

Transcription: Chester Brown

Today is Tuesday, March 13, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this afternoon I'll be interviewing Mr. Chester Brown. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm in the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Brown is in his residence in Houston. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us. The first question I have sir is would you please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

Chester Brown: Well I was born in Austin, Texas, and went through school there and went to the University of Texas, graduated there, and joined the inactive U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, and was called to active duty where they had what they called a V12 program, at various colleges throughout the country, if we could finish our graduation within a semester.

Did you go to Austin High School?

Chester Brown: Yes.

Went to Austin High, and then you went to the University of Texas. Were you in college when World War II started?

Chester Brown: Yes.

Do you remember December 7th, Pearl Harbor, do you remember where you were that day?

Chester Brown: I was in my apartment at school. My family had moved to Temple, Texas, and I stayed in college.

So then at some point you decided to volunteer, correct?

Chester Brown: Correct.

What made you choose the Marine Corps?

Chester Brown: Well, I just figured if you're gonna get in it, get in with the best.

Well I agree, I'm a fellow Marine, so I cannot understand that sentiment. So when you signed up, you were still a college student.

Chester Brown: Right.

Did they send you off to boot camp, or did you stay there on campus?

Chester Brown: Well, neither at that time. We were assigned to different colleges, and oddly enough, mine was Southwestern in Georgetown, which was about a 25-mile move.

Did they start teaching you just the basic skills you would need as a Marine officer? Was it kind of like a boot camp or officer camp school?

Chester Brown: Somewhat like a boot camp, but we held regular class hours.

How many other men were with you in Georgetown that were part of this Marine Corps program?

Chester Brown: I'm gonna guess close to 50. We had almost half of the University of Texas football team, supporting line-up, and the coach at Southwestern had never seen such a platoon.

That's interesting. How long did you end up spending there at Southwestern going through this training?

Chester Brown: One semester.

One semester. And do you remember when this was? Was this 1942?

Chester Brown: I'm gonna say it was in '43, November, around there.

'43, yes sir. So at that point, after you finish a semester at Southwestern, did they give you your commission in the Marine Corps?

Chester Brown: Oh no, no, we went to boot camp.

Did you go to San Diego?

Chester Brown: No, we went to Paris Island.

Paris Island, OK. What are your memories of Paris Island?

Chester Brown: Not very fond.

Pretty hot and humid I guess.

Chester Brown: Well, that, and a discipline we were not used to.

And so even though you were going into the officer program or to be an officer, they still sent you to Paris Island with the enlisted recruits.

Chester Brown: And we went from Paris Island, one group went the first thing after the boot camp period. We went to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for further screening.

What did you do in Camp Lejeune? A lot of field time?

Chester Brown: Everything, yeah, mostly field.

Where did they keep you at Camp Lejeune?

Chester Brown: In the quonset huts.

In the Quonset huts, OK.

Chester Brown: We had 13 of us, all from Texas.

How long did you spend there at Camp Lejeune going through training?

Chester Brown: I'm going to say roughly a couple of months.

During this time, the war is going on, so you know you are heading to war at some point.

Chester Brown: We were what is considered or called the alternate candidate's school.

And at that point, were you eager to finish up your schooling so you could get out into the fleet, into the action?

Chester Brown: I had already finished, I graduated, took summer courses and myself and one other, Les Proxer, tackle University of Texas, later I believe the district attorney or country attorney of Austin. He had a brother named Ben Proxer played football also. But we were the next group to go. Since you were a Marine, you can appreciate this. The screening board, you get to fear it after a while and think what if I flunk? Are they going to send me back to boot camp and I'll be enlisted? The guy who headed up the screening board was I believe a Captain Flag, and he was a holy terror. All of the candidates were in fear of his questions and his attitude. In fact, one of the smartest ones we had in the class just locked down. He couldn't answer anything. They sent him back for further training, which he made. This Captain Flag asked me if, to name two better Marines than me. I named a couple of friends and I saw my lieutenant who was on the board tense up. I looked at the officers on the panel above us in the eye. You were supposed to look over them. So he looked at me and then said name two Marines that are better men and better Marines than you. I named a couple of friends, I missed the trickiness of the question. I was supposed to say there was not any better than me. I saw my lieutenant tense up. Captain Flag says, can you whip these men? And I looked down and looked him in the eye, and I said both together or one at a time? He actually, he was not known for it, broke out laughing. My lieutenant said I could've kicked your little fanny on that. But he said you saved yourself.

