

Marrissa Scales: Okay. Well, on behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, we'd like to thank you for giving us this interview, but for the record, could you please state your name?

Marshall Tyler: Marshall Tyler.

Marrissa Scales: Okay and when were you born?

Marshall Tyler: Born in Lexington, Tennessee, in 1945.

Marrissa Scales: Okay and where were you born – well, where were you raised?

Marshall Tyler: Here in Lexington.

Marrissa Scales: Here in Lexington. Okay and what is your occupation?

Marshall Tyler: I'm a real estate broker.

Marrissa Scales: Okay, who are your parents?

Marshall Tyler: Alvis and Jewell Tyler.

Marrissa Scales: Okay and what were their occupations?

Marshall Tyler: Farmer and she was a factory worker.

Marrissa Scales: Okay and what was it like growing up for you in Lexington?

Marshall Tyler: It was just typical growing up. I mean we grew up on a farm and we worked from daylight to dark and we fed by the lights at the barn at night, so we were used to probably a 12-, 14-hour day.

[00:01:01]

Marrissa Scales: Okay. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Marshall Tyler: I have two brothers.

Marrissa Scales: Okay and what do they do?

Marshall Tyler: One of them was a banker and the other one was a construction superintendent.

Marrissa Scales: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood you lived in?

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Marshall Tyler: Well, I grew up in a rural area. It was a farm. We were – as far as neighbors and all, we – it was a mixed neighborhood when I grew up and we worked – all of us worked together. We worked in the cotton fields and cornfields and hayfields and all that type stuff together, so just a typical southern way of life really is the way we had it.

Marrissa Scales: Okay and where did you go to elementary school, here in Lexington?

Marshall Tyler: No, there was a little county school that was a K through – I mean it wasn't K. It was first grade through the eighth grade, Poplar Springs, a little community out west.

[00:02:05]

Marrissa Scales: So then where did you go to high school?

Marshall Tyler: Lexington High School. Mm-hm.

Marrissa Scales: Lexington High School and what did you do after you left high school?

Marshall Tyler: I was a factory worker for seven years and then I sold industrial supplies to factories for 12 years and then I've been in real estate 25 or so.

Marrissa Scales: Okay. What was school like for you?

Marshall Tyler: School?

Marrissa Scales: Mm-hm.

Marshall Tyler: It was okay, just preparing yourself for what you were gonna do in the future, which we didn't know, had no clue. I was – I worked every job at Johnson Controls and little did I know that each job that I did was preparing me for a job later on, that I could go – later on, I became a salesman for industrial supplies and I could go any factory and, you know, I knew the way that maintenance worked.

[00:03:01] I knew the way that tool and die worked. I knew, you know, the whole bit, so it was just kind of a natural for me to go in and I could talk with a plant manager or, you know, the maintenance man or the fellow that's sweeping the floors. I sold them things, so it was just kind of a stepping stone. My whole life's been that way.

Marrissa Scales: Good. Now, did you – were there any issues, I guess, with segregation or integration? How did those things impact your educational experience, if at all?

Marshall Tyler: Integration hadn't taken place when I was in high school. Now it did shortly afterwards, but I never had any trouble with racial tensions or anything like that. When we worked on the farm, you know, all of us worked together, our neighbors or – we had black neighbors and white neighbors and one Hispanic neighbor.

[00:03:58] So, you know, we didn't really know any different, but, you know, a lot of the big cities and all had a lotta tension. I know when I was in the – went off to the service there was a lotta tension in the service at the time. I didn't have any, but – you know, but there was a lotta tension then.

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Marrissa Scales: When did you go to the service?

Marshall Tyler: I was in in '66 through '72.

Marrissa Scales: In what branch?

Marshall Tyler: I was in the National Guard but I trained in the – Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. I trained at a Ranger school and then I went to mechanic schooling in Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, and after that, well, I was back here and then kinda coincidence with the National Guard.

