

Transcription: Charles Brown

Today is Monday, December 20th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree, and today I'll be interviewing Mr. Charles Brown. This interview is taking place at his residence in Cedar Park, Texas, and is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today –

Charles Brown: Oh, you're welcome.

...for our program. I guess, sir, the first question we always start with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

Charles Brown: I had a weird childhood. It was during the Depression of the 30s and early 40s, and I was not a good student in school.

Where were you born and raised?

Charles Brown: I was born in Weehawken, New Jersey.

OK, close to New York City?

Charles Brown: Yeah, right across from New York. Eventually we lived in New York, Manhattan. But I was born and raised early on in Hoboken, New Jersey, which again was across from Manhattan.

Home town of Frank Sinatra, right?

Charles Brown: Yeah, in fact he was eight years older than I was, and he lived about five doors down from us. But I never saw him. Eight years is a big difference. They always say oh, you know Frank Sinatra? Well, no. But anyway, I joined the Junior Naval Reserve while I was in Hoboken, and played hookie from school for two years. They couldn't keep me in the classroom. After that, I got to meet people in the Junior Naval Militia. That's not government, that's just a club. After that, I took a real interest in ships along the Hudson River. I'd go visit them, I'd see them as such wonderful things. So I was stuck with the ocean.

What was it that made you want to enter JROTC when you were in school?

Charles Brown: I didn't enter the ROTC.

Or the program that you were in?

Charles Brown: Oh, I loved ships because we used to go down to see them along the river at the docks.

So just growing up around it.

Charles Brown: Yeah, and we used to go for the liners and they showed us the engine room and the bridge. It was very fascinating. And then after the Junior Naval Reserve which was like a Sea Scout affair, I joined the U.S. Naval Reserve, the government.

Do you remember what year that was?

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, that was 1940. After 1940, joining the U.S. Naval Reserve. We went on a cruise that summer, two weeks to Charleston, South Carolina. Something happened to Guitanamo. We were supposed to go to Guitanamo, but we went to South Carolina on the U.S.S. Cole, a destroyer. I loved it.

Did you have to go through basic training at that point? Had you gone through boot camp?

Charles Brown: No, we didn't go to boot camp yet. We trained in the little armory we had in Hoboken. There were 29 of us total. They called us the 29th Division. And after that, it appeared that the war was, Germany was doing this thing, and it appeared to us that the war was coming. Everybody was talking about it prior to the war. They called the 29th Division out, the 28th, 29th, then, and they didn't know what to do with us.

But you were activated before the war.

Charles Brown: Yeah, we were activated in April 11th, I think it was, 1941. And they really didn't know what to do with us, so they shipped us to boot camp in Norfolk, Virginia, and then after boot camp which was training and all, they shipped us to Jacksonville, Florida, Naval Air Station. I applied for flying training, and I got it. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, that all ended. They ___ us up from there two days later, from Dec. 9th that we shipped out from Jacksonville, Florida, to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. And what we found there was a ship called the U.S.S. President Hayes, it was an amphibious attack we would train in. After the President Hayes, we got home for Christmas because we lived right there, next to Brooklyn. Then we left to go to the Panama Canal, and we got to San Diego. In San Diego, we trained Marines, after La Jolla, and 1st Marines and the 2nd.

What was your job at that time?

Charles Brown: Landing craft.

Landing craft, OK.

Charles Brown: Taking Marines into the beach. And that went on until about June of '42.

What do you remember most about the landing crafts? I've talked to veterans and I've read that a lot of times it was hard to land on a beach and you didn't want to, I forget what the term was for it, but how to get turned on where you'd get beached and you couldn't get back out.

Charles Brown: Breach.

Breaching, yeah.

Charles Brown: Yeah, we had an experience with that. The waves were pretty high in La Jolla, and we even went down towards Mexico, and we had the swells that were 20-30 feet high, and we'd almost lose control because the swell would carry us. But we managed to train. We trained Marines from let's see what the beach was -

But you trained all there in San Diego?

Charles Brown: In San Diego along the coast, and we'd go down to Mexico. What was the name – La Jolla was one name.

Del Mar is there, Mission Bay.

Charles Brown: What's off San Diego?

Did you do much up at Camp Pendleton?

