

Interview with

JESSE PRIEST
Texas Ranger, Retired

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Project: Texas Rangers

Interview Conducted at the Priest's Home
Midland, Texas
Saturday—September 6, 2008

Interviewed By: Nancy Ray and Eddie Ray
Longview, Texas

Present at Interview: Jesse Priest, Barbara Priest, Nancy Ray Eddie Ray



Introduction

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JESSE PRIEST
TEXAS RANGER, RETIRED

NANCY RAY: My name is Nancy Ray. I am visiting with Jesse Priest of Midland, Texas. Today is Saturday, September 6th, 2008, and we are in the Priest's home. Also present are Eddie Ray and Barbara Priest. The purpose of this interview is to discuss Ranger Priest's career as a Texas Ranger. At the request of Ranger Priest, we are neither creating a video of this interview nor are we recording via audio. This document will be the only record of the interview with Ranger Priest. Ranger Priest, do you understand this document will belong to the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame & Museum in Waco, Texas?

JESSE PRIEST: Yes

NANCY RAY: Ranger Priest, do I have your permission to place this document on the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum's website, etc.?

JESSE PRIEST: Yes

NANCY RAY: What is your full name, and where do you currently live?

JESSE PRIEST: Jesse James Priest, Midland.

NANCY RAY: When and where were you born?

JESSE PRIEST: In Burnet County, September 18, 1929

NANCY RAY: Who were your parents?

JESSE PRIEST: My father was Jesse James, Sr. and my mother was Bruxie Hoard.

NANCY RAY: Did you have brothers and sisters? And if so, what were their names?

JESSE PRIEST: It's a yours, mine and ours situation. My Mother had a daughter, Billie Romel, and Daddy had Lathel and Lenton (sons) and daughters Leota and Leila. Then they had Joel, Jesse, and Noel, and then Ray, and then Jeanette. Jeanette recently died.

NANCY RAY: Where did you go to school?

JESSE PRIEST: Bertram in Burnet County

NANCY RAY: Did you have any favorite subjects?

JESSE PRIEST: I liked recess.

NANCY RAY: Did you like any other classes?

JESSE PRIEST: No (laughter)

NANCY RAY: What about other activities such as sports, band, or other extracurricular activities?

JESSE PRIEST: I played football and baseball. I broke my collarbone playing football so I knew I couldn't play any more.

NANCY RAY: What position did you play?

JESSE PRIEST: Quarterback.

BARBARA PRIEST: The school was very small, too small to have band or things.

NANCY RAY: When you finished school, did you serve in the military or what did you do?

JESSE PRIEST: I was in the Navy... went in January 1947 and got out 2 years later in December of 1948.

NANCY RAY: Where were you stationed?

JESSE PRIEST: Treasure Island in San Francisco. I worked in the Communications office.

NANCY RAY: What did you do in Communications?

JESSE PRIEST: We did communications from ship-to-ship ... and communications went all over the world.

EDDIE RAY: Did they have teletype?

JESSE PRIEST: Yes, but it was slow. One of my jobs was to carry messages around to everyone who go them.

BARBARA PRIEST: His high school class graduated while he was in the Navy. His Daddy

received permission to accept his diploma in his place.

NANCY RAY: Tell us your wife's name and when you married

JESSE PRIEST: Barbara. We married July 12, 1952. We married in Albuquerque, New Mexico where I was playing professional baseball.

NANCY RAY: What position did you play?

JESSE PRIEST: I was a pitcher.

NANCY RAY: What about your broken collarbone, were you still able to play?

JESSE PRIEST: Yes, I am right handed so the broken collarbone didn't hurt me in baseball. Barbara is from Lubbock and she *picked* me up and that's how we became acquainted.

BARBARA PRIEST: I did not *pick* him up. We were introduced by a Lubbock player and I didn't pay attention to his name. I worked at the movie in the box office and he came over and asked if I wanted to get a cup of coffee when I got off work. I said yes but I was kind in kind of a panic because I couldn't remember his name.

JESSE PRIEST: I really impressed her!

BARBARA PRIEST: I had to get on the phone to find the guy who introduced us to find out his name I didn't *pick* him up, he picked me up.

NANCY RAY: How was life as a Ranger's wife?

