Transcription: Eric Brown

Today is Friday, September 6, 2013. My name is James Crabtree and today I'll be interviewing Mr. Eric Brown. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board's Voices of Veterans Oral History Program, and today we're doing this interview in person at the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas. Sir, thank you for taking the time to do an interview with us. It's an honor for our program.

Eric Brown: Well thank you for giving me the opportunity to interview with you.

Sure. The first question that I always like to start off with in these interviews is please tell us just a little bit about your childhood and your background before you went into the military.

Eric Brown: OK, well my childhood consisted of growing up in Fort Worth, Texas. I'm originally from Fort Worth. Prior to the military, I hadn't even been outside of Fort Worth. So I was looking forward to the opportunity of getting outside of small town Fort Worth. At some point during my high school years, I decided I wanted to do more, see the world, do a little travel, and it was all based on me being an inquisitive child. I had a lot of questions about life and the only way to try to answer some of those questions was to get outside of my own small community there in Fort Worth. So immediately following high school, I entered, signed up for the Air Force, and unfortunately at the time that I signed up for the Air Force, they had what's called delayed enlistment.

OK, I'm familiar with that.

Eric Brown: And delayed enlistment is when the Air Force is at, in terms of recruitment, it's almost they are at a stalemate and they don't want to pull too many folks in because they would have too many folks in the military. So they would delay your enlistment coming into the Force, and so I was on delayed enlistment for about 11 months.

OK, that's a pretty long time to be in the delayed entry program.

Eric Brown: It is a long time, but I lucked out because the recruiter actually, when he found out they would have to delay me for 11 months, he asked what was I doing until then, and I told him I had a little job, but I quit the job thinking I would get into the Air Force. Well it just so happened his wife was a supervisor at Carlswell Air Force Base. Back then it was Carswell Air Force Base.

I know right where that is.

Eric Brown: Now it's Naval Air Station Fort Worth. His wife was supervisor out there at the base exchange, and he said if I was interested I could work out there. So I thought it was a great opportunity to actually, for some exposure to military life prior to coming in. So I think it was a great opportunity and I took him up on that, and he pretty much called her and they hired me on the spot.

That's great.

Eric Brown: So I ended up working out there.

What was it that made you want to go into the military? Did you have any family members or friends that had served?

Eric Brown: My father had served four years in the Air Force, and most of his time was in Turkey and some of those places in Europe over there, so he had a brief time in the Air Force, four years, and he was the one that encouraged me to consider military service, because I really didn't have a solid plan after high school. I mean I was a fairly straightforward kid, and made good grades and things like that. College was really, not something I really wanted to do at the time. I don't know if it was because I wasn't encouraged or otherwise, but I took him up on the Air Force. I had nothing else going, so I said hey, why not?

That's great. So you spent some time there at Carswell working, and you got to see kind of the Air Force environment, so you knew then I guess when you went to your basic training, that's what you wanted to do. You were set on that. There was no backing out at that point I guess.

Eric Brown: There was no backing out, and a lot of it came about through just my interactions with, you know, at the base exchange you had everything from military spouses to retirees working at the base exchange, and oftentimes you would have active duty members who had second jobs out there. So we would always have these conversations about what I would expect in the Air Force and the type of lifestyle I would lead and some of the benefits and perks, and so I just, for me I felt outside of just the benefits of going in the military service, there was something special about those people I worked with. There was a sparkle in their eye and I think that spark was based on the patriotism of giving back, and I wanted that. I wanted to be able to do something better than just an Eric Brown. I knew that life was more important there.

So then you went to basic training. Did you go to San Antonio?

Eric Brown: Yes, I ended up going to Lackland Air Force Base for the basic training, which was an experience. Again, I think I was well prepared because I had gotten some tips on what to expect out there, but nothing can fully prepare you for such a drastic change in lifestyle out there, especially getting off of a bus and having a training instructor out there, a military training instructor yelling at you. Nothing can prepare you for that.

How long did you spend there in boot camp?

Eric Brown: I spent about six weeks in boot camp down at Lackland. Since that time, they've actually increased the amount of time of young folks that are down there, but at that time it was six weeks.

So when was that? Do you remember the year?

Eric Brown: Yes, the year was actually between May, it started in May through around July I believe is when I spent my time down there.

So you had graduated from high school, so you spent a year working at Carswell and then you went that May. What year was that?

Eric Brown: Boot camp was in May of 1988.

OK, so back in '88 it was six weeks. What are some of the memories that stand out the most about your basic training? Anything particularly scary or fun or humorous?

Eric Brown: I think for the most part for me it was mostly education. I don't think it was a scary experience. There was a lot of fun because you were in an exciting environment. For a young person back then, for such a change, there is a level of excitement, but I think also there was an opportunity for education, because it made me understand that there are other folks with different backgrounds around the United States and around the world in fact, but we were all trying to come together for one cause and one purpose, and so there was a huge level of excitement. Obviously there was a fear factor that the military folks would try to impart on you, but that was all in trying to break you down to build you back up and try to implement discipline and dedication, commitment, those sorts of things.

What was a typical day like in Air Force boot camp?

Eric Brown: A typical day was in the very early morning, very early morning boot camp, probably 4:30-5:00 in the morning. It started off with just an abrupt yelling, time to get up real quick, shower, shave and then you'd get out to the track and you'd begin running, because they also had to condition you physically to prepare you for the Air Force.

A lot of PT?