That's great.

Chester Brown: I'm sorry, this is just an incident.

No sir, I appreciate that. I like these stories and that's what we're trying to get in these interviews is stories like that. So when you finished up Camp Lejeune, that's when you get commissioned?

Chester Brown: We shipped to Quantico.

Sent to Quantico, OK. And what do you do at Quantico? Is that more officer candidate school?

Chester Brown: That's officer's training.

Yes sir. And how long did you spend there?

Chester Brown: You're asking questions, quite a while ago. I'm going to say three months.

Sure. And then at the end of that, did they make you an infantry officer?

Chester Brown: Yes, we were second lieutenants.

What were your feelings at that point? Were you excited or apprehensive?

Chester Brown: I was both pleased and surprised. No, by then you've been through so much to get qualified that you're pretty well elated.

What did your folks back in Temple think? Were they excited?

Chester Brown: You know, we never did discuss it. As we went through there on the troop train, we went right by my dad's place of business, and I waved out the window. That was the last I saw until after the war.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Chester Brown: I have a sister.

You have a sister. So you were the one child that was heading off to war then in your family.

Chester Brown: That's correct.

So when you graduate finally from Quantico, you're commissioned as a Marine second lieutenant, you're an infantry officer, where do they send you to at that point?

Chester Brown: I believe it was Camp Pendleton.

And that's when you joined a battalion?

Chester Brown: No, we were a replacement outfit. We shipped out of California on the U.S.S. Sea Bass, which was a Henry Kaiser ship. He had just begun to make the Kaiser automobile when the war broke out, and they converted it into ship building. Not very good, but anyway, that's where we ended up getting shipping orders aboard the U.S.S. Sea Bass, and it doesn't give a destination. We didn't know where we were going.

Just somewhere in the Pacific.

Chester Brown: That's right. We started out to be Guadalcanal.

What were your thoughts and your emotions at that point?

Chester Brown: You know, you just followed orders. You had a replacement platoon assigned to you, you carried out the orders you received for calisthenics and keeping in shape. We were nearly a month on the ocean. We didn't know where we were going until we got there. Likewise, we were assigned to a platoon of replacements and our job at that time was putting, staging supplies on the beach, or shipment with an operation.

Now you were a platoon commander at that point, correct?

Chester Brown: Yes.

How many Marine do you think you had in your platoon?

Chester Brown: It was around 45.

Do you remember any of them, like your platoon sergeant?

Chester Brown: Yeah, everybody got a nickname over there, and this guy's name was Mason, and they nicknamed him Stony Mason.

Was he older than you?

Chester Brown: No, I don't think so. I was about 23.

I would guess that most of the Marines were your age or younger then.

Chester Brown: Oh yeah, 19, 18, some of them lied and said they were older than they were.

That's right. And so Guadalcanal was the first place that you arrived overseas?

Chester Brown: Correct.

Tell us, sir, about your memories of Guadalcanal.

Chester Brown: Hot and humid, and heavy mosquitoes. First black man I ever saw with peroxide hair.

Why did he have peroxide in his hair?

Chester Brown: The natives.

Oh, the natives, OK.

Chester Brown: Somebody sneaked him some peroxide.

What was the situation at Guadalcanal when you arrived there? Had the battle already been fought and things pretty well settled down?

Chester Brown: Yeah, we were still doing exercises in the jungle. We had to take atabrine to keep us from getting malaria. Some of the men that had been there a lot longer were absolutely yellow from taking atabrine.

Certainly not a pleasant climate.

Chester Brown: Absolutely not. We had exercises in the jungle, and it was heavy mosquitoes and sweat.

When you arrived to Guadalcanal with your replacement platoon, did they assign you to a battalion at that point?

Chester Brown: Yes, they had already assigned it. We didn't have our orders on it though.

Who did they send you to?

Chester Brown: We stayed right there in Guadalcanal until we shipped out to go into action, and we didn't know where the action was going to be.

OK, and you didn't know what battalion you were going to be assigned to at that point?

Chester Brown: Actually what regiment.

And what regiment, OK. When did they finally ship you out and where to?