BARBARA PRIEST: It was good... but sometimes when he would be working on cases, he would be gone for two to three weeks at a time. One time he was on a case and was gone for two weeks... and for about a week or 10 days of that time, I didn't know where he was. I lived on the edge when he was gone.

NANCY RAY: Do you have any children?

JESSE PRIEST: We have two... a boy and a girl... Our son is James Rikard and our daughter is

Niki Elizabeth Speicher.

NANCY RAY: Do they live nearby?

JESSE PRIEST: Yes, they both live in Midland. We have three grandchildren. Our daughter has two sons and our son has a daughter. Grandchildren are expensive (laughter).

NANCY RAY: Did you have other jobs before starting your career in law enforcement?

JESSE PRIEST: I started playing baseball when I returned home from the Navy. I started in 1949 in Sweetwater, then in 1950 in Harlingen...1951 and 1952 found me in Albuquerque, New Mexico in the West Texas-New Mexico League. In 1952, the owners of the ball club wanted Barbara and I to marry at home plate before the game so we agreed, and there were 3,631 people in attendance. I pitched that night and won 15 to 1. During the winter of 1952 my contract was sold to Shreveport, Louisiana, in the Texas League. I reported to spring training there in 1953, then in May I was assigned to the Temple (Texas) Eagles in the Big State League. Finishing the season there. In September of that same year Shreveport recalled my contract and in the spring of 1954 I was farmed out to Augusta, Georgia in the Atlantic League. In 1955 I reported back to Shreveport for Spring Training. I pitched a few games and then was released to the Midland (Texas) Indians where I ended my baseball career because of a calcium deposit in my pitching arm.

NANCY RAY: How did you become involved in law enforcement?

JESSE PRIEST: After the baseball ended, we were living in Lubbock.....I got acquainted with the Highway Patrol captain there. Captain Posey was a big baseball fan and he got me started.

NANCY RAY: Do you remember the year you entered the Highway Patrol and were you at Camp Mabry or the new Academy?

JESSE PRIEST: I was in the second school in the new building.

BARBARA PRIEST: He graduated in March, 1956. Our daughter was born while he was in school. He couldn't get out of school to get from Austin to Lubbock so she was 2 weeks old before he got to see her.

NANCY RAY: In your Highway Patrol training, tell us a little about what you learned... maybe something that stuck with you throughout your career.

JESSE PRIEST: Safety was a big part of what they teach... how to protect yourself,... how to look out for things that are not normal.

NANCY RAY: What is something that would not be normal?

JESSE PRIEST: Something not normal would be a 15-year old kid driving a brand new Cadillac. Something that just doesn't fit. Or a kid driving an out-of-state car and not knowing where they are. ...Just something that seemed out of place.

NANCY RAY: What was your first duty station with the Highway Patrol?

JESSE PRIEST: Canyon, just south of Amarillo in the Panhandle. Palo Duro Canyon.

NANCY RAY: What were your primary duties there?

JESSE PRIEST: Speeders, wrecks, traffic law enforcement, working the highways. Working highway traffic. Once in a while, in a smaller town like Canyon, something bad happened and you would help the local sheriff or chief of police. The Canyon Sheriff had one deputy and there was one policeman and if something happened, they hollered for help.

EDDIE RAY: Who was your first supervisor or where was your home unit?

JESSE PRIEST: Sergeant Brookshire out of Amarillo. He was Sheriff at Odessa later. My partner was Dan Dowdy.

NANCY RAY: You went there as a rookie officer, no real experience.

JESSE PRIEST: No experience.

NANCY RAY: Is there anything that happened there that really stands out in your mind – maybe a case or a partner or some of the people there?

JESSE PRIEST: Well, nothing really outstanding,... we just worked traffic. Dan was a stickler on the law... and he enforced the law... and he expected everyone else to abide by the law. Every time I went to write a ticket or work with a violator, he said “consider your ass eat out ‘cause that’s not the way we do it.” (laughter) He broke me in right! He was a very good partner.

NANCY RAY: Where did you go after Canyon?

JESSE PRIEST: Childress. I wasn’t there very long, just about a year. I quit (Highway Patrol) while I was there and moved back to Lubbock for 2-3 months... then I was reinstated.

NANCY RAY: Why did you quit?

JESSE PRIEST: I didn’t like Childress. They would not transfer me so I had to quit to get out.