Eric Brown: A lot of PT, and at that time the Air Force was trying a lot of different things in PT to include different exercise regimens such as pushups, and they were just trying a lot of different things back then because back then, physical fitness was not really pushed as hard in the Air Force as it was in the other services, such as Army Marines. Back then we had the mindset we just fly airplanes. We don't go to war like that. But yeah.

Did you know when you went to boot camp what your specialty was gonna be, what you'd be doing when you graduated?

Eric Brown: No, I didn't actually know what I'd be doing. It was until probably the final week of boot camp that I was offered a position as a flight engineer on a C-130 aircraft.

OK, that's very cool.

Eric Brown: That kind of scared me a little bit. I never dreamed about flying in the back of a plane like that.

Obviously they offered that to you because of I guess aptitude testing you would have done during basic training? Is that kind of the way it worked?

Eric Brown: Yes, aptitude testing actually prior to basic training is what they hired for. During processing at MEPs they looked at those scores and based on those scores, they try to fit you in.

Assign you an MOS.

Eric Brown: Right. And for us it's called AFSC. Air Force Specialty Code. For the Army it's MOS.

Yeah, and Marine Corps is the same thing, MOS. So you get told I guess about a week left in your training, hey, this is what your assignment is. You said you were intimidated by it a bit? Why was that?

Eric Brown: Because of flying. I'd never flown before and so I didn't want to go down that road yet, and so I ended up turning it down because it was just offered to me, it was an option. But the second option I had to take, which was an aerospace ground equipment mechanic. And the acronym for that is AGE, the standard name for it in the Air Force is AGE mechanic.

So you finish your six weeks and I guess they sent you to a follow on school, or a specialty school?

Eric Brown: Yes.

Where did you go then?

Eric Brown: From there, I went up to Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois, where the AGE training complex was held. In fact, during that time that was where a significant amount of the training for any flight-line related job, specialist, anything that would do with aircraft maintenance, it was at Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois, especially with a lot of the support maintenance functions out there, anything supporting aircraft operations.

So you learned everything then you needed to know about being a ground mechanic.

Eric Brown: Yes, that's where you would learn all of the scholastic information, educational information, everything that was written. But obviously there was another phase of learning, once you finished with what they called technical training school, and that's where you would go into on the job training. But for the most part, a lot of the training happened at Chanute.

Did you enjoy it?

Eric Brown: I enjoyed the time at Chanute partly because a lot of our trainers at Chanute were prime military folks, or older military folks, and many of those folks had served in Vietnam, and had a lot of stories to tell, but they brought a wealth of experience that you just can't get anywhere else. These folks had been through combat and they know what it took to fix those aircraft and get them off the ground.

What was probably the most challenging thing that you learned while you were going through that training? To me, somebody that has no knowledge of mechanics, I think that's a lot to deal with. Was there anything that was more challenging than other things?

Eric Brown: I believe one of the most challenging things is utilization of critical thinking, attention to detail.

I would imagine that's key.

Eric Brown: Something that you typically don't, we use it at varying levels throughout our lives, but when you go in the military service such as the Air Force when you're dealing with million dollar aircraft -

Peoples' lives are on the line –

Eric Brown: Peoples' lives -

Maintenance work that's done –

Eric Brown: Absolutely, so there's a lot of need for attention to detail and also critical thinking. When you talk about maintenance on aerospace equipment, you can't just look at a problem for face value. You've got to be able to think through the problem, and that's where that critical thinking comes in. And keep in mind, the results of that thinking could be a huge factor in mission success when they come to get those aircraft off the ground.

So I guess at that point, when you were at Chanute, I guess they had you in the barracks and then I guess you would have weekends off, but during the day you would spend just hours in a classroom learning about the different types of engines and techniques of repairing them and that sort of thing?

Eric Brown: Yes, in our particular course work for aerospace ground equipment consisted of about ten modules. These modules could last anywhere from ten days to several weeks in duration depending on which aspect of the maintenance we were being trained on. For the most part it was just in the dorms half the time, and the other half of the time training. And you had the option of going to school in the day time or at night, because of so many students being recycled through there.

What did you end up choosing?

Eric Brown: I actually chose the day shift, but at some point I was put over to night shift because there was a need and they had to fill slots.

So they were training then pretty much 24 hours a day.

Eric Brown: Yes, training occurred 24 hours a day, nonstop.

So that's really how busy the place was in that situation.

Eric Brown: Absolutely.

And that's not even during war time, 1988 or '89.

Eric Brown: No, there was no war, exactly.

How long did you end up spending there at Chanute?

Eric Brown: At Chanute I probably spent probably about three and a half months at Chanute.

A pretty long period of training then.

Eric Brown: Pretty length in training. Every AFSC is different. Every Air Force Specialty Code is different. Obviously there are some specialty codes where the training may last two weeks, especially when you're talking about some administrative position where most of the

training is going to take place in on the job training. But as you can imagine with aerospace maintenance, there are so many components to aerospace maintenance, when you're talking aircraft support equipment, so it's a pretty lengthy course.

What type of aircraft did they train you on while you were there?

Eric Brown: Well in particular they trained us on every type of aircraft because the unique thing about aerospace ground equipment, it supports any type of aircraft, so we had to get trained on every type of aircraft, everything from the F-16's, F-15's. Back then we still had the F-4's in commission. We still had F-111's in commission. The B-52's, the KC-135's, C-141's.