Charles Brown: No, they came to us to take the boats out and just go out and hit the beach. No, at the beginning we were supposed to throw an anchor line off our stern to have a grip, and hold us from breaching. But the problem there was the reverse engines to get off the beach, most of the boats would wrap their anchor line around the boat's propeller, and it was a mess. They changed it, thank God, and amazingly enough the invasions we got involved in, like after in June of '41, we left San Diego quite secretly. Everybody thought we'd be back in like we do with the Marines, training them. We didn't come back in. We hit the Pacific Ocean and kept going. We got to our first island, the first island friendly was Tagatabu. That was a friendly island. Then we went to New Caledonia; Numea, New Caledonia, a French settlement. That was friendly.

*What were your thoughts when you were shipping out and you knew you were going to war?
What were you thinking at that time?*

Charles Brown: Well, it was eerie because the coast of New Jersey when we left Brooklyn was blacked out, and the Panama Canal, there was a Japanese submarine or more off the Panama Canal entering the Pacific Ocean, and we had to wait a day or two in the canal area before we could leave. As far as our feelings, I thought it was an adventure, not that war is an adventure, but just I looked at the married men. They were the sufferers.

Sure, with families and wives.

Charles Brown: Yeah, family, and I was free lance, just had no real – I had a girlfriend back home, but that was a high school affair. But I missed my folks when it became exciting, you know, with the jobs we were supposed to do. In June of '41 -

'42?

Charles Brown: '42. No -

Because the summer of '41 was Pearl Harbor, and after that you were in San Diego.

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, '42. When we left in June, we went to a few friendly islands. Then we got ready for Guadalcanal and Tulagi, the first invasions in the Pacific, and we hit the beach there. The other, these are from -

These are your documents, papers.

Charles Brown: Yeah, some of the documents. This is “Notice to all hands. On August 7th, this force will recapture Tulagi and Guadalcanal Islands which are now in the hands of the Japanese.” So that’s just a notice that we were gonna land at Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

Tell us about that day. Was Guadalcanal your first landing?

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, that’s the first landing against the Japanese.

What was it like with the Marines on your landing craft?

Charles Brown: We hit the beach, and amazingly, the waters in the Pacific around the island were almost like glass. We never had the surf that we had training Marines. We were surprised how easy it was to get on and off the beach. We had air raids the second day. The first day, not even a Japanese soldier was visible. They were supposedly at an island called Florida in what they call the group of islands, you know, Guadalcanal, Tulagi, Maladie, and there’s a few names... Those landings for two days were absolutely free of Japanese. They were at a religious ceremony on this Florida Island. The third day they came back and then the fight began. The fourth day, we had to leave. The Japanese had superior naval forces, and we had to move them out, get them off the island, which we did.

How many Marines would you carry on the landing craft normally?

Charles Brown: Well, the personnel boat, we had about 22 Marines. Then we have G-flaters and tank-flaters, to bring the tanks in and supplies.

How many were in your Navy crew on one of those vessels, three or four men running it?

Charles Brown: On the landing craft? Three.

So it was you and two others, and you could take about 22 Marines in.

Charles Brown: Two machine gunners and me, the coxswain of the landing craft. But we didn’t receive any resistance. It was weird. We were walking the beach, and no Japs. But when they came back in, all hell broke loose. We had a lot of air raids. We shot down a lot, too. My ship got seven planes in that area of Guadalcanal and Tulagi, so we did pretty good. We went out and we didn’t have modern warfare equipment. We had Lewis machine guns from World War I aircraft. We had Springfield rifles, not the Garand and not the Colby, so we had limited fire power. It was accurate but limited. There’s a story that the Springfield rifle was a fold action rifle – one shot at a time and you have to throw your bolt. The Japanese got used to that five shot business with the Springfield. When the Favie came out and the Garand, we got new equipment. The story was that the Japs would expect the five shots and then stick their head out, and we’d have an 8-shot clip, or an automatic clip, too. When they stuck their head out, you got ‘em with the six gun, the ace shot, you know. So it was interesting. They had dirty tricks. They would come out and surrender three of them, and as soon as the Marines approached them, the Japanese when they were ready would, the three of them would drop to their knees, one guy had a machine gun on his back, and the two started firing the gun. A lot of Marines were taken by that trick. The other thing I think, we spent two nights on the beach because there was no activity to speak of, so we had to unload supplies. The Marines were lazy f-er’s, they didn’t even help us get the supplies. They were mesmerized. There were no Japs, nothing. But the two nights on the beach, it rained every night on the islands, and the Marines would cover their