NANCY RAY: When you were reinstated, did you have to go back through the training?

JESSE PRIEST: I went through Part 2 of the school.

BARBARA PRIEST: We were able to buy his time back so he didn’t have a break in service.

JESSE PRIEST: When I reinstated, I was stationed in Lubbock then they sent me to Seymour. The two patrolmen in Seymour got in trouble so they sent me and Bill Angel to take their places.

BARBARA PRIEST: They developed the reputation of being the “priest and the angel.”

JESSE PRIEST: I was in Seymour for just a few months then the sergeant from Haskell got me transferred over to Haskell. He was a baseball fan and he had Little League and Pony League and he wanted me to help coach.

NANCY RAY: I guess you enjoyed that?

JESSE PRIEST: Yes, I liked it. We stayed there about 9 years and called it home for a long

time. We still have good friends there. In Haskell, I had back surgery. Then I transferred into Motor Vehicle Inspection Service which is a little less strenuous and then I moved to Graham. I was stationed in Graham when I made Ranger.

Note: After the interview, we learned the back surgery was caused by an injury when Patrolman Priest was loading a 300-pound drunk into a car.

NANCY RAY: You mentioned being accepted by the communities where you lived. How were you involved?

BARBARA PRIEST: In Haskell, we were pretty active in the community and church. He was president of the Jaycees one year and they were very active.He was president the year we took the oral vaccine (for polio)... and he spearheaded that to distribute the vaccine. (**Note:** A receipt in Mrs. Priest's scrapbook showed 5000 doses were distributed). During that year, we went all over that part of the country and the Jaycees did the oral vaccine. He received two or three letters that were written to Colonel Garrison... I think where they commended him and the Jaycees for that work. The Jaycees were also active in the American Cancer Society.

JESSE PRIEST: Haskell just kind of took us in and we became part of the community... it was a nice little town.

NANCY RAY: So what made you want to be a Ranger, did you always want to be one?

JESSE PRIEST: More or less... I always wanted to be one. ...Probably most Highway Patrolman would like to be Rangers eventually because it's a good promotion.

BARBARA PRIEST: Texas Rangers are a very elite group of Law Enforcement Officers.

NANCY RAY: You sound proud too.

BARBARA PRIEST: I am, I was always proud of him.

JESSE PRIEST: I had applied before leaving Haskell but I was in Graham before I was accepted. The legislature has to appoint them, they only let so many in... there are only so many openings. There were about 62 in the state at the time

NANCY RAY: How many were accepted with you?

JESSE PRIEST: There were 10 or 12 appointed in 1969.

NANCY RAY: Did you have a sponsor who really encouraged you to apply?

JESSE PRIEST: Well, the Rangers working in Benjamin and in Wichita Falls and the Rangers that I knew... I talked to them and the Captain in Lubbock. They have to more or less recommend you and the Rangers in the Company where you're living... they can blackball you. If the Captain or one of the Rangers didn't want you, you probably wouldn't get it. They have a good reputation they want to keep.

NANCY RAY: Do you remember the names of your first commanding officers or any of the people who entered the Rangers with you?

JESSE PRIEST: Selwyn Denson was the sergeant in Lubbock.

BARBARA PRIEST: He went into Company C which headquartered in Lubbock.

JESSE PRIEST: Jim Ray was captain... then Pete Rogers. then Skippy Rundell. Soon after I went in, I knew just about every Ranger in the state.

EDDIE RAY: Let's say someone over at Fort Worth had a problem. Sometimes you would travel over there to work. How did they request assistance?

JESSE PRIEST: I was in Wichita Falls and we had a murder in my area. The ladies that were killed were from Lake Worth. We had a hard time getting the girls identified. The Ranger in Fort Worth, Tom Arnold, called me and asked if we had those ladies identified yet. He asked if they

looked like they had been beat to death with a dead dog. I said no, they had been shot. Tom said he had a case... some ladies who burglarized a house and they killed dog. The man (Ralph Brown) said he would beat them with his dog if we found them. They (Fort Worth) asked for help and they got it. If I left for 2 or 3 days, I had to get permission to go from the captain. If it was assisting another Ranger or another officer, all they had to do was ask.

EDDIE RAY: So the captain gave you quite a bit of leeway...