So a lot of aircraft.

Eric Brown: Yes, a lot of aircraft. Some of the equipment used could be used across all aircraft, but you also had some equipment that was specific to certain types of aircraft. Obviously there is a difference between an F-16 fighter jet and a C-141 cargo plane, and so you had to learn the various aspects of the equipment used to support those type of aircraft.

I'm sure. After you finished your three and a half months then of all that intensive training, at that point did they send you out to another, in the Navy they would say in the fleet, did they send you out to an operating Air Force Base or a front line?

Eric Brown: Yes they did. Obviously there was a process to determine where the greatest need is for my particular specialty, and so at that time I was selected to go to an overseas location in the Philippines, so I was assigned to Clark Air Base in the Philippines, and I arrived at Clark in October of 1988.

OK, was that the first time you had been out of the country?

Eric Brown: It was the first time I'd been out of the country, it was the first time I'd been out of the continental United States.

Tell us what your memories are of that.

Eric Brown: I think my first night in Clark, we arrived under the cover of darkness for some reason. I think that's just the way the flights were set up back then. The first thing I remember is the smell of Clark. They had a unique smell, and the smell was not a bad smell, it was just a different smell and I think it was because of the palm trees, the coconut trees, the tropical smell. As you can imagine, coming out of Texas for most of my life, you could smell anything from cows in a pasture to cedar trees, but over there it's a unique smell is what I remember. And I just remember it was just a different environment for me.

How long did you end up spending at Clark?

Eric Brown: I spent about two and a half years at Clark Air Base.

So a pretty good long tour then.

Eric Brown: Yeah, two and a half years at Clark Air Base, and it was a very intense tour because during that time there was a lot of political upheaval going on over there. They were going through a lot of changes.

You were over there when Imelda Marcos I guess and Ferdinand Marcos were there being kind of pushed out.

Eric Brown: Right, as you can imagine the uprising there, it came about probably around 1986 I believe, so I came about on the cusp of that when the regime had fallen and they were trying to figure out who was gonna take over leadership of the Philippines. So we had rebels there who wanted leadership positions. We had one of the more violent rebel groups called the NPA, the New People's Army, and even today the New People's Army is still active over there.

So there was a little bit of a risk then being a military service member in the Philippines.

Eric Brown: Oh there was a huge risk during that time.

Did they allow you off base much?

Eric Brown: There was a lot of restrictions on base and it would be based on threat assessments. As you can imagine, even threat assessments themselves were difficult to ascertain, but there was a lot of restrictions on base. When the restrictions came, sometimes they shut the entire base down. No one could go anywhere, everything is blacked out. I remember days when they would literally cut off electricity to the local base community, cut off all electricity. They wanted no lights so the helicopters could get up and do their NVG, using night vision goggles trying to look for these rebels and insurgents over there. And you had obviously, unfortunately we had a lot of military folks whose lives were lost due to NPH snipers, which they called sparrows because they were so quick, so swift, they would come and do their business and they were gone before you know it.

Would there be even attacks then on the base itself, anybody out in the flight line and things like that, or was it usually service members that had gone on liberty into town or that sort of thing?

Eric Brown: Well for Clark Air Base, I think we had a very effective layer of security for the base out there, very effective, but unfortunately most of the things, the nasty things took place outside the gates, the perimeter of the gate itself. As you can imagine, there is such a large contingent of military folks stationed at Clark Air Base and everybody couldn't be housed on base to include families, so there was a huge portion of military folks there that lived off base there.

Was Clark near Manila or in Manila?

Eric Brown: Clark was probably about an hour and a half drive from Manila.

Was it kind of out by itself then?

Eric Brown: It was out by itself but Clark set at the base of some mountains regions there.

And that's where a lot of the rebels were living, in the mountains?

Eric Brown: A lot of them were living in the mountains. A lot of rebels were being sent up to Clark from the southern islands of Mindinao, which they've had some strife with the Philippine government for many years, and so because the U.S. there was supporting the Philippine military and some of the Philippine efforts, obviously we became targets for those rebels and those insurgents there.

So with all that going on while you were there, did you get out very much or did you kind of try to stay just on base?

Eric Brown: In general, most of the folks stayed close to base, but we had the opportunity to venture out and visit other locations and visit other regions.

So you got to see some of the Philippines then.

Eric Brown: Yes, got to see some of the Philippines, but they were very strict about allowing you to do that. You would have to get permission and have a letter signed saying hey, they know where you are, commander knows where you are, first sergeant knows where you are, when are you coming back, when are you leaving, who are you going with -

Definitely not just free reign.

Eric Brown: No, not free reign at all.

When you lived over there, were you a single guy or did you have a family at that point?

Eric Brown: I was single arriving at the Philippines, no kids, just me.

You lived in the barracks?

Eric Brown: I lived in the barracks initially. But they did allow you to live off base around the perimeter of it. They called it the perimeter of the base, probably within a half mile radius of the base. They didn't want you to venture out too far from there. But luckily I had a guy from high school that graduated with me who happened to also be stationed in the Philippines, so we went there together.

Kind of a small world then.

Eric Brown: Small world, very small world, and he was an AGE mechanic.

What aircraft did you work on the most when you were there at Clark? Was there a certain set of aircraft that you dealt with?

Eric Brown: Primarily the aircraft that were assigned to Clark was the F-4E Phantom and the F-4C, and the difference between the two, one is combat and one is to suppress enemy fire and pretty much to draw the enemy fire.