Chester Brown: We were part of the camp army to land on Okinawa. It was 4th Marine Regiment, 22nd, 29th; three Army regiments – 777, I forget the other one. They were crack outfits. We stopped en route to Okinawa, again, not knowing where we were or where we were going. Higher up officers, I know they were screened, but we stopped at an island called Mog Mog in the Euliffee group, and had a big beer bust on the beach, and spent the night on ship, and then took off the next morning and finally had a briefing and learned we were going to hit Okinawa, which really didn't mean too much to us except it was a way station between Japan and Pearl Harbor.

So you didn't realize at that point the severity of what you were going to be facing in Okinawa?

Chester Brown: Oh, absolutely not. No, that was one of the longest operations the Marines had in the war – 82 days. That's what the record shows. I thought it was 84.

Yes sir, it might have been. At that point, did you have a captain that became your company commander?

Chester Brown: Yes, we did.

Tell us about the captain.

Chester Brown: The captain's name was Clint Eastman, and he was the only man in the company smaller than me.

Really. How tall do you think he was?

Chester Brown: He couldn't have been more than about 5'6".

And you're about that same height?

Chester Brown: I was about 5'7".

Yes sir. Where was he from?

Chester Brown: You know, I never did know and never did, we never got that close.

Was he a pretty good officer though?

Chester Brown: Excellent.

What type of guidance did he give to you and your fellow lieutenants before the battle?

Chester Brown: Well, it wasn't up to him. It was a regimental training program. I'll tell you, the thing about the Marines and you've been on active duty?

Yes sir.

Chester Brown: Well you well know this then, you trust your officers, and you don't look back to see if they're following, the officer. You know they're there.

That's right.

Chester Brown: So that was Clint Eastman.

What did you say to your men, your platoon, before you went into Okinawa?

Chester Brown: Well, that's kind of weird. We got ready to approach the staging area for the landing, and I forget what I started saying -

About Okinawa.

Chester Brown: Oh, they called me up at the regiment and said Brown, we want you to make the landing with the 22nd regiment as liaison officer. I said yes sir, and didn't know what a liaison officer did. I assumed you set up some kind of liaison. Anyway, I was at summits with the 22nd on the landing, not my own people. And actually about the third day I went across the peninsula and joined the 4th Marine. Colonel Bean says where have you been, Brown? I said where you sent me. And then I was given a platoon company, Company A with Clint Eastman and we were the replacement platoon.

And is that the platoon that Clovis Thompson was part of?

Chester Brown: I never knew when Clovis joined it. That sounds strange, but you know, you hear a man get hit behind you, and you hear about a replacement, and you got a name, and he's filled the bill. That's the man they gave you, that's the one you use. I heard that Texas twang. I believe it was as late as the Naga landing, which was sort of a diversionary tactic, which closed things out down at the end of Okinawa at Naga City.

I had a chance to interview Mr. Thompson a while back, and he lives out in Abilene now, and I thought it was amazing that he had kept in touch with you all these years, and he told me about the Silver Star that he was awarded for his actions there at Okinawa and that you had written that award. Tell us sir a little bit about your memories of that event, because to me, that's the epitome of Marine Corps heroism in combat, the way he had thrown those grenades and that charge against the Japanese war position. I was wondering if you could share with us.

Chester Brown: We were on a ridge and didn't know it, but it links with a cave underneath, and we began to get casualties from mortar fire, and we finally located the hole that was evidently an air vent to the troops underneath, and we called for an explosion bigger than a grenade, and they brought it up and the guy that he instructed, a number of seconds and everything after the fuse was blown, said you're going to have to have a lot of endurance to take this. Well you called him Clovis, and I called him Blackie, it was his nickname.

Yes sir.

Chester Brown: And he didn't hesitate. He said I'll take it. Handed his rifle to somebody else and took the thing and ran down the hill, I'm going to say about 20 yards under rifle fire and poked that thing in the hole and came back about five steps and fell down flat. It went off and we never got another mortar round out of that hole. Prior to that, there was opening at that cave at the one end of the ridge which was kind of moon-shaped. They had used zippo tanks we called 'em, and they fired napalm, and they pulled that tank up to the opening of the cave and you usually get some secondary explosions if there's any ammunition stored.