foxhole with their poncho, and we did the same because of the rain. The trouble was, the Japanese could hear the rain hitting our ponchos, and they would roll hand grenades in your foxhole. They would sneak in the area. And we went over through the second kind of second invasion was on Tulagi, and the Marine raiders were on that island. They got in the battle sooner than Guadalcanal, and it was pretty horrible at that point. They would pile the Japanese dead and burn, and we were eating our lunch, which I didn't, I couldn't. The smell. And there was another path that we walked on which was stupid, walking through this, walking the path on Tulagi, and we saw two Marine captains dead by the path, and as we made the turn on the path, there was a Jap machine gun, but he was dead after that. And what they did was cut his head off and put his helmet back on his head, and that wasn't a pretty sight either. But that was Guadalcanal and Tulagi. The air attacks were the worst one at that time. After Guadalcanal, as I said, August 7th, we moved on to another major invasion on Bougainville. But before Bougainville, we went up an island called Rendova, Munda, and a couple of other names. They weren't large invasions, but Bougainville was.

Absolutely.

Charles Brown: Bougainville was the worst area we've ever seen. There were Jap planes everywhere and we shot down the few we had, Groman protecting us, the Groman aircraft, and they could dive and spin out 15 feet from the water. I mean they just, they were like they were foldup, and that was an amazing feat, and they shot down a lot of Japanese planes. But the Japanese bailed out of their plane with their parachutes were not friendly. I mean they started shooting at us in the boats while they were floating down with their parachutes, and of course we had to fire back at them and killed a lot of them. But Bougainville was closer to an island called Rabaul, and that meant more aircraft, Japanese, and the sky was just black with them. It was just amazing, and with our own fighters, defense. But we got through it all right. I don't think any of our ships – we had a group of ships that always worked together, from island to island to island.

And you were on the President Hayes this full time?

Charles Brown: Yes. And then there was the President Jackson, President Adams. And they had this big stack affair. After Bougainville, we would up on Guam, Saipan, and Tinnean, and they were very heavy fighting there. I can remember the tanks we had, and somebody said take your fuel with you. They put 55 gallon drums, two of them on the back of the tank. All you had to do was get a hit, and pierce the drums, or a mortar would hit the tank and there would be nothing but fire. But Guam was, we lost about six men on Guam – two brothers, one was killed, and from Louisiana. They were so short that we never thought they'd even get in the Navy. But Guam was a nuisance. There was a sand bar that we had to get through, so I think they asked the destroyers with us to blast the sand bar so we could bring our boats there.

What were most of the sailors like that you served with?

Charles Brown: They very seldom talked about home. I mean they maybe did it to themselves, but they were all gun-ho for duty. We didn't like the lack of battle. I know it sounds strange, but when we weren't doing landings, we'd be bringing supplies to different places, and it was just boring, and you had to scrub the deck and all that kind of – but it got lively when we had air raids. I've got a paper here – procedure in case of air attack.

Now are these all papers you saved?

Charles Brown: Yeah. I don't know why I did. I got a whole album over there on the desk. Here's a citation for landing. You're welcome to look at these, and if you wanted any copies I've got a computer.

Yes sir, we can make copies of these for our archives and everything. Tell me a little bit about what it was like aboard ship. Were you able to get pretty good food and get your mail and that sort of thing?

Charles Brown: Well, when we first went out, no, we got Australian mutton, and that wasn't too good. I remember one day they gave us liver and onions, and the liver, you could cut it with your fork, it was horrible. But basically like around the holidays, we'd always have a turkey.

How about mail from home? Did you get mail fairly regularly?

Charles Brown: Yeah, but I didn't write hardly at all. And my mother even wrote to President Roosevelt saying she hadn't heard from me. This is, it was secret then, but this is the Jap plane similar to a US C-47, arrives Okinawa area, 17th after ____ ferrying peace agent and green crosses, top and bottom wings. Physical ¼ mile, snow white --

How did you get a copy of that, sir?

Charles Brown: I don't know, it became not secret, and I was on the bridge, I was a quartermaster, and it says "let him pass." And that day -

Can I see it?

Charles Brown: Oh sure. We were in Okinawa. That's toward the end of the war.

Yeah, wow, interesting. So this was a plane that was bringing some sort of Japanese peace agent, so you don't shoot them down. And this was dated 16 August, 1945, so right towards the end of the war.