That was kind of towards the end of the Phantom's lifespan wasn't it?

Eric Brown: It was, it was towards the end of the Phantom's lifespan.

Was that harder to work on an aircraft that had been around longer like that or do you think it was easier?

Eric Brown: The Phantom itself was a beast to work on. It was a beast. It was an older aircraft, it was not as fuel efficient, it was probably one of the heaviest fighters in our inventory, it was extremely heavy. You have an engine problem in a Phantom, it's pretty much start to descend like a rocket.

I've heard it said that the Phantom is proof that you can make a brick fly -

Eric Brown: Yes it is. So it was a maintenance nightmare, the Phantom. I guarantee you anytime a Phantom went up, nine times out of ten it came down with some issues.

Really, I know that was a unique aircraft, too, because it was flown by the Marine Corps and the Navy and the Air Force, so all branches flew it.

Eric Brown: It was.

Have you ever talked with Commissioner Patterson about the F-4? I know he was a back-seater.

Eric Brown: No, I haven't talked with him about it. I haven't had the opportunity to talk with him about the F-4.

He was in the Navy and was a back-seater as we call it, Naval flight officer, but on F-4's, so that was like his plane was the Phantom, so having worked on that, you should talk to him because you all have something in common.

Eric Brown: I would certainly consider that. It was a learning experience. In fact, here at Camp Mabry, there is an F-4 sitting out there at the aerial park, and anytime I drive down the Mopac there, I just get memories of that time at Clark working on the F-4. It was an awesome aircraft in terms of it served its purpose. It suppressed enemy aggression. We used it to fly up to Korea to deal with incidents there, and also even to fly cover for our folks on the ground dealing with those insurgents and rebels there in the Philippines. So it was an effective aircraft, but it was a maintenance nightmare.

It was time I guess when they retired it to move on to other aircraft as well.

Eric Brown: More aerodynamic aircraft, more fuel efficiency, absolutely.

What was a typical day like for you at Clark? Did you work regular shifts? Did you get weekends off? Were there times that it was harder than other times? Were there operations that made things more difficult at times?

Eric Brown: The typical day at Clark was probably because of the heat at Clark during certain times of the year, the time for military to report for duty was adjusted to where we would report in at 6:00 in the morning every morning, all military folks when the weather was a lot cooler. By the time it got hot, most of the folks left for home around 3 o'clock and you'd have another shift to come in. But I think one of the most challenging aspects of being assigned to Clark in terms of Air Force duty was our preparations for combat and also our involvement with a lot of the rebel activity there at Clark. At many times we would have to get those aircraft airborne at a moment's notice based on threat assessments, not only to protect Clark's interests, our Air Force military interests, but also to protect the Philippine government's interest there. So it was a pretty hectic time. And at the same time we were supporting operations in Korea. Korea was still doing their thing up there and we had contingencies in place that responded at a moment's notice up in Korea to include combat patches that would go up, support aircraft, combat aircraft, so that was one of the more challenging aspects. It was the unknown, but at the same time you had to be always prepared.

How many people were normally, I know in the Marine Corps they had a section or a platoon, did it kind of work the same way in the Air Force? Did you have a section that you worked in? How did that work or the chain of command, that sort of thing?

Eric Brown: Well basis, on the size of our operations for the AGE complex, we have what's known as Flight. Air Force has Flight, and our Flight consisted probably of about 140 to 150 people.

So it would be like a Company in the Army or Marine Corps.

Eric Brown: Right, but that Flight was broken up into what's called the CAT system, the Combat AGE Team, and each Combat AGE Team was assigned to a specific aircraft package. Each aircraft package consisted of anywhere from six to eight jets that would be able to take off at a moment's notice, or deploy at a moment's notice. So when those six to eight jets, for example, had to go to Korea to respond to contingency, there was a package that follows to support those six to eight jets.

OK, so you had almost like a squadron that you were assigned to?

Eric Brown: Yes, the 3rd Tech Fighter Wing was the wing, but the squadron was also the 3rd Equipment Maintenance Squadron.

So I'm sure then the teamwork aspect was crucial. I guess you had other airmen that were with you that worked with you consistently and you each had your own skills and specialties, and that sort of thing.

Eric Brown: Teamwork was crucial. In the maintenance world, it is so vital. In fact I was talking to another gentleman here at the Land Board who works in the information systems office upstairs who served 13 years in the Air Force, and his prior job was on his egress. Egress is if you look inside of a canopy of an aircraft where the pilot sits, in an emergency situation they would have to pull the cord to eject out of the aircraft. Well, egress is responsible for that mechanism. As you can imagine, it's pretty much an explosive at the bottom of those seats. It's like a jet pack that pushes them away from the aircraft, and that's what they worked on. So we had to work hand to hand with folks like that. There had to be a high level of trust, as you

mentioned teamwork, and personal accountability. Every member, there was a high level of personal accountability for the maintenance.

So there were a lot of checks and double checks and verifications that everything was done properly, too, right? So that made everyone make sure they were doing their job right.

Eric Brown: Make sure they're doing their job right, make sure that aircraft is safe, make sure the personnel are safe, make sure that we are able to accomplish our mission. There's a lot of checks and balances in the Air Force, and I would go beyond the Air Force and say all services. I think there's what is so unique, and it goes back to the attention to detail, accountability, responsibility, critical thinking, just to make sure it works safe and we can perform those missions.

