

U.S. Army Joint Munitions Command Oral History Interview Series

Mr. William Summerfield
Employee, Lone Star Army Ammunition Plant



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Oral History Interview with William Summerfield

Lone Star Army Ammunition Plant Employee



Ms. Pleasant: For the record can you state your full name and position here at the plant?

Mr. Summerfield: My name William Summerfield and I go by the name of Bill. I am a Metrologist for Day and Zimmerman, Inc. (D&Z).

Ms. Pleasant: What does a Metrologist do here?

Mr. Summerfield: A lot of people think that we forecast the weather, but that's the wrong thing. As you can see there are a lot of various types of instruments in here and what we do is calibrate. We check the calibration of any gauge, scale, or anything that measures that isn't electronic, like an oscilloscope. Forecasting the weather is a different department. But all the gauges like micrometers, plug gauges, red gauges, ring gauges, scales, torque wrenches, tooling attempts, that is made here or comes in from other companies that go with the machinery here. We check all that.

Ms. Pleasant: When did you start working for D&Z?

Mr. Summerfield: October the 9th, 1961. I have 46 years of employment right now.

Ms. Pleasant: And what position did you start in?

Mr. Summerfield: My very first job? Do you know what a yo-yo is? That's one of those things you swing back and forth to cut the grass. That's what I did first. I did that for four days.

Ms. Pleasant: Four days?

Mr. Summerfield: Yes and then I went directly to work on the railroad that we have here and I worked there for three months. I then went to a production line as a production operator for three months before I got bumped back into storage for a week. That's where you unload the vans and railcars and everything. I went back to R line and stayed for about six months, and then moved over to M line and stayed about four years, and then that process went into inspection. Then I got a bid into the X-ray department at E10 and stayed there for many years. I spent most of my time out here in the X-ray testing part, probably around 30-35 years in that department. In 2005 we had an opening up here and I came up into the meteorology department. It's been an experience.

Ms. Pleasant: Was it easy to bounce back and forth through all those jobs or was there a large learning curve?

Mr. Summerfield: No, at all. Probably the most difficult job that I've had here in the 46 years that I've been here, I have right now. There's a lot to learn about this stuff and I haven't learned it completely yet. The man that retired from up here spent 40 years in here and I told him, "it's going to take me a while to learn that." He said, "well I've been here 40 years and I haven't learned it all yet." But this is probably the most fascinating job I've held since I've been in here because you're dealing with anything from weights from 300 or 400 lbs. or more down to the milligram of measurements. I might be measuring something that's 4 or 5 feet long or something that's down to the millionth of an inch.

Ms. Pleasant: That is very small.

Mr. Summerfield: Yes it is. You can't see it and you can't feel it.

Ms. Pleasant: Mike, do you have any questions you'd like to add right now?

Mr. Weitzel: How many people work in here with you? Are you here by yourself?

Mr. Summerfield: No, there is one other person. He's out on the lines right now.

Mr. Weitzel: Coming into 1961 amid the Vietnam conflict that was just starting to build up, what was it like here at the plant?

Mr. Summerfield: Well quite frankly I was just 18 and out of school. I had tried to join the Service and failed the physical, but one of the questions they asked me was if I would consider going to Germany. At that time Germany was a hotspot. I told them I wasn't too thrilled about it, but you know I didn't have a choice in that matter. I had never heard of Vietnam at that time. It was a year or so after that when Vietnam, as a matter of fact I think it was 1963 or 1964 when things started accelerating here. At the time that I came out here I think there were only three or four production areas running at the time.

In 1963 or 1964 the other lines began to open up. I believe we only had one shift when I was hired in out here and then within five or six years I think every area had three shifts on in that area. We had about 11,500 people working out here during that time. There were a few jobs that I didn't quite care for, but I think that happens everywhere you work. One thing that has really made it good to work here is that this place has really been blessed with really good upper management. They still have good upper management. We've got a good bunch of people out here and 99% of them out in the work area, you know you're going to have bad ones wherever you work, but 99% of the people that work out here are good, conscientious people. It's like I said in an interview that we did with the *Gazette* one time; we do a damn good job out here. We're all proud of what we do and I'd like to look forward to 46 more years, but I don't think that's going to happen.