When the rioting broke out at Memphis, they came to the armory. I was one of the first ones there and they wanted to know if I was – could drive a personnel carrier, armored personnel carrier, and I said yes.

[00:05:00] So they got about the first ten guys that could drive those and we went to Milan Arsenal and then we drove the personnel carriers down the interstate to Memphis and that was kind of a unique experience. I was in the lead carrier.

When we got to Memphis at the city limits, well, there was motorcycle policemen that was escorting us and there was two and there was like – I think there was eight carriers and one of the policemen just stopped at one traffic light.

He'd slide it sideways and block the intersection and then the other one would be at the rear at the other traffic light and when the last one would go by, he'd come flying by us and he'd slide into the next intersection and he'd say, you know, "You time it to where I can just get there and block the traffic." So we was – I was on the lead carrier going in and one of the drivers.

[00:05:59]

But that was kind of a – we didn't know what was about to happen. We just was sent there because there was racial tensions and there was rioting and our job was to stop the rioting and the main thing that they did to stop the rioting while we were there was they enforced a curfew.

You couldn't be out after dark and they had a certain time. I can't remember exactly the time, but they couldn't anybody be out after, so that's how they kinda controlled that and we was a large number of people.

But it's real interesting – I had two black fellows that was in my outfit that was with me all the time – how I got contacted by *The Commercial Appeal*. They came up. I was on a street corner and this event had just taken place.

[00:06:54]

And the – a couple of, I guess, people that was causing the trouble came down the street and they asked the two guys that was with me – they were black guys – "Whose side are you on?" And our lieutenant told them, said, "You guys get in the personnel carrier and set up radio communication."

They didn't know a thing about radio communications. He just got them out of the way and then the interviewer, the guy came up and interviewed me and he was asking me the questions that he asked me and he said, "How do you feel about this situation?"

I said, "Well, I feel sorry for the black people that's with me, you know." And so that's where the comments came and that's where you guys got ahold of me from.

Daniel Jacobs:

Right.

Marshall Tyler:

But we were in – I was on the street corner of Beale and I can't remember the other street, but there was a little park right across the street from that.

[00:07:59] But our biggest job was to – you know, to enforce the curfew and to keep the peace really is what we were sent there for.

Marrissa Scales: Can you tell me a little bit about your family at this point in your life? Like are you married?

Marshall Tyler: Yeah, I'm married. I've just had the ninth grandchild and we're excited about that. My wife's named Pam.

Marrissa Scales: Her name is Pam. What's her occupation?

Marshall Tyler: She's a real estate agent.

Marrissa Scales: She's a real estate agent. How long have you been married?

Marshall Tyler: Ten years.

Marrissa Scales: Ten years.

Daniel Jacobs: Let's go back to your experience with the National Guard. Why did you – you said you originally joined in 1965?

Marshall Tyler: Sixty-six, uh-huh.

Daniel Jacobs: Sixty-six, okay. Why did you choose to join the National Guard?

Marshall Tyler: Well, at the time, I had one child and about to have another one and I wanted to serve the country but I didn't want to be gone from home, so that was the route I choose.

[00:09:01]

Daniel Jacobs: Were there many other people in the community or your friends joined the National Guard or was that a pretty –?

Marshall Tyler: There were several, yeah. Yeah, I had some friends that was in the regular Army and I had some that was in – course we didn't know but what we would be activated and sent – you know, Vietnam was going strong then and we didn't know but what we would be sent there at any time, you know.

The talk was that we would be, but I never was sent there, but I trained in basic and training and stuff with a lotta guys that was in the regular Army and the Rangers and stuff that went overseas.

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Daniel Jacobs: So when you did the training, you actually trained with regular Army, also?

Marshall Tyler: Oh, yeah. Mm-hm. We did. Yeah.

Daniel Jacobs: Okay. Was the training or the boot camp integrated?

Marshall Tyler: Yeah. Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

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Daniel Jacobs: Do you remember if there was – were there any tensions at boot camp or was it anything –?