Absolutely. Is there any one particular memory that stands out as your favorite memory of your time at Clark?

Eric Brown: Favorite, I wouldn't necessarily call it a favorite memory, I would say it is a huge memory, something that I even think about today, and that was my eventual departure from Clark Air Base. It didn't happen based on normal reassignment to another base. It happened because of the infamous explosion of Mt. Pinnatubo in Clark Air Base, the volcanic eruption. You're talking about displacement of 15,000 to 20,000 military folks. It was the largest military evacuation since the Vietnam War, and so that happened in June of 1991, and unfortunately I was in the midst of that.

Tell us a little of your memories of that, what that meant for you in terms of what you and your fellow airmen had to do.

Eric Brown: Well the memory of it first started out with everybody at the base noticing little streams of smoke coming off the mountain ridge there not far from Clark. And this was based on some seismic activity, volcanic activity at that location, so the military officials, Pentagon officials at DOD decided to get some seismologists involved and get those folks over there to see what was going on, and so it got a lot of attention and long story short, the volcano was becoming very active very rapidly on a daily basis. So at some point the seismologists all agreed that there would be an imminent catastrophic event at that location, so a contingency plan started taking place, plan started taking place, but at the same time, the Philippines and the U.S. were in negotiation for renewing the base treaty, that base contract there. So as you can imagine there was a lot going on there. At some point during the negotiation process, toward the end of the process, the decision was made to evacuate everyone from Clark Air Base and all the surrounding military installations. Unfortunately during this time, I also had an emergency in the States. My grandfather passed away and so prior to the evacuation, I had to take off to the U.S. and it was unfortunate because I arrived in the U.S. a little too late for the funeral. So I arrived after the funeral which was upsetting to me, but I hung around in the U.S. for about a week and I kept in contact with the folks in the Philippines to find out what was going on. When it was time for me to go back to the Philippines, heading back I recall taking off from Alaska, took a couple of flights up to Alaska and you take a flight from Alaska over Korea and then down into Clark over there. We took off from Alaska and we heard the pilot come over the intercom and say there was a lot of activity going on at Clark, and that the word hadn't been given to evacuate yet, but it seemed imminent. By the time we got to Korea, we got more news that it looks like they were preparing for the evacuation, so they made the decision to still continue with the plane's mission. It was a 747 aircraft and it was probably only about 40 military folks on the plane. It

was a pretty empty aircraft. We took off from Korea and were heading to the Philippines, and mid-way to the Philippines we got an announcement over the speaker that said it's official, Clark Air Base has been evacuated, and they came over and said the aircraft will probably not be able to continue its mission on to Clark. Well it just so happened on the aircraft was one of the base leadership individual. There was an 06 colonel there who I believe he was an operations commander who had business in the U.S. but he was on his way back, and he got involved and he made the decision that there was no way this plane was not going to continue on this mission. We had folks on this plane who had family members there, children and wives, and also he had duties there. Somehow this plane had to get to Clark, and he got the approval from higher headquarters to continue on, but they had to figure out where to land the 747. So the plane was landed at what's called Subic Bay Naval Air Station in the Philippines. As you can imagine a 747 flying into Subic Bay Naval Air Station is uncommon. That base typically supports smaller type aircraft, and so I recall when we landed on the 747 at Subic Air Base, we probably sat on that aircraft for about an hour and a half, two hours, and the reason we just sat there on the tarmac on the aircraft was because they didn't have a stepladder big enough to get us down from the aircraft. So they had to figure out a way to get us down from the aircraft and what you saw looking out the windows, you saw nothing, even though they had told you there was an evacuation, there was nothing, no one in sight, only the folks that were working at the flight line. So they eventually got us off the aircraft, they got shuttle buses to take us to the evacuation site.

How far was Subic Bay from Clark?

Eric Brown: Subic was probably about a 45-minute drive from Clark, but with an evacuation, from what I understand from my wife because she had to evacuate alone, it took 'em four to five hours to get to Subic Bay because as you can imagine the volume of folks that were evacuated from Clark. It was just a long carpool, a long row of cars.

So then they flew you and you were married by this time?

Eric Brown: Yes, I was married by this time.

They flew you and your wife out on another 747 or where did they send you all?

Eric Brown: Well before this, it wasn't an immediate fly out. Everyone was pretty much stranded in the Philippines for about five days, five or six days, because what happened, once that 747 landed with myself and the other 39 passengers on board, within a day or so the volcano had a full, major eruption.

So you were there when that happened?

Eric Brown: Yes, I got there the day after it happened and then we were pretty much, everyone was pretty much left to fend for themselves, and I mean you had a breakdown in not necessarily discipline or order, but there was no, the command structure was kind of disrupted because it was a survival mode for everybody. We came together as military folks as a community, but it wasn't about the military structure anymore. It was about us as common people taking care of one another, making sure each other was safe and so it was a hectic period.

What was that eruption like? I guess ash everywhere in the sky and that sort of thing?