Mr. Weitzel: What was it like after Vietnam and how rapidly or slowly did things start scaling back down?

Mr. Summerfield: It kind of went down in phases and some of them were large phases. It would get disheartening when you'd go up through the Clock House where they had your seniority list hanging up there and then would have a termination list next to it that usually had about 40 people to a page, and sometimes you'd have 20 or 30 pages up there of people getting laid off, and it just gets disheartening. It was tough on the area there for a while too, but we maintained where we're at now. For how many years has it been Ms. Kennedy?

Ms. Kennedy: Oh, we've been hanging fairly steady probably for about seven or eight years now.

Mr. Weitzel: From the pictures and negatives we've gone through and the people that we've talked to in the last few days it sounds like the people out here were more than just co-workers. It sounds like the workforce had really strong, almost family bonds.

Mr. Summerfield: Yes, I know back in that time if you weren't working on the weekend there were huge picnics. Various lines would get together and then they would find out another line was out too. Everything happened out at the lake and people would get together out there. I went to one picnic that combined A line, C line, and D line and there must have been 900 to 1,000 people out there. We all knew each other. I still see people today, of course I'm getting a little older, but I see people that I've worked with and I know their face, but I can't quite put a name to them because it's been so long since I've seen them. But yes there was quite a strong family atmosphere, and still is.

Mr. Weitzel: We saw many pictures of competitive sports leagues, and numerous game clubs like canasta, bridge, bingo, was there healthy competition between the lines?

Mr. Summerfield: Yes, they had ball leagues, bowling, Canasta, Bridge, golf and much more. They used to have Bingo out here a long time ago. There's still a ball field that's up here just as you come in the gate. A lot of times when people would get off work they would go right out there and play ball until dark with maybe a team from Lone Star and a team from Red River Munitions Center.

Ms. Pleasant: Are there any experiences or memories that stick out in your mind?

Mr. Summerfield: I can remember one in particular. I believe it was in February, 1967 when we had the explosion on Depot P line. I was there that night and I lost a neighbor and a real good friend.

Ms. Kennedy: Mr. Weitzel and Ms. Pleasant, were you both aware of that explosion?

Ms. Pleasant: I've seen pictures.

Mr. Summerfield: We had a 105 Howitzer line and a projectile blow up while it was being assembled and 11 people were killed that night. That still affects me, it still affects me today.

Ms. Pleasant: Safety is always stressed, that has always been understood, but when something like that happens it is a very tragic and sad event for the installation and community. Are you from this area originally?

Mr. Summerfield: I was born in Springfield, MO and my dad worked for a freight company and we moved from Springfield to West Plains, MO to Ft. Smith, AR, Newport, AK, Memphis, TN, Texarkana, AR, Texarkana, TX, Chicago, IL, to Texarkana, TX. I came back here in 1957 and I've been here ever since.

Ms. Pleasant: How does Lone Star affect the local community? What kind of impact does it have here in Texarkana?

Mr. Summerfield: Well of course back when we had 11,500 people working in here, you could walk into a car dealer and the car dealer says, "Well where do you work?" You reply "Lone Star." The dealer says "sign right here." The thing that gets me now with some of the younger people, when you say you worked at Lone Star they automatically think of Lone Star Steel, which is south of here and when you say, "No, that's not it" they say, "Well where's that at?" But then you can go and ask anybody that's over 40 years old and say Lone Star and they know exactly what you're talking about. This place has built a lot of homes and has educated a lot of people's kids over the years. I hope it continues to do so. This place has been very good for this area.

Mr. Weitzel: You said when you got off your yo-yo jobs you went and worked on the railroad line for a few months?

Mr. Summerfield: Yes, we had a railroad that runs out here and I worked on it for a few months.

Mr. Weitzel: Today, almost everything's shipped back and forth through the country with trucks. What was it like back then when it was the train hauling more of these items?

Mr. Summerfield: I didn't do anything with hauling, other than the weight aspect of storage when I would load one. My crew changed cross ties and straightened the track, put in switches and markers, and all that kind of stuff. It was work but I can remember back when we were really booming out here, all the trains were in and out of here constantly. I don't know how many trains a day were on this track all the way into Texarkana every day, back and forth, hauling ammunition in and out and there were a lot of trucks. Just about everything goes by truck any more, but there was stuff going in and out of here constantly at that time. I'd say it has been an experience.