Marshall Tyler: Not a lot. We trained at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, and not really. When we went to Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, for mechanic school, there was some civilian workers on there and there was some tensions between the civilian workers and the people that was in the service.

Daniel Jacobs: What were the tensions? Were they – was it –?

Marshall Tyler: Well, I don't know. There would be some words said to each other when they were passing and some slurs made and it didn't take much for a slur 'til it was a fight, and, you know.

But – so they'd have to call the MPs and stuff in to kinda get it all separated and then they – they controlled it real well, I felt like, but I felt bad about that, but, you know, it was just the time it was and there was tensions and – but, you know, there wasn't that much here at the time.

[00:11:00] Just – I mean everybody got along. I always just went the extra mile to make sure that people were treated equal.

Daniel Jacobs: Yeah.

Marshall Tyler: I had two blacks that I trained in tool and die and there was 30 men in the company and the oldest man was supposed to train the youngest man that came in, and I was one of the youngest ones there and the others refused to train the two blacks that came in. One of them I'd worked on the farm with for years.

I was just as comfortable with him as I was anybody, so I trained him, and then they brought another one up and his dad and me

were good friends, so I trained him and the others just refused to do that, the older situation with the younger person.

But it was amazing the – if I went to lift something that was real heavy, one of the guys that I had trained would be on the other end of it, you know, just automatically helping me, you know.

[00:12:03] I could go downtown and they'd see me across the street and they'd – "Hey, man," you know, all the way across the street, so we'd – I never had any problems in my life with racial tensions.

Daniel Jacobs: When you were in the National Guard, did you ever have any training on how to deal with riot situations or was that part of the training?

Marshall Tyler: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I was on a riot squad. Yeah. Mm-hm.

Daniel Jacobs: What does that training consist of or what do they –?

Marshall Tyler: Oh, you just put shoulder to shoulder just like the highway patrol riot squad now. I mean if they – they just take fixed bayonets and they take one step at a time shoulder to shoulder and they're gonna clear out anything that's in front of them with a bayonet coming at you, you know. I mean it's just – but that's pretty much what we did.

Daniel Jacobs: What unit were you in?

Marshall Tyler: I was in the infantry unit, 117 Infantry, A Company.

Daniel Jacobs: And so you were – as a mechanic, did you also serve – I guess you said you were a mechanic in the riot squad.

[00:13:01] Were they just overlapping duties or how did that –?

Marshall Tyler: No. When they sent me off for training, they gave testing and I tested and at the time they put me in a motor vehicle training. The minute I got back home there was no opening in the motor vehicle, so they put me right back in the infantry. *(Laughter)*

Daniel Jacobs: Okay.

Marshall Tyler: I was a sergeant a little bit later on on the 106 anti-tank weapon and that's what I was on when I got out. I served in that capacity for a little better than two years.

Daniel Jacobs: Okay. What rank were you when you went to Memphis?

Marshall Tyler: I was a private when I went to Memphis. Shortly after, I was promoted to a SPC 4 and then after I got to SPC 4 then I was offered the slot on the 106 anti-tank weapons and that's what I served at the last couple of years.

Daniel Jacobs: Before you went to Memphis had you been hearing anything about what was going on in Memphis? Did you – were you reading the newspaper?

[00:14:01]

Marshall Tyler: No, the riot was a surprise to me. I mean it really was. I mean I knew there was a garbage sanitation strike and I knew there was some – you know, I knew there was some tensions over that.

But when they did the march when the rioting broke out, I think most everyone was surprised at that, but then we were informed right quick that we had to get there in large numbers and keep the peace, so that was mainly our job at the time.

Daniel Jacobs: Right. And so you were at the armory when they called you, when they asked you to go to Memphis or did they call you?

Marshall Tyler: No, they were calling and I was – I lived only a couple of blocks away from the armory, so I was one of the first ones to arrive. We had to pack our gear and get to the armory just as fast as we could, so when I got there, I was one of the first ones to arrive.