Eric Brown: I can recall the eruption, my wife and I were driving, we needed gas for a vehicle because she drove down from Clark in a vehicle, and I recall when we came from the gas station, filled up and got gas in the car and we were driving from the gas station and all of a sudden we started hearing noise, like things hitting the car, and it became more and more apparent, and then it seems like mud was falling out of the sky. What was hitting the car was volcanic debris, rocks, it was pummeling the car, and it was just like mud raining down. As you can imagine this was covering up windshields and cars had to pull over, and it seems like just all hell broke loose. It started accumulating on the ground and at some point we made it to a safe location, but it started to deteriorate then. Keep in mind, this was probably around noon, around lunch time, as I can recall, and all of a sudden I remember it going pitch black. 12 o'clock, around lunch time, it seemed like 12 o'clock at night. It was pitch black because of the volcanic ash just covered the sky completely, and on top of that, we had a major super typhoon off the coast of the Philippines that was heading towards us at the same time. So the winds from the typhoon were helping to push that volcanic ash south towards the Subic Bay area, and some of the southern regions of the Philippines, so it was just a big mess. Once the volcanic activity let up, I recall everyone kind of doing a damage assessment, and it was like there was just gray snow around you everywhere, and it was just the ash. Some of the ash was anywhere from a few inches to several feet deep in terms of ash, so it was pretty traumatic.

So how long was it before they were able to get you out of there?

Eric Brown: It was probably five to six days before they were able to get us out of there and the reason is because any major airport was shut down because of the volcanic ash.

So where did they end up sending you eventually? Did they just send you like you said as individuals, they would get you on flights as they could, or did you go with your unit?

Eric Brown: The main island of the Philippines in Luzon, there was just too much ash to get any type of aircraft in there, so what they had to do was they came up with a contingent plan to get the naval forces in there, with all the ships, every ship in the region was told to get to the Philippines. It was just awesome, the Navy was just awesome what they did for us, and they sent ships, everything. I'm talking aircraft carriers, support aircraft, and what they had to do was get, you're talking 15,000-20,000 folks who are being evacuated, they had to get us on these naval ships and take us to another island called Sabu in the Philippines, southern islands in the Sabu, which was not as affected by the volcanic ash, and Sabu was deemed the staging location where aircraft could get in to support the evacuation efforts to get folks out of there, and the main aircraft that were used was C-141's and C-130's, combat aircraft. From Sabu we were flown over to Guam, and so it was a much larger staging area and where the military had agreements with civilian aircraft such as American Airlines and everyone else, Delta, just you name it, they were there to support taking care of Americans and getting those Americans to safety.

Where did you ultimately end up? Where did you and your wife ultimately travel to?

Eric Brown: We ultimately ended up because at that time, many folks didn't have assignments, and so we got assignments at a moment's notice who was sent to Dias Air Force Base in Texas.

And that is in Abilene, right?

Eric Brown: Yes, Abilene, Texas.

Did they do that kind of with the idea that you were from Texas, or was it just random chance that you got Dias?

Eric Brown: It was random chance based on needs of the Air Force. They did ask you because of what we had went through, they wanted to kind of help alleviate some of that trauma and asked us where would we like to be stationed. I think I chose Texas. I just wanted to be close to home after going through something like that.

Did they ever re-open Clark Air Force Base after that?

Eric Brown: Clark was officially closed. What happened, the negotiations fell through, they did a Senate vote, Philippines, and decided that they did not want to renew the base lease.

So that's the way you left, and that's the way everybody I guess –

Eric Brown: That's the way I left, that's the way the historic Clark Air Base was shut down, and -

Mount Penitu erupted -

Eric Brown: Mount Penitu erupted and before it erupted, we got the last Air Force off the ground the day before it erupted, and that was -

Yeah, that is pretty traumatic.

Eric Brown: Yeah, it was pretty traumatic.

To go through all of that. So you get to Dias then, that's a complete change from the tropics I guess. Were you still working on F-4's at that point or did you get assigned to another type of aircraft?

Eric Brown: No, Dias, because aerospace ground equipment technicians can, we can be assigned to support aircraft, but we can also be assigned to support special combat operations unit, and I was assigned to a unit called a Tanker LF Control Element, TALSE.

Tell us a little bit about what that entailed.

Eric Brown: TALSE was a unique job because it was a squadron made up of only 28 people, and everything from a chief master sergeant down to me, the lowest ranking individual. I was an A1C, and C airman actually, I'm sorry. E4.

Like a corporal then.

Eric Brown: Yes, and so I was the lowest ranking person of the 28-man squadron. We had everything from a lieutenant colonel, chief master sergeant all the way down, and this consisted of low masters, it consisted of flight planners, it consisted of communications folks, and the main mission of TALSE was to support combat operations. If we had a situation at an austere location, a place where there was no base facilities, just a barren location, TALSE folk would be sent in to set up command and control along with special forces or anybody else to help secure

the air field to get it, of course we'd get folks in also to actually lay down runways so we could get combat aircraft in there and bring troops in to support missions.

What did you think of Dias? Did you like being closer to home again?

Eric Brown: I did like being closer to home. Obviously Dias has a different type of heat out there in West Texas. It's a dry heat, so that was unique, the climate out there.

Is it still a big B-1 base?

Eric Brown: Yes, Dias is a huge B-1 base, but they also have a huge C-130 combat and cargo plane component, so C-130's are also a very big part of Dias.

How long did you end up spending at Dias? Were you still on your first enlistment at that point?

Eric Brown: I think at that point I reenlisted shortly after arriving at Dias, probably a year or so after arriving at Dias I reenlisted. I made a decision to reenlist. I enjoyed what I was doing at the time, even though I had went through all this traumatic events with Penitu though, I think the thing that really hit home with me was the fact how we came together in the Philippines, not only as military members, but as Americans to make sure we're all safe and that let me know that I need to be doing something bigger than myself, continue doing something bigger than myself.