That makes sense.

Chester Brown: And that was all taken care of and ceased. As had been before, we got up there and started catching that mortar fire.

So after Thompson had done that pretty heroic act, did you know at that time, did you think after this battle I need to put him in for an award?

Chester Brown: We didn't think about awards.

So then afterwards, after things had settled down, is that when -

Chester Brown: Oh yeah, I was fully aware of the bravery that he took on himself, exposing himself to enemy fire to save us, the rest of the troops. We had a boy named Reed from Texas as company runner. He got shot through rifle fire through the throat. What was strange, when we took this ridge, there were already trenches and foxholes in place, facing the ocean, and that showed that this was a training ground.

Did you see many of the Japanese troops, or were they pretty much dug in the entire time?

Chester Brown: Pretty well concealed.

And I know from things I've read, interviews I've done, the Japanese really didn't surrender. Is that what you experienced, that they would fight to the death?

Chester Brown: Oh yes. They were convinced that they were in for torture and everything else if they ever let the Marines get 'em. And they were given a lot of propaganda to put fear into them and make them fight to the death, including the officers. In fact, left of this ridge the 22nd Marines were on our left flank, the high ranking officers began to commit hari kari. And we could hear the American troops yelling, they were even pointing out the next guy they wanted to shoot, blow his guts out. It was pretty fanatical.

During the battle which you mentioned was well over 80 days, did you ever have any doubt about the success of the Marines? Did you ever doubt that things were not going to work out, that the Japanese might somehow push you off the island?

Chester Brown: No, I really didn't. My platoon was down to 15 men from 45, but you did with what you had, you kept moving. We finally pushed them off the end of the island.

As a second lieutenant, did it dawn on you that you were really in a position of vulnerability, being a young officer? Everything I've read was that officers were always targeted in the field.

Chester Brown: You know, I have a theory about that, strange that you mention it. We were at one time were told that including replacements, our officer casualties were 125%. I got to thinking back in my company and regiment, battalion, most of the officer casualties were guys over 6 feet tall.

So you think you made a smaller target.

Chester Brown: They were convinced that the big men were the officers.

That makes sense.

Chester Brown: I'll give you an example. There was an all American from Wisconsin, Dave Shriner, and we came up on this ridge, and my platoon was in reserve that day which means you got two on the line and one following, and one gets hit pretty heavy and you move the reserves in. We were moving up and they had Dave on a stretcher, and a little blue bullet hole in his right breast, and while he did, I don't know but he looked up and saw me, and he said Brownie, I'm just too damn big.

Well, there's probably a lot of truth to that.

Chester Brown: I think there was. We had a Major Green got hit by a burst of nambu rifle, which was comparable to a power BAR. In fact it fired faster. You got to remember, too, in all of this the Japanese had smokeless powder.

So you couldn't see where they were firing from.

Chester Brown: Couldn't see where they were coming from. All you knew was if you heard it, he'd missed you.

That's right.

Chester Brown: Shriner had a buddy who was as tall as he was named Bowman, and he got hit. The executive officer got hit. This Major Green was a battalion commander. He was hitting on a hill. We were patrolling it down, around enemy below, and this guy came out of a cave halfway down the slope, and opened up with a nambu rifle and filled him with it, and Green was about 6'2". But if they had a chance of picking, they always seemed to pick the big man.

And did you wear your rank insignia in the field?

Chester Brown: No.

You took that off.

Chester Brown: You did not wear a rank and you did not call ‘em by rank. Back on that ridge, where Mr. Blackie made his act, I looked up and there was Colonel Schaeffer who was regimental commander, standing with his back to the enemy, and standing up and exposing himself chest up, and I said Schaeffer, we had a man get it in the neck a while ago, you’re standing too high. He thanked me and got down.

Yeah.

Chester Brown: I never did figure what the full colonel was doing up there on the line.

That’s interesting. Did you have a radio operator that was with you during that time?

Chester Brown: Not in the platoon.

Yeah, so you weren’t marked out then by a radio operator walking around with an antenna giving you away.