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Daniel Jacobs: Do you remember what the atmosphere was like when you got to Memphis, like what people – I mean did anyone who was living in Memphis come up and talk to you besides – you mentioned the incident earlier, but did people say anything to you or did you feel like they were friendly or angry?

Marshall Tyler: Not really. See, the – when the attention arose was at night when the curfew was on and if someone was out, they had to be escorted home or wherever, but in the daytime it was just a normal day-to-day thing in the daytime.

Everyone came and went as they wanted to without any question. We did most of our patrolling at night and we'd go 12-hour shifts,

but our shift would start somewhere around dark and we'd patrol 'til daylight the next morning.

Daniel Jacobs: So is this just driving around and just checking on people or what were you –?

[00:15:57]

Marshall Tyler: They – yeah. Well, they – enforcing the curfew. If someone was out and wasn't supposed to be out, well, you know, bad news for them because they – you know, they would escort them wherever or whatever needed to be done, but sometimes you'd have someone that was wandering around drinking or something like that, you know, that just – that didn't abide by the curfew.

But it didn't take long 'til that took effect and everything quietened down, but there was one incident I was close to that was some sniper fire and when we investigated we couldn't find him. They shot up a police car and a policeman laid down in the seat.

They couldn't – he didn't know where the fire was coming from. He just knew the windows broke out and, you know, he laid down in the seat and so we searched and searched and couldn't find anyone.

[00:17:00]

So the next morning we found some empty cartridges in a culvert on the interstate or on the bypass and that's where he was and he crawled out the other end of the culvert and got gone, whoever it was. We never knew who it was, but, you know, just things like that.

We'd search if we saw someone in a – running across a housing project or whatever. We'd try to locate who it was and what they were doing out at 10:00 at night or, you know, what was going on, so that was the main thing that we did.

Daniel Jacobs: And were you – did you have – well, I guess you were carrying a rifle, but were – was there any sort of, I guess, like rules of engagement or had you been briefed beforehand about – like were you carrying a loaded rifle or like live ammunition or how did that work?

Marshall Tyler: The only time at night when we were in a situation that we thought was dangerous we would load the rifle.

[00:18:03]

But I can't remember honestly but one night that we actually loaded up and had ammunition. It had to be something that was going on, some kinda disturbance that was close to us for us to load up.

Otherwise, we'd keep an – we'd keep the rifle but we'd keep the ammo in a different pack, but I was in a situation one night where we pulled back to a shopping center where we had – we'd had some tension in a housing project and everyone had loaded up.

So the lieutenant came to the truck and he said – we was up in the backend of what they call a deuce and a half and it had a tarp over the time and he said, "I know you guys loaded your weapons back there." Course, they had asked us to and then they asked us to unload before we went back.

[00:18:59]

So I was sitting in a bench next to one of my fellow soldiers and we'd taken our clips out and pulled the bolts back but he didn't pull his bolt back far enough to eject the shell. He thought he had and he eased the weapon up to the tarp and was gonna click it. We'd always click our weapons.

He blew the tarp – (*Laughter*) I mean he blew the tarp all off of that thing. I mean and the lieutenants and all thought someone was firing at us and they was all diving under the jeeps. You could hear bang, bang. (*Laughter*)

I couldn't hear good for a week. Man, my head was ringing, but that was one instance, but, you know, the – we were in some pretty – I guess pretty tough situations from time to time.

BEGIN CLIP 5 [00:19:55]

But, you know, there again, unless someone was specifically giving you trouble, you know, you'd just live and let live type thing is what we did, but when the curfew came, they were serious about us making sure that no one was out past that time, but we didn't have a lotta trouble other than just I guess a show of force.

A large number of people helped squash the trouble, the tensions that was going, but we were there when they had a march after Martin Luther King was killed. They had another march, you know.