Charles Brown: Yeah.

On here it says USS Norton Sound, was that the ship you were on at that point?

Charles Brown: Yeah, I'm sorry, I should've told you, I was overseas 33 months. They told us 18 months and we'd go home. Well, they couldn't spare us, so 33 months, and I got back to the States for leave, only I wound up at the Long Beach Naval Hospital with yellow jaundice and a light case of malaria. Then I got out of the hospital and went home on leave. I came back, let's see, that was -

Were you able to make a full recovery in the hospital?

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, in fact, they came in, I was a first class petty officer then, and in fact I found my, oh, this is a citation for a landing party that we went on. The unique part of that was the Navy never had a landing party except this one, unless we had Marines or Army.

On board ship, did the sailors and Marines get along?

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, the only problem we had when it was time for chow down, the watch would go ahead of the Marines in line, and they didn't like that.

Yeah.

Charles Brown: Now here's an award of Navy unit citation, or commendation, to USS President Hayes, a navy unit commendation _____, and they list the battles we were in, not all of them I see, but Guadalcanal, Tulagi, the consolidation of the southern Solomons, night torpedo attack off Maladie, Battle of Rendover, Battle of Bougainville, landing at Guam, landing at Ley.

Leyte Gulf?

Charles Brown: Yeah, these were the major -

What are your memories of Leyte Gulf?

Charles Brown: I didn't go to Leyte, I was about to say. I missed Leyte when I went home on leave. That's the only one I missed. There were a few others. We were all over, we were Australia, we were New Zealand for repairs, for new weapons, whatever came out.

Did you have a pretty good feel during the war of what was going on, where you were?

Charles Brown: No. We eventually put things together, but it was strange. We'd get a *Life* magazine and we'd find out what happened, and they didn't talk. I was on the bridge most of my watch, and I could hear the radio, and I learned more than the average guy, but the thing was, I got 25 days leave instead of 30, and I was back on the Norton Sound. She was a seaplane tender, which had the PBM observation flying boats, and the Norton Sound went to Guam again, and we refueled there, and then we went to Okinawa. And in Okinawa, that was a sad affair. The kamikaze's were all over the place. We had them day and night. We used to make smoke to cover us in the harbor. Kerama Retto was our group of islands we were at. It was 18 miles south of Okinawa. The picket boats, now what they were were destroyers or destroyer escorts out from the islands, and when kamikaze or aircraft came in, they would get the first crack at them, but they also got blown out of the water themselves. That was a horrible thought of them. They even hit the, I think it was the Hope hospital ship. I mean the Japs didn't care what they hit. They were a vicious bunch of people.

Do you remember where you were when you learned that the atomic bomb had been dropped?

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, I even went to Nagasaki, on the hill.

Where were you the day you learned that the bombs had been dropped?

Charles Brown: At Okinawa.

I imagine it was quite a celebration when you learned then that the Japanese were surrendering.

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, in fact we went from our anchorage in Kerama Retto, the 18 miles to Okinawa, and lined up all the ships in the area, getting ready to invade Japan, because we weren't sure they told the truth. And in fact one night while we were standing by waiting for the surrender, how should I put this, something disturbed some people on these ships, and they

started to fire like there were aircraft in the area. Then the whole fleet fired. They didn't know what they were shooting at, but we were nervous because we thought we were going to invade Japan, and then when the bombs went off, we were thankful. A lot of people were. But Okinawa was pretty bad for the Navy. I think they lost over 5,000 men. When I was discharged, I got on a liberty ship, a little steamer we got on board in Tsing Tao, China, and the liberty ship took us all the way across to -

Hawaii?

Charles Brown: Yeah, we always stopped at Pearl. No, it was not San Francisco -

Treasure Island maybe?

Charles Brown: Well, Treasure Island yeah, I think yeah, let's see, oh, Portland, Oregon, the liberty ship took us, and then we took I think it was a train, I'm not sure, to San Francisco, Treasure Island, and then we left on train off Treasure Island in San Francisco to go to New York, Long Island.

Did your folks know you were coming back home at that point?

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, we had the telephone.

Tell us about the homecoming, what it was like to be home again.

Charles Brown: Oh God, well it was strange. I was gone for 33 months and then the hospital stay.

So close to three years.

Charles Brown: Oh yeah. And then 12 months more at Okinawa.

So over three.