Chester Brown: No, I mentioned this Les Proxer a while ago, I ran into him during the motor movement ___ operation up in the mountains, and he was the communications officer. He had radios that connected him to tanks, to aircraft, to naval gunfire, artillery. He could talk to any of them and did. We called for an air strike. Well by the time they found it and shot some rockets, they had to go back to the carrier for gas, so he called in the naval gunfire. And we were up on the mountain and can’t even see the ships, and they had those gyroscopes. They laid that stuff in within 50 yards of us.

That’s impressive.

Chester Brown: It was really impressive.

Wow, and I’m sure that did a lot for your Marines’ morale.

Chester Brown: Oh you bet. You knew somebody out there was helping.

Exactly. So how did you everything was finally over at Okinawa? Did word come down from higher headquarters that there was now kind of into the mop-up phase?

Chester Brown: Yeah, it came down more by rumor than anything else. We ceased to receive fire, for one thing. See their artillery naturally was pointed toward the beach, to knock out an invasion. They had to turn those guns around when we began to come up from behind them, and I don’t know what they were, maybe 90 millimeter, but by the time they got all that done, we were already looking down their necks. That was the one thing that we noticed different, not to be critical at all, but the Army’s answer to artillery seems to be artillery. You knock their guns out. The Marine method of handling it is charge the guns and kill the gunners and their supporting troops. They had their artillery mounted on tracks in caves. They would pull it out and fire about three rounds, even at night, and then run it back in and make a turn, and you couldn’t hit ‘em. They had a rocket, attempted a rocket, and it was kind of a joke except the hole it made when it hit, you could put a truck in it.

Wow.

Chester Brown: It looked like it. You could see it. It had a secondary charge and it tumbled. It ran up a ramp, a narrow-gauge railroad, and fired it. And if it was at a certain height, it fired again, but they couldn't direct it.

Now at Okinawa, how long did you ultimately spend there? I know the fighting lasted for over 80 days.

Chester Brown: I was there the whole time.

The whole time? And then once that had wrapped up, how much longer were you at Okinawa before they moved you onto another location?

Chester Brown: Just almost immediately they sent us to Guam.

And you said sir at that point, your platoon had gotten down to just 15 Marines?

Chester Brown: My platoon of organized strength is 45, and I had 15.

What did they do at that point? Were there any more men replacements to give to you, or did you kind of merge in with another platoon?

Chester Brown: No, I just kept at it and ran it as a platoon.

Just a 15-man platoon.

Chester Brown: Which made us thin.

Which is basically like the size of a squad at that point.

Chester Brown: Exactly.

So tell us about Guam, what are your memories?

Chester Brown: Very brief, really, except one night we were eating, we were in chow line, and it was at dusk, and somebody yelled out, there was a Japanese soldier in the chow line. He had on a green uniform and like fatigues, and had a chow kit. When somebody recognized him, he broke and ran off in the dark.

So he was in line to eat?

Chester Brown: Yeah.

That's amazing.

Chester Brown: So he was actually ___ from the time we took Guam.

I guess he must have really been hungry to do that.

Chester Brown: They say. I didn't see it, so I won't say it's true or not. There were some that had been there long enough, they had little gardens raised.

That's probably true.

Chester Brown: I wouldn't doubt it.

If they were there that long and nothing else to do while they were just occupying –

Chester Brown: Resourceful.

That's right. Then from Guam, what happened next?

Chester Brown: We got notice of the surrender.

How did that word get to you? Was that through rumor as well or was there an official announcement?

Chester Brown: There was an official announcement, but it was not made to just anybody. It came through the company headquarters, and everybody was cheering and throwing grenades in the water.

And that was at Guam?

Chester Brown: Yes. We were just beginning training on the invasion of Japan. You see, in all of this you had your Navy Seals. They came in to the beach at night under water, and located the emplacements, cut them if they could. They had underwater barbed wire things to keep landing craft from coming in, and we had a briefing on that before we left the ship on the invasion.

Gearing up for the invasion when you were doing that training, I imagine you and every troop in your unit had to have known that was going to be an awfully tough and bloody battle if you actually had to land on mainland Japan, is that right?

Chester Brown: You know, the troops never saw a map, so they had no idea. They pretty well figured as close as Okinawa was to Japan, why something big was coming up.

Were you still a second lieutenant at this point, or had you been promoted to first lieutenant?

Chester Brown: I was still a second lieutenant and I picked up my first lieutenant rank in Japan. I spend six months in occupation duty.