We were there at that, but we just – thankfully, nothing happened on it. The – but looking back at the experience, I'm thankful that I

was there, but I'm glad that people now get along a lot better than they did back then.

[00:21:02]

Daniel Jacobs: Yeah.

Marshall Tyler: Yeah, very, very thankful, but hopefully that – you know, the way to solve things like that a lotta times is our day-to-day life, living, you know, our parts out, so, you know, you just – I've always tried to treat people like I would want to be treated, no matter who they were.

Daniel Jacobs: Did you ever feel scared while you were – when you were serving in Memphis? Was there ever a time when –?

Marshall Tyler: Oh, yeah. I mean you hear sniper fire and stuff, you know, I mean it's gonna unnerve you but then, you know, there's just so much of that. Then you gotta carry on what you were assigned to do, so I mean you had to actually do that.

So there's times that – I know I was on a street corner down there when those fellows came up and asked my black friends that was with me there, you know, "Whose side are you on?"

[00:22:04]

And I mean, you know, I didn't know what was gonna happen then, just – but the lieutenant who you'll interview a little later, he took care of the situation in a nice way.

Daniel Jacobs: Yeah. So this Mr. Holmes was your lieutenant or –?

Marshall Tyler: Dan Woods was the lieutenant.

Daniel Jacobs: Oh, Woods.

Marshall Tyler: Both Holmes and Lieutenant were – they were both lieutenants at the time. Mm-hm.

Daniel Jacobs: Okay. How long – so how long total were you in Memphis? Did you got and then come back or –?

Marshall Tyler: We were there a week and then we came back home and then Martin – we hadn't – I hadn't even gotten unpacked good and we got the news that he'd – Martin Luther King had been killed and then I mean it wasn't – seemed like five minutes 'til they was on the phone telling us we were going back.

Daniel Jacobs: Yeah.

[00:22:58]

Marshall Tyler: And so that – we were there a week the first time, came home and then back another week and then came home.

Daniel Jacobs: Did it feel different when you came back after Dr. King had been assassinated? Did –?

Marshall Tyler: Oh, yeah. I mean – you know, I mean it was a bad serious thing then. I mean, you know, I'm not saying that the riot wasn't, but, you know, there was so much unrest there at the time that we didn't know what was going to happen or, you know, just – it was an uneasy time if you're going into a situation where you saw things on TV where, you know, rocks were thrown and sticks were hitting people up the side of the head.

So I mean it's a fearful situation you're going into, but when we got there, you know, the show of force, I think, kept a lotta things from happening that could have happened, but we didn't encounter a lot.

[00:24:02] It was just individual things that would happen out on patrols and things like that mainly that would happen.

Daniel Jacobs: When you're patrolling how many people – like how many people would be with you on a patrol? What –?

Marshall Tyler: Well, there was a – a policeman normally was in a jeep with a driver and you would have probably two sergeants in the back of the jeep and so then you would have – in the truck you would have – in the back with tarps on, normally you would have probably eight to ten people in the back.

And, you know, if they had a situation arise, they'd holler they wanted so many men, you know. I need four men out here to help with this situation, so otherwise you'd just sit in the truck and not know what was going on 'til you got back in, but they kinda rotated the seats out to where the next four would – you know, you'd know which one was going next, you know.

Daniel Jacobs: Yeah.

BEGIN CLIP 6 00:25:04

Marshall Tyler: But very – I don't think there was but a couple of times a night that we loaded our weapons and all, that they got all of us out at one time, but most of the time it'd just be one or two people that would be out breaking a curfew and they thought it looked like maybe younger people that was – the night that they got us all out 'cause they were running and they saw them running.

So they wanted us to get out and find out where they were or what was going on, why they were out and they was really dead serious about that curfew. That was our main job was to enforce the curfew.

Daniel Jacobs: What was the attitude of the other people in your – or the other soldiers you were with? Did they have any – I mean was there a general opinion about – were people angry about being in Memphis or just how did they feel? What was the attitude?