Charles Brown: My folks had moved. They left Jersey and went to Queens, New York, and I didn't know where I lived or anything. What was strange about the homecoming, my mother would come in in the morning, after I got home, and wake me for breakfast, and I'd jump, and she said oh, you almost hit me. The amazing part of going home was I couldn't go freely to the refrigerator and get food like they told me. I was very shy about it, and it was strange. I'd been gone a long time. Then I had to find, I wanted to be educated, and the GI Bill really helped.

They had just passed that.

Charles Brown: Yeah, and I had to go to prep school, New York prep, because I didn't have a high school diploma, and I finally got a regions diploma and wrote to three colleges – Bucknell, Michigan Tech, and Brown University. I said the first one that answers, I'm going. So I bought a clunker car, I got the answer from Michigan Tech. Michigan Tech is way up in the upper peninsula.

What town is that in?

Charles Brown: That's Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan.

Yeah, right on the border of Canada.

Charles Brown: Yeah, exactly. A lot of people don't know what I'm talking about when I say way up there. But anyway, that noise that you hear was the noise that you'd hear offshore when they bombard us. It's just a dull sound. But anyway, I got the telegram from Michigan Tech, so I left. I didn't know where I was going.

You were describing some of the shelling of the islands.

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, the worst one that we got into was Guam. The Japs were right at the top of the hill. We landed at the base and they were dropping mortars and everything on that sand bar that we opened up. We lost six men I think. We hadn't been hit. Our ship was lucky. Of course, a lot of them were. We didn't get hit with anything except friendly fire. They sent us in the proximity to shells to fire an aircraft. You approach it and when you get close enough, it bursts. Well, we tested some of them, but the length of time they were in storage and the shipping out to the Pacific with the saltwater and atmosphere -

It damaged the fuses?

Charles Brown: It damaged the fuses. We fired and the drone of these things, but the fuses, crazy, about 100 yards off the ship, they exploded. And I got a piece of shrapnel right here. Burned like hell. And we had a lot of things go wrong like that.

Did you have any brothers or sisters back home?

Charles Brown: I had a sister.

Did she write to you much?

Charles Brown: Oh yeah, she did and my mother did. My father would put a note at the bottom. But it was nice to get home. But I knew nothing about industry. My wife has asked me when I got up to school at Sault Ste. Marie, she said, how come you threw a pair of shoes away? I said they didn't fit me. That was in the school dorm when I was living there. She said, well we thought you had money, you threw those shoes away. She said why didn't you give it to Good Will or Salvation Army? I didn't know what those things were. I went out when I was 17 and I didn't know what a charity was or anything. That's why I worked and tried to get a job to find out what's going on in the world. I worked for Helverough's watch company, and oh, they were cheating son of a guns. They would sell a watch and some mother would send a letter and a watch back, saying my son was killed somewhere, and that's all we have to remember him. Can you please repair it? They wouldn't. They would throw it in the safe and ignore it. But going home was strange, it really was. The length of time I was gone, in fact, I felt bad about leaving the guys. I knew I wouldn't see many of them again.

Did you keep in touch with any of them after the war?

Charles Brown: I did for about four or five years, and then we tried to, got involved in, well I got married, we had kids, and I lost track of them. I looked them up on my computer, and a lot of them are deceased.

Well we'll go ahead and wrap it up since you've got a lot of folks here to see you.

Charles Brown: Do you want to copy any of these?

Well, you can email those to me, sir, if you like, but main thing is I want to thank you for your service and let you know that everyone at the Land Office from Commissioner Patterson on down is thankful to you.

Charles Brown: I got your card.

You got my card, and we're part of the General Land Office, the Veterans Land Board, and the goal of all of this is to save these interviews for posterity.

Charles Brown: I hope I gave you enough information.

Yes sir, I think it's a great interview, and one of my coworkers, Jim Darwin, I believe is friends with your son, and he's the one that mentioned we should interview you.

Charles Brown: Yeah, I hope you get what you want out of it.

Yes sir, well we try to interview as many veterans as we can, especially World War II veterans, to save these.

Charles Brown: One of the girls that work here mentioned there's a lot of veterans there.

Yes sir, please feel free to give them my phone number and my name if any of them should be interviewed. We do a lot of interviews over the phone as well, so let them know. It's a great program and it's a small way of the state of Texas trying to honor and thank the veterans for their service.

Charles Brown: Well that's wonderful.

Yes sir, thank you very much.

[End of recording]