Tell us, sir, what that was like, especially dealing with Japanese civilians.

Chester Brown: Quite mixed as you would imagine any population is not typical. The Japanese are a very strange race. They appreciate fine art. They also can be very cruel. They are pretty well independent. Each man has a little candy and a little bag for a ration, and I don't know how they did when they assembled for a meal, because we never gave them a chance to assemble.

Did the people seem to be pretty much afraid of you or were there any that gave you a hard time?

Chester Brown: Japanese were terrified of Marines. They started rumors like if you wanted to be an officer in the Marine Corps, you've got to murder your mother, and just ridiculous stuff. It was put out by the higher ups and they didn't question.

But I guess consequently the Japanese population didn't give you much trouble then while you were there in Japan I would guess.

Chester Brown: Not really. Our trouble came from our own troops, pillaging and looting, because as usual we formed the guard around the bases. There were fitness machines in caves and you have a German made machine, and on each side would be a Japanese copy. They did not copy copies, and there would be a British machine or a Dutch, and on each side would be a Japanese, and they were powered by electric motors. Electric motors were worth 1,000 yen per horsepower.

Did you have a chance to see much of Japan during that six months you were there?

Chester Brown: We went into Yokohama and Tokyo and we got kind of what they call R&R, rest and relaxation at Yukoska mountain, there was a holding place for European diplomats caught up in the invasion, and you wouldn't know it, but there was a little guy named Eddie Firestone, and he was a radio star, and then Henry Aldrich. He was going around taking pictures of all of these foreigners, and I told him, I said Henry, you've been taking pictures for three days now and you haven't put film in the camera yet. He said I don't have any film in this camera.

That's interesting.

Chester Brown: He never did have to explain it.

That's interesting. Then I guess sir, at some point after those six months, I'm guessing you had enough points then to be able to come back home?

Chester Brown: Yes.

Tell us what that was like getting to finally get back home again after all that time.

Chester Brown: Well, we were not the first ones to go. Those were with more points, and incidentally one of my very best friends named Broyan, we became friends because we were bunking beside each other in OCS, shortly after he left home, his wife had a baby boy, and that gave him 5 more red points. So he got to ship out before I did. But it was quite something to learn you were going home.

Do you remember the day you finally got back I guess to Temple and were able to see your family again?

Chester Brown: Oh yeah, we landed in California, we took physicals, got shipping orders. Of course the first thing I did was call by telephone, tell 'em we were back. I was still single so it didn't make that much difference to me.

I can only imagine that your parents were relieved to finally have you home.

Chester Brown: Oh yeah, I'm sure that's true.

At this point, did you go back to the University of Texas, or had you already graduated?

Chester Brown: I had graduated. I went to work for my dad in Temple.

What was that transition like coming from having served on active duty in the Marine Corps in the Pacific during the war? What was that feeling like to come back home?

Chester Brown: It took one night. I took off my uniform and I never put it back on.

So it was a pretty smooth transition for you.

Chester Brown: Absolutely.

That's great. How was it that Clovis Thompson came to stay in touch with you all those years? I think he said he tracked you down at some point?

Chester Brown: He didn't though stay in touch, yeah. In fact I was kind of surprised then. I don't remember any details, but it seemed to me like I tracked him down by computer.

OK, on the computer.

Chester Brown: Yeah, I got the white pages, I knew he was from Abilene, so I had the white pages from Abilene brought up and I didn't know Clovis was his name, so I called and finally got the right one.

That's great. And did he remember you?

Chester Brown: Oh yeah. Well actually this incident with the mortar fire, we became pretty close friends.

That's great. He spoke very highly of you during the interview and when I learned that you were here in Texas as well, I told him, I said I'd be really honored to interview him, and that's when he was able to get me your phone number. We've done a lot of interviews for this program over the years, and recorded some pretty interesting stories, but this is the first one I can remember of an individual being decorated for heroism in combat and then being able to interview his officer. That just normally doesn't happen. People have passed on or they live other places or more often than not, they've lost track.

Chester Brown: There are not many left. I'm 90. I'll be 91 on March 22nd, just a couple of weeks. My sister's 92.

March 22nd and you'll be 91?

Chester Brown: Right.