[00:26:05]

Marshall Tyler: I mean, you know, we wasn't there but a week at a time, so I mean I couldn't – they just sent us there to do the job and we, you know, felt like that we were accomplishing what they wanted us to accomplish, so I mean I didn't really know of anybody that was angry for being there.

I mean they just – they thought it was a time in – and, of course, it was a time in history that you was involved in something, but I'm thankful in a way that I was there, but I didn't know of any tensions or anything.

Course, there we had some mixed groups in our outfit and no one ever got treated any differently in our outfit so, you know, we had a kind of unique situation. A lotta outfits were not that way.

[00:26:59] A lot of them were completely white, but ours was a good mix, you know, so we didn't have any tensions.

Daniel Jacobs: Was it just people from Lexington in your outfit or was it from all over West Tennessee?

Marshall Tyler: Our company was – Lexington, Parsons and Henderson was – made up Company A and so, you know, that was our – I – Lexington had probably in the neighborhood of 200 guys.

I'm not sure about that, but then you maybe had 100 from Parsons and 100 from Henderson, but Henderson was our headquarters, but they looked after the maintenance and things like that. Ours was infantry and the Parsons group was infantry and our groups were together.

[00:28:02] But we probably had 300 or so in a company, just average people, factory workers or, you know, whatever, construction workers. Just all walks of life really was in the guard at the time.

Daniel Jacobs: Do you think the experience of going to Memphis – did it change you or affect your opinions about anything or –?

Marshall Tyler: No. It opened my eyes that there was a lotta tension in a lotta bigger towns that we just didn't have here. I mean there was still – you know, we didn't have any trouble when the schools were integrated and stuff. We didn't have any problems like the big cities do. It's more of a live and let live type situation here.

Daniel Jacobs: Yeah. Do you have a question?

[00:28:58]

Marrissa Scales: You mentioned that Memphis has changed a lot from now and then. Do you think there's still work to be done?

Marshall Tyler: Well, I don't go to Memphis a lot, but yeah, I'd say there's still some work to be done there. Yeah.

Marrissa Scales: But it's progressed.

Marshall Tyler: Yeah.

Marrissa Scales: Okay.

Daniel Jacobs: What are people's – I mean I guess back in the '60s was – like what kind of – what opinion did people have about Memphis? Not specifically during the riots, but I mean had you gone there very often? Did you –?

Marshall Tyler: I had some family there and we would go and visit them and they were over around the Getwell or somewhere close to 240, Robin Hood Lane and in there.

[Crosstalk]

Marrissa Scales: East Memphis.

Marshall Tyler: Over close to the VA Hospital and it wasn't too far from Memphis State, but yeah, I never knew of any problem when we were visiting over there at all, not at all.

[00:30:02]

Daniel Jacobs: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about? I mean just –

Marrissa Scales: That we haven't covered.

Daniel Jacobs: Yeah, that we haven't asked you about, about your National Guard experience or about anything else, maybe –

Marshall Tyler: No, I can't think of anything to add to it.

Daniel Jacobs: Okay.

Marrissa Scales: If you could go back would you do anything differently?

Marshall Tyler: No, no.

Marrissa Scales: As far as serving in Memphis?

[Crosstalk]

Marshall Tyler: You're put in a situation to do a job and, of course, you know, we as guardsmen just feel like that we fulfilled that, but we was a backup to the Memphis Police Department.

There we were, you know, 12, 14 guys with one policeman, so it gave them looking like that there was a lot of force, so you know, if there's trouble, don't mess with us type thing, but no. I – there was more tension and stuff in Memphis by far than there was anywhere in this part of the community.

[00:31:02]

Daniel Jacobs: Yeah.

Marshall Tyler: Yeah.

Daniel Jacobs: Okay, well, I don't have –

Marrissa Scales: Well, again, thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project.

Marshall Tyler: Well, thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

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