How long did you end up staying in the Air Force?

Eric Brown: I ended up doing right at 23 years in the Air Force.

And you retired at what rank then?

Eric Brown: I retired as an E7, as a master sergeant in the Air Force.

So then you got to go I guess a lot more places than just Dias. Where are some other places you were?

Eric Brown: When I arrived at Dias, as you can imagine the Gulf War, we were still gonna miss the Gulf War, in fact the Gulf War was going on when Penitu was just erupting. Still there was a lot to do going on, so immediately upon arrival at Dias, they gave me an opportunity to kind of get myself together and everything, my personal effects and everything, and I was sent over to support the Gulf War effort.

Did you go to Saudi Arabia?

Eric Brown: I went to Saudi Arabia, went to locations such as Taiff and Jetta, Saudi Arabia, but also even when we were trying to stay there for some time, but came back and supported other combat operations that died such as the situation in Somalia, we restored hope. In fact, I was in Somalia with the Army folks who were depicted in that movie Black Hawk Down.

So you were there when that happened.

Eric Brown: Yes, I was there, and I remember when that unit arrived there because they had to change out with another unit there, so we were there supporting operations there.

Did you have an air field you all were working out of or what was that like in Somalia?

Eric Brown: Mogadishu airfare was a nightmare in Somalia because as you can imagine, working an air field with the TALSE folks unit I was in, we controlled the ramp, we controlled the air space, and so we worked out of the tower there which is an old commercial air field there, and that tower was like you were sitting ducks up in that tower, but we had to have a span of vision to see what was going on at the air field.

Did the Army fly their Blackhawks out of that same air field or did they have their own setup?

Eric Brown: Well they flew out of that air field, but they also had a smaller location that they would fly out of for contention purposes so there was a lot of activity going on there, a lot of snipers, small scale combat. I can remember myself taking a lot of fire at the location. I recall one incident where I just went to the bathroom at a porta-potty not far from one of our tent locations and you begin to hear bullets ricocheting everywhere, and this was common in Mogadishu because it set almost in a hole, on the outside you had these old housing developments around. That's where they take a lot of potshots, and so we would get the Marines were there as well, and the Army folks, and they would go up and take care of business. But it was just constant.

How long did you spend in Mogadishu?

Eric Brown: I spent a couple of weeks in Mogadishu and because I was recalled back to Dias to support other operations that were getting ready to start off in other locations.

I'm sure two weeks was long enough.

Eric Brown: Two weeks was long enough. It was a very intense two weeks, and unfortunately after I left there, that's when, well even before Blackhawk down, there was a slaughter of about 20-26 Indian military personnel. They slaughtered those folks and the military was involved with going in. There was some small scale skirmishes there and everything, and that's what actually led to President Clinton actually saying we need to go and get in this thing, and one of our targets was Mohamed Faraidid who was the leader of some of the things that were going on over there.

He had a son that was a corporal in the Marine Reserves which was kind of weird. I don't know if you heard that, that's a whole another story that he had a son who was over there with the Marines that ended up later on becoming kind of like I guess in a ward order of his own.

Eric Brown: He did, he began becoming one of the leadership of the factions over there.

Small, crazy situation.

Eric Brown: It was.

They sent him because he was living in the United States and going to college in California, and was his son, and he was over there and yeah, that was a bad situation.

Eric Brown: Absolutely.

Where were some other places that you got to go during your Air Force career?

Eric Brown: I also got to go to Africa on several occasions to support humanitarian missions such as in Ruwanda, the Ruwanda genocide that was taking place there, so between several factions, so we had to go and support that, and go to places like Gomen, Zayeer, and Kagali, and there, and that was heart wrenching because you had not only the genocide taking place, but you had a lot of mass casualties based on some of the folks in the country who were trying to evacuate the fighting and things like that, so you had a mass exodus of folks there, and it was just a nightmare.

So you got to travel a lot then.

Eric Brown: I did, I traveled extensively at a young age and so I think, I will tell you that I think my time in the Philippines prepared me for that. As I mentioned before, there's a high level of personal accountability that has to take place because you have to be very focused in a lot of these situations, and I think it prepared me well.

Where was your favorite place that you were stationed?

Eric Brown: My favorite place to be stationed, I would have to go back to the Philippines. That's where it all started. That's where I made the transition from, you know, I went on I would say from a boy to a man in the Philippines. Unfortunately I didn't make that transition in a typical way, it was a transition I think that was well suited for service in the military.

What was it like when you retired after 23 years being in the Air Force? Was it hard to make that transition into the civilian world?

Eric Brown: It was hard, but prior to retirement, after about 15 years of aerospace ground I actually changed jobs. I actually retrained into mental health services, and I did this because of the love of people, and really I felt there was a need because some of the impact to our troops out there, and so I worked for about 7 years as a mental health flight chief, which included supplement seduced treatments, prevention, family advocacy, psychological, psychiatric and social work services. As you can imagine, I would probably be well suited for that having gone through so much trauma.

And then when you retired, you came back home to Texas I guess?

Eric Brown: I did. I retired in December of 2009 and prior to that time it was a tough decision to make because as you can imagine the military is just a family, and I knew that I would be doing something great by transitioning, but it's also like I was leaving a family.