JESSE PRIEST: If you're working on a case, all you have to do is let them know what you're doing... working on a case. They knew where I was all the time.

BARBARA PRIEST: What about when you went to Louisiana looking for somebody?

JESSE PRIEST: We were looking for a stolen bull.

EDDIE RAY: What did Louisiana think about a Texas Ranger being there?

JESSE PRIEST: A man in Jacksboro lost a registered bull and a guy came along and loaded him and sold him at the sale in Mineral Wells. We traced it to a man in Louisiana, in Houma. We had the serial number for that bull and when we found him, we loaded him. The sheriff (in Louisiana) said you better get him back to Texas before the man comes back. If you have to go somewhere else on a case, you contact the local sheriff and other law enforcement to let them know what you're doing. You don't just go without them knowing what you're doing.

NANCY RAY: Think back to the first time you put on a Texas Ranger badge. That must have been a proud time for you. What special feeling did you have about the badge and what do you think it meant to people civilians?

JESSE PRIEST: I think the Ranger badge is special not to just ordinary citizens but to other law enforcement agencies. ...I may be prejudiced, but I think the Ranger badge is special. No matter where you went.. go to other states..., they knew who the Rangers were and what you stood for.

They respected that badge.

BARBARA PRIEST: It is a high honor to be a Texas Ranger because they are an elite group of men. Not just anybody could get on the Texas Rangers.

NANCY RAY: Where was your first duty station as a Ranger and what years were you there?

JESSE PRIEST: Wichita Falls in 1969. I believe November.

BARBARA PRIEST: October. The kids had already started school in Graham.

JESSE PRIEST: There was already a Ranger there, Byron Currin, and he was fixing to retire so he broke me in more or less with the Ranger service.

NANCY RAY: You went there as a new Ranger, how were you received by the sheriff and other law enforcement officers?

JESSE PRIEST: Good. I more or less got in with them through Byron, he introduced me to everybody. They accepted me.

NANCY RAY: Tell us about your first case.

JESSE PRIEST: No,... I don't remember the first one. The biggest one was the double murder in Jack County that I had to work by myself. Two women were found shot and weighted down with heavy rocks, in a stock tank out on a ranch. They had been there for about a week. Getting them identified was first... then backtracking. Tom Arnold at Fort Worth knew these people and they were more or less dope dealers and had bad reputations. The women had burglarized a house of cocaine and other dope. After the women were identified, we found out who their associates were. The wife of Ralph Brown, the man whose house they burglarized, had hired a guy to do the killing. She hired Leroy Lafoon to kill the women and he was convicted. Ralph Brown's wife did the dealing and was also convicted. Ralph had been shot by a Fort Worth police officer in the head and he didn't think clearly. She spent time in Huntsville. When Ralph

found out he had been burglarized and someone killed his dog, he made the statement to the one who investigated... he said he would beat them to death with his dead dog. The dog was found buried in the backyard. It took a long time to solve that case, a little over a year.

NANCY RAY: You ran into some pretty bad people.

JESSE PRIEST: Yes, but you know what you're dealing with so you don't let your guard down.

NANCY RAY: Is there anything else you want to share about Wichita Falls

JESSE PRIEST: We found a woman in a bar (borrow) ditch in Archer County and she had been at a party earlier and left with a boy that somebody knew.. in her car. Well, we put out wanteds for the car and him, the boy, and about two or three weeks later, we got word he was in Deadwood, South Dakota. His car was found there. We gave the information we had on the boy and they found him in Gillette, Wyoming, a couple of weeks later. He was arrested. We brought him back to Archer County and he went to prison for 35 years. The interesting part (laughter), the motive for killing was.. this was before Viagra,... he got caught in an embarrassing situation and she laughed at him so he killed her.

NANCY RAY: What about your other duty stations, where were they?

JESSE PRIEST: Here (Midland). I promoted to sergeant and was here when I retired. I've been in Midland since 1975.

NANCY RAY: Are there any other cases you can tell us about?

JESSE PRIEST: I was a supervisor in Midland so I didn't work cases. Being a sergeant is like being a lieutenant now. After I left, they made sergeants to lieutenants. Once you are a supervisor, it is not as much fun. Being a supervisor is really one of the reasons I retired because I had to stay in the office most of the time.

