same. War—I don’t think we should ever go to war, that war should end right now. Pull those guys back. Bring them back. But I’m very proud of America to see that they’ve changed, and are welcoming them home like they should, the way they do. But when I see that on TV, when 300-400 come home from Afghanistan and Iraq, I’m happy to see but it still tears me up a little bit, that we didn’t get that. So, only a Vietnam vet could understand that I think.

GOMEZ: After all you’ve been through, we’re thankful that you’re today to tell your story. You also helped tell the stories of your lost comrades, which helps you, like the wall, carries on their names. You, also, help carry on their names, and you help give us the education on what happened in combat. I want to thank you for having this interview with us. It’s been very
educational. People can now look at this to see what people experienced in war. Thank you so much.

**CHAVEZ:** Thank you very much.