Ms. Pleasant: Have you ever held any supervisory positions? Are there any experiences that you would like to share about your positions as a supervisor?

Mr. Summerfield: I've held some temporary positions. I was telling you about the upper management. I don't know of any companies where you can walk down the main hall of the office and they can step out and call you by name or you're welcomed in their office. Even when the executives from Philadelphia come in; most of them know you by name and they go out of their way to make you feel comfortable with the management. I've always appreciated that.

Mr. Weitzel: How much of a presence or influence has the Army had working here with D&Z?

Mr. Summerfield: They were right there with us because we had the CORs (Contracting Operating Representatives) that worked right out there on line to verify that everything was going the way it should. We all worked very closely with the Army and their staff. It has been a very good relationship.

Mr. Weitzel: What's it been like with more sophisticated technology being integrated in here over the last 30 years?

Mr. Summerfield: It gets a little overpowering sometimes. Of course when VCRs (Video Cassette Recorders) were the big thing I couldn't program my VCR. I would have to get a kid down the street to do it, but some of the high tech equipment that comes in now, to just watch it or see it being put in, to me I can think because of my age, it is a little intimidating. As far as being afraid of computers or anything like that I'm not afraid of it, I'll jump right in there with it. I know there are a lot of people that computers just intimidate the heck out of them, but I'm glad to see it come in.

Ms. Pleasant: Is there anything else that you would like to discuss about your actual roles and responsibilities in any of your positions that kind of show people like what it was like to work here?

Mr. Summerfield: Well, I have spent most of my time in the inspection and testing department while I was out here, and particularly in the X-ray and the testing end. In that department you are the final say about whether the product is accepted or not. Particularly in X-ray because you're the last to see it and if something goes wrong, you're the person they come to when they come back and want to know what happened. It's a job that I've always prided myself in, I've tried to do it well and I think I have. I've had a few bumps along the line, but that's life. Really looking back over the years I can't think of anywhere that I would rather have worked than for D&Z at Lone Star. I've met a lot of good people out here and I have made a bunch of good friends when I first came in out here and we're still friends. They don't work here anymore and some of them live up in North Arkansas, but we see and talk to each other regularly. We're just kind of like family, that's the family thing that's in me. It also goes back to whether you know how D&Z was to this area, how it affected it. It was very good for this area.

Ms. Kennedy: There was a time when D&Z was the chief employer in Texarkana.

Mr. Weitzel: In 50 or 100 years from now, when you've got the college historian history students doing research on the Lone Star Army Ammunition plant, what is one thing that would

be most important they got right when they're writing up their history. In 50 or 100 years from now that would be put into this transcript right now that they'd be looking at?

Mr. Summerfield: That we were a conscientious company that made munitions for the Army, Navy, Marines, that we did it well and as safely as possible. I don't know what else you could ask for. And maybe that I was here and that we made a difference in the world.

Ms. Kennedy: You made a difference.

Mr. Summerfield: We sure did. We sure are making a difference.

Ms. Pleasant: What are your feelings about BRAC (Base Realignment And Closure) and the plant?

Mr. Summerfield: I think a lot of it needed to take place, but I think they've over jumped. I think they went too far. You know it's like we make three or four unique items out here that nobody else makes and I think it probably should have been studied a little closer. But it doesn't do too much good to sit back on that anymore, now we just have to strive for the future and go on with our business.

Ms. Pleasant: Do you have plans for retirement or are you going to continue working until you can't?

Mr. Summerfield: Well as a matter of fact, before our Plant Manager retired in July, he asked me if I was going to retire and the department boss asked me if I was going to retire. I said, "No, I'd just go ahead and work out here until y'all run me off." I just enjoy what I'm doing. I want to get a big motor home and go all over the country and see everything I want to see, but I'm just as happy out here. As long as my health is good, I'm going to continue to work. I enjoy it and the people.

Ms. Pleasant: We appreciate your candidness and you taking the time for the interview. Thank You.

Mr. Summerfield: Sure.

End of the interview