Yes sir. It seems, too, that a lot of the World War II veterans that I interview nowadays, they were all very young during the war. They were 17, 18 years old and so consequently there aren't a whole lot of World War II officers out there to interview. So I appreciate being able to hear your memories of being an officer in the Marine Corps in the Pacific, and the training that you went through and that sort of thing.

Chester Brown: The funny thing about it is, it kind of repeated itself. I got called back for Korea. I got to San Francisco. They had my captain's rating, and my orders read adjutant, Ordinance Battalion. Only time in my military career I put down a choice of duty that they gave me one. And we were sleeping on the ground stretchers when we got overseas and they were calling out the assignments, and this guy named Young called out, said Brown, Ordinance Battalion, Adjutant. I had put down administrative. First time I've ever encountered that. I've put in infantry, artillery, tanks. I wasn't so gung ho this last time. But anyway, he handed my orders over some of the guys' heads, and he said well, you're a captain. And I grabbed the orders and said thank you.

So you'd been promoted to captain during the time you were in the Reserves.

Chester Brown: Yeah, I had found out that there weren't any captains. All the company commanders were first lieutenants.

Interesting.

Chester Brown: The casualties were that heavy.

As the adjutant, because I'm an adjutant by trade, so I know that MOS, did you work directly for your battalion commander or the battalion executive officer?

Chester Brown: Both.

What were the typical duties that you had there in Korea as an adjutant?

Chester Brown: We were at the peace talking stage, and we had ammo up near the ___ Jong peace talks, and that's as close as we got. They had managed to include supply company. Well that included ammo, so I had several jobs around artillery shells and boxes of M-1. We needed the artillery shells because the rods in the boxes were steel and the ground was frozen. We used them as tent pegs.

I imagine you had a lot of Marines to keep track of, being scattered around to the various dumps like that.

Chester Brown: Well, some of the dumps were in charge of the Army. But we stored them in our earth and storage bins, for protection from man-made artillery fire. There was no use in duplicating.

Sure, now when you were in Korea, what were you doing when you got called up? Were you working at that time still for your dad?

Chester Brown: Oh yeah, but by then I had married and had a daughter.

OK. So it made it a little tougher I would guess to go away at that time.

Chester Brown: Oh yeah. I'll never forget her grandfather holding her in his arms while I got on that airplane and flew to Dallas and then the coast.

How old was your daughter at the time?

Chester Brown: She was 4.

4 years old, wow. But I guess conversely though, I imagine the homecoming had to have been even sweeter being able to come home to your wife and your daughter.

Chester Brown: Well, that's true.

How long were you gone in Korea?

Chester Brown: About 10-1/2 months. And that included a refurbishing at Quantico of a couple of months or so. I took them with me up there, and dare say they move like that, you've got a leave, so when I got my orders overseas, I had a 30-day leave, and got 'em back home. In fact, we had started building our first house.

That was in Temple?

Chester Brown: Yes, right.

When you got home from Korea, were you finally discharged at that point from the Marine Corps?

Chester Brown: I had requested a discharge and I got it, an honorable discharge. The deal was under Truman, you're in the Reserve for 10 years, or the duration of the emergency. They never did call it a war. And so when that time was up, I immediately sent a letter in and got an honorable discharge back.

Well that's great.

Chester Brown: Made it going in by my age anyway.

That's great. Now you are in Houston, is that correct?

Chester Brown: No, I live in Conroe.

Oh, Conroe, north of Houston. How did you come to move to Conroe?

Chester Brown: Let me think about that a minute.

You stayed in Temple quite a while though, I'm guessing?

Chester Brown: Oh, I'm sorry, you talk about a lapse of memory. Things changed in the operation of our business, the company, attitude towards commission distributors and so forth, so I figured if I got out, why dad would have the whole thing and none of our drivers or clerks

would have to quit or look for a job, so I went looking for a job and knew Gulf oil people. That's who we worked with, and got hired.

By Gulf oil?

Chester Brown: Yes, and sent to Midland. We were in Midland 10 years. I was transferred to San Antonio after another structural change in the corporation. I spent 20 years in San Antonio. I was hired in 1986.

So your career then, you spent a lot of years in the petroleum industry.

Chester Brown: Exactly. I had probably one of the best jobs you could have. At one time I was operating out of my garage, and I called Dallas and Houston twice a day, took correspondence with problems, and found out that a lot of times, that old boy in overalls on that gas compressor station had a civil engineer's degree, and if I just let him talk long enough, he'd tell me what his problem was.