NANCY RAY: During your career, what kind of cases did you work the most? Burglaries,

homicides...

JESSE PRIEST: Primarily burglaries and homicides but cattle thefts and things like that.

EDDIE RAY: What about oilfield thefts?

JESSE PRIEST: A lot of oilfield thefts, pipe, drilling equipment and etc.

NANCY RAY: Were narcotics cases common?

JESSE PRIEST: I never did work narcotics. DPS has a section that does that so I never did get involved in it.

EDDIE RAY: Did you ever just luck into just catching somebody that you weren't really looking for... you said you looked for things that weren't normal.

JESSE PRIEST: We worked a schoolhouse burglary and found this boy's billfold he dropped when he was burglarizing the school. The DA said he wouldn't let them carry it any further because the man said he might have just dropped it. ... In Haskell before the Rangers, this boy was burglarizing the jewelry store and he fell through the roof and fell into the jewelry store onto the glass counter. He was hurt, broke some ribs. (laughter)

NANCY RAY: Did you receive any special training? If so, what kind?

JESSE PRIEST: We went to schools, seminars in Norman OK...

BARBARA PRIEST: You were on the SWAT Team.

JESSE PRIEST: We formed the SWAT team in Midland. I was supervising it and had to go to Quantico, Virginia, and go through FBI training for SWAT. When I came back, we formed the team but we never had to go anywhere. But we were ready.

NANCY RAY: What about other cases... can you think of some that might have been very difficult to solve?

JESSE PRIEST: One murder in Punkin Center that I never solved. A guy got shot in front of a

convenience store. Nobody saw anything and as far as I know that's never been solved. The double murder I have already talked about is the one I spent longer on than any of them. We use to go to Terlingua to the Chili Cook Offs because of all of the dope and rough crowd that always showed up for them. There was a girl disappeared from one of the cook-offs one time and I don't think she was ever found or anything solved about her.

NANCY RAY: You worked in dangerous situations and many hours. How did you separate your work from your personal life?

JESSE PRIEST: Sat down, drank a cup of coffee, smoked a cigarette and waited for a phone call to go out again. You'd go crazy if you didn't.

NANCY RAY: Did you ever use humor to handle some of the stress?

JESSE PRIEST: From time to time you can use humor to get past it but sometimes that doesn't work.

NANCY RAY: Did you spend a lot of time testifying in court and if so, is there an incident that really stands out in your mind?

JESSE PRIEST: I never did like it but I had to. Not too much in the highway patrol, maybe some DWIs..., but as Ranger it was the murder cases, any case. Bill Angel and I were in Seymour..., they had him on a DWI case one time and he was laid back..., he didn't get excited about anything. They had a smart aleck defense attorney who was in his face saying things.. Bill just kept looking. The attorney stayed in his face for four or five minutes, just talking... and finally he backed off....Bill just looked at him, calm, and said, "could you repeat that again please?" (laughter)

NANCY RAY: About your family life,... being a Ranger was very time consuming and it was not an 8 to 5 job.

BARBARA PRIEST: How about 24/7?

JESSE PRIEST: Normally, you need to be in office around 8 AM to check mail and everything coming in..., make reports... see if anything is going on or not..., whatever the priority is for that day and what can be put off until tomorrow. No set things you're working on. The Highway Patrol has more regular hours on duty but they get called out to work wrecks or other things.

NANCY RAY: Was he gone a lot Barbara?

BARBARA PRIEST: When he made Ranger he was... and even when he made supervisor he was gone some too.

NANCY RAY: Is there something that happened during your career... an award, an honor, a "pat on the back,"... or something that really made you proud?

BARBARA PRIEST: When we lived in Wichita Falls, the Kiwanis Club honored him with "Law Enforcement Officer of the Year" in 1975.

JESSE PRIEST: That happened when I moved here (Midland) and they called me and I had to go back to Wichita Falls to get it.

NANCY RAY: You must have been well-liked in the community?

JESSE PRIEST: Some people you can fool and some you can't.

NANCY RAY: Did any other Ranger have a special effect on your career and if so, how?

JESSE PRIEST: One of my best friends was a Ranger, stationed in Benjamin, Homer T. Melton. He was the sheriff when Bill and I first moved to Seymour. We got to know him as the Sheriff and he later went into the Rangers and they moved him right back to Benjamin.