Take that uniform off –

Eric Brown: Take the uniform off, it was very difficult. I think that's probably the most stressful time in my life, that year when I made the decision. Leading up to the decision and then finally making the decision to retire, and it wasn't necessarily about what was I going to do after the Air Force, it was how can I transition from 23 years of being a part of an Air Force family. How do you just leave that behind? It's a huge change, so it was interesting. I retired from the Corps air base in Japan, and I had been on my fourth year. I was in that part of Japan for four

years, but prior to that I was in Okinawa for five years, so a total time of about 9 or 10 years in Japan. But I retired and relocated here to the United States, Texas. I'm from Fort Worth. I wanted to be close to home but not too close to home. My wife has family in Houston. I've never been to Austin.

So you're about three hours from each of those towns.

Eric Brown: You're exactly right, so we compromised, so that's what it's all about.

And now you're the director of the veterans cemetery program.

Eric Brown: Veteran cemetery program. I was recently promoted to that position. I'll be honest, I was a little reluctant. I've never imagined myself being director of a cemetery program, but as soon as I stepped foot at the Central Texas State Federal Cemetery in Killeen, I knew I was in the right place. It's a beautiful cemetery and we take care of our military folks and our military family in life and in death.

So really you've retired from the Air Force, but you're still serving veterans and those that are still serving, military members, so in a way that transition is a good one because it's probably pretty seamless. Really you've gone from –

Eric Brown: Absolutely, that helped the transition tremendously.

How did you find out about the Veterans Land Board?

Eric Brown: I found out about the Veterans Land Board initially, once I retired as you can imagine, you are, it's highly, you are told that you need to keep up with your medical, make sure you maintain your physical fitness and all the health and everything, so I found me a doc locally that was obviously approved by the military. As a retiree, I get full medical benefits, and it just so happened my private physician here in north Austin is a Naval reserve 06, and he talked to me about the Veterans Land Board when I initially went to his office and told me about some of the benefits they offer. If I was looking for a home or land to purchase, then please get with those folks, and when he first mentioned it, I was like Land Board, I never heard of such a thing, but I think about a year or so later I inquired about it and found out about the Land Board.

That's awesome. A good thing, it's kind of fortuitous that you would know about it and tell you just kind of word of mouth I guess.

Eric Brown: Absolutely, word of mouth but it came from a member of our military family, and that's something that really hit home with me. It's still military folks taking care of military folks.

That's right. Well we're honored and glad to have you at the VLB, especially as a veteran. It's veterans serving veterans, and so you've got that bond. When did you start at the Land Board?

Eric Brown: I started at the Land Board in January of 2012. I started out as a management analyst, supporting the state veterans homes, and also -

Another great program.

Eric Brown: It's another great program, but as a management analyst I was kind of the analyst for the cemetery program and for the veterans homes, and that's just pulling data and doing trend analysis, seeing if we can make improvements, those things, and that's where I started.

Well I really appreciate you taking the time to share your story with us today, and you know, here at the Land Office today, we've got besides the Veterans Land Board we've got all the archives that go back to the 1700s. We've got the Registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of all the original settlers in Texas, and we've got the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. So our goal with these interviews is to number one, give a small bit of thanks to veterans for their service, but then also to save their stories for posterity for future generations. Hopefully hundreds of years from now people will be able to listen to these interviews. And with that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening to this long after you and I are both gone about your time in the service, or any advice, or anything like that?

Eric Brown: I would want to speak on something real briefly. The veterans homes and cemetery program, one of the things that we felt was a great need for the veterans homes was to be able to educate those folks who were working in the veterans homes about our military veterans in those homes. As you can imagine, I mean the folks working in those homes sometimes transfer over from a typical long term care facility. Some may not understand what a veteran is, and so I've started a program, activities for myself to go into those homes and do what's called community assessments, so that I would educate the staff on those vets in the homes, but also talk with the vets themselves to get an idea of their needs and how they like their life in homes. What I've found going through those vet homes is that there is a tremendous amount of history in the homes. If you just set down and give a vet the opportunity to talk, you will find a lot about history, and I think what is happening with the Voices of Veterans actually is a testament to us making an effort to ensure those stories remain alive and they are not lost. There are a lot of stories to tell and if you just take the time to listen to a veteran I think you will be amazed.

You're absolutely right, and it's amazing to me the number of interviews that I've done that there are a lot of veterans that will open up to another veteran even if they are a complete stranger, and they may not have told those stories to their loved ones. I've heard from a lot of especially kids and grandkids that will say I've never heard those stories before, maybe because their loved one didn't feel comfortable telling them about it or they didn't really kind of know the questions to ask or that veteran didn't feel like it could relate to them, so it's a gratifying thing that we're able to share those stories also with the families and then also save them.

Eric Brown: Absolutely.

Well sir, again, I appreciate your time and sharing this interview with us and just like we do for all interviews, in a couple of weeks we'll give you copies of this interview on CDs and you can keep or give them to your family, and we'll give you a certificate and letter from Commissioner Patterson, too, so even though you work here at the Land Office, we're going to do the same thing for you that we do for all the veterans which is nice. The veterans, it's a big surprise for them. They get a signed letter and certificate and a commemorative DLB binder and a lot of them will put it up above their fireplace and stuff. And I tell all of them it's just a small thing but it's a way for the state of Texas to tell them thank you. So thank you for your service and for your being here at the VLB.

Eric Brown: Thank you for giving a veteran the opportunity to tell his story.

Yes sir, thank you.

[End of recording]