So you got a chance to spend quite a bit of time I guess out in oil fields?

Chester Brown: Oh yeah. Not in production, but in dealing with production people.

Sure. My grandfather lived out in, he worked for Sohio Oil for a long time. My father went to high school out in Rankin. Sohio had like a camp basically out near Midkiff, and that's where my father grew up and my grandfather worked out in the oil fields there all over the Permian Basin.

Chester Brown: When I was out there, I come across what had been oil camps. They would be a brick foundation and the weeds, along with the rattlesnakes.

Yeah, all that's pretty much gone now where my dad grew up. There's nothing there except some of the foundations and I think they filled in the swimming pool, but it was like a regular town and then at some point people decided they would rather just live in Midland or Odessa, and a lot of those camp towns just went away.

Chester Brown: Talking about Rankin? You talking about the swimming pool, that was one of the first swimming pools in that part of the country. And at one time, they had a dance hall and Lawrence Welk played there.

Oh, that's interesting.

Chester Brown: It was before he got as popular.

I know that my dad said he had seen Roy Orbison and his band perform there in Rankin one time. He was from Wink.

Chester Brown: He was?

Yes sir. So he was a west Texas guy.

Chester Brown: I didn't know that.

He was more my dad's kind of age group and he was a rock-n-roller in the late 50s out there.

Chester Brown: Was he blind?

No, but he had very, very thick glasses and had dark, tinted glasses. So he was maybe almost legally blind. He certainly had thick glasses. I know the Midland-Odessa area because that's where my grandparents lived and everything until they died.

Chester Brown: Well I'll be.

Yes sir. Well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to let me interview you today, especially as a fellow Marine.

Chester Brown: Bear in mind that you're talking to somebody with a poor memory.

Still I appreciate that stories that you've been able to share, especially for where you were and anybody that's read anything about Marine Corps history, especially in World War II, they can appreciate where you were and what all you did. This program was created by Commissioner Patterson who is also a Marine veteran of Vietnam, and he's a history buff. This program was created really to thank you and veterans like yourself for your service to our nation.

Chester Brown: If I ever get smart enough to play that disk.

Well, we'll get somebody there that can play it for you.

Chester Brown: I have a daughter that's smart enough.

Yes sir, and we're going to send you a bunch of copies so you can give them to friends and family so they can listen to them.

Chester Brown: Thank you.

Yes sir, the other reason we have this program is to save these stories for posterity. We have documents here at the Land Office that go back to the 1700s and we have the original land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at The Alamo, and just amazing pieces of history.

Chester Brown: That's wonderful. I have two grandsons that would treasure that.

Yes sir, well our goal with these interviews is to save these so that hundreds of years from now people can listen to them and maybe learn something from them. With that in mind, is there anything that you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview long after you and I are both gone?

Chester Brown: Well, you get to where whether your time or your money runs out.

Yes, well sir, again, I really appreciate your time and most of all everybody here at the Land Office appreciates you for your service to our nation.

Chester Brown: I appreciate that. Thank you.

And what I'll do sir, I'll try to give you a call or I think you've got my number, but I'll call you tomorrow or the next day and try to get your mailing address.

Chester Brown: I've got a sticker on my hand card here.

OK, let me pause the recording because I don't want to give that away on the recording.

Chester Brown: I don't think I answered because I didn't know. The Japanese didn't surrender. The picture that I have of the surrender was where they laid their swords on the table on the U.S.S. Missouri, and that was not actually the surrender. The surrender was actually done much later, or a few days later, I think by the Emperor of Japan. I'm not sure. But anyway, that's the reason I think I couldn't answer. I couldn't remember. That was a peace settlement, and I have that picture, but that picture is widely circulated.

Well any picture you have of yourself especially from your time in the Marine Corps, we would love to have copies of that.

Chester Brown: OK, mighty fine. James, thank you for your interest.

Well yes sir, and again thank you. It's an honor for me and everybody here.

Chester Brown: Thanks again anyway, and I'll call you with that address.

Yes sir, we'll be in touch soon and again, thank you very much sir. Take care.

Chester Brown: Bye bye.

[End of recording]