BARBARA PRIEST: He was from Benjamin, born and raised in Benjamin and everyone in that part of the country knew who Homer T. Melton was.

JESSE PRIEST: When I went down there, he told us this is my county, Knox County is my

county..., but ya'll what you need to do. But if you do something wrong and you know you're wrong, you're on your own. But if you do something wrong accidentally, then I'll be behind you all they way.

NANCY RAY: When did you retire?

JESSE PRIEST: December. 31st, 1979. After 25 years.

NANCY RAY: You had a long career, you probably did a lot of things right,... but maybe some things didn't turn out exactly as you wanted. If you could re-do something or do anything different, what would it be?

JESSE PRIEST: Well, I don't know of anything that I would change.... Probably some decisions could have been made different but... Financially, I would probably have been better off if I'd stayed longer... but I've enjoyed retirement.

NANCY RAY: Have you worked since retirement?

BARBARA PRIEST: He's worked hard.

JESSE PRIEST: For about 2 years, we spent on a ranch in Breckenridge. Bill Angel worked for the owners while I was working here... he was taking care of about 4000 acres... he got into some trouble and I went to the owners of the ranch and said I needed a job. We stayed there about 2 and a half years. When we first went down there, we were supposed to take care of the cows then he got into farming.....it was just to much work for us to handle and they would not hire any extra help. Then we moved back to Midland and worked security for Clayton Williams when he was building ClayDesta Plaza. Worked for him until the oil bust in the 1980's. Went to work for the County Attorney's Office as an investigator for 12 years. Worked for the U. S. Marshalls office and then finally retired .

NANCY RAY: Times change. What do you think is the biggest difference for a person

becoming a Ranger in 2008 compared to when you became a Ranger?

JESSE PRIEST: They've got more to work with than we did... have better equipment... computers for report writing. We didn't have DNA then which they have now... we had to dig for evidence. Now if they have a speck of DNA, they've got the case solved.

NANCY RAY: How did you get your clues?

JESSE PRIEST: Ask questions. You just had to ask.

NANCY RAY: How did you learn to do investigations?

JESSE PRIEST: They taught you how to do investigations..., like the homicide school in Oklahoma. They teach different ways of killing somebody... how to look for a normal or abnormal death... how to look for how they killed a person,. How to look for ways to do the job.

NANCY RAY: What advice would you give a new Ranger?

JESSE PRIEST: I would advise them to be a good Ranger, it is the best law enforcement service there is.

NANCY RAY: Because of this interview, a small portion of your life and career is documented for the future. There is no way we could capture everything in this short time. Think about your life and your career... some of your accomplishments and your contributions to the safety of Texans... How... or for what... would you like people to remember about you?

JESSE PRIEST: I think as far as my professional career, I'd like to be remembered as being fair, honest and having integrity. (**Note:** After the interview, letters in Mrs. Priest's scrapbook verified that Ranger Priest was recognized for all of that and more, in the communities where he was stationed.)

BARBARA PRIEST: He's always been honest... lots of integrity

JESSE PRIEST: Dedicated to the job.

NANCY RAY: Jesse, is there anything else you would like to add... about your career, your family, any people or cases?

JESSE PRIEST: There's lots of friends all over the state. I don't know of any really bad enemies that aren't in the penitentiary. Most of them I could call on and get help. In fact, when I was taking Leroy Lafoon to Huntsville, he even asked if there was anybody I wanted taken care of... said that he could take care of them for \$500. (laughter) Even though I did everything I could to get him convicted, he would still help me.

Note: Mrs. Priest meticulously documented Ranger Priest's career in a scrapbook which is approximately 6 inches thick. She has many newspaper articles, certificates, letters, photographs, and other memorabilia. The scrapbook contains an incredible amount of information about cases, manhunts, guard duty for President Ford and Governor Wallace, and much, much, more. Another book contained copies of "Detective Magazine" which included some of Ranger Priest's cases. The book also contains numerous articles documenting the history of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame in Waco.

While looking at the scrapbook, Ranger Priest talked about his experience with the Interview Board before being accepted into the Rangers. He said the interview lasted approximately two hours and he was questioned about how he would handle situations. I asked if the interview was hard and Ranger Priest said "yes, very hard.