Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with John Brown

September 26, 2005
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Charlie Deitrich

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 1.

Charlie Deitrich: *If you can state your full name, date and place of birth.*

John Brown: John Joseph Brown, born Brooklyn, New York June 6, 1924.

Were you raised in Brooklyn?

Up until the time I joined the Navy in 1941.

What was it like growing up in Brooklyn?

Pretty rough. It was during the Depression.

Is that right?

But there were no poor people. Nobody had anything. It was rough. There was nobody that had transportation. All of the kids, we went to parochial school. And we didn't have welfare in those days but they had what they called Home Relief. You got a free meal at lunchtime at school. And there were six of us. My father died when I was about nine. I don't know what else to say except for the fact that it was pretty rough during the Depression, but the whole country was suffering at that time.

Tell me about your parents. What are your parents' names?

My mother's maiden name was Margaret Bree and her people were all born in Ireland. My grandmother was born in the north of Ireland. On my mother's side, the people were born in the north, and my father's people were all born in the south of Ireland; my grandparents were born in County Cork in southern Ireland. And they all immigrated to this country in the 1800s. And my father went into the Army. He fought in the Cuban insurrection.

That's the Spanish-American War?

Well, I don't like to use the Spanish-American name. All I remember is the Cuban insurrection. And let's see, I don't know what else except for the fact that they were all raised in Brooklyn. In those days, it was what they called parishes, like they have in Louisiana now. All of the immigrants lived together. It was all the Irish together, the Italians together, and that type of thing. And I went to a parochial school in Brooklyn, and went to high school. Left there when I was fifteen, at the invitation of the teacher, and I never went back.

Then I enlisted in 1941. I borrowed a quarter to get to the recruiting station. And I found a home, so I stayed for twenty-two years. Went to sea in February '42. First ship I was on was torpedoed in '43. It sunk off Bizerte [Tunisia] in North Africa. And come back to the States and went on board a destroyer escort and went back out to sea, and in '44 we sunk a German sub. We got three battle stars on that ship. And then, well, when V-E Day went, we went through the [Panama] Canal and went off to the South Pacific. Went through Halmahera, Inodnesia, Morotai, Dutch East Indies, all of that, you know, island-hopping, and we made it out there in time for the invasion of Lingayan Gulf in the Philippines. I don't know, somebody said, what was it like? I said you went away as a seventeen-year-old kid and came back as a twenty-one-year-old man. Anyway, this is what—

That's good. Did you mention your father's name?

John.

What was growing up in Brooklyn during the Depression like? What'd you do? Did you have any hobbies or—?

No, went to work when I was a kid. Well, I worked for a guy, what we used to call a peddler. I don't know whether you know what that term is. He drove a truck around with vegetables on it **[00:05:00]** and we used to sell the vegetables to people. You go along the street yelling

"Peddler!" And then they'd come out and they'd buy potatoes or something. And I got $3.50 a week but I worked from six until noon, went to school from, oh, somewhere around one o'clock till three, and then got off and I worked till six again. I got $3.50 week, and had to give Mom $3.00 because there was the six of us, plus I had a brother that had Down's syndrome. We all went to work. So I went to work, I guess, well, [for all] intents and purposes when I was about nine, and then I got a job as a--sounds ridiculous—chicken plucker. It was in the kosher meat market. I got ten cents for each chicken that I pulled the feathers out after this rabbi killed it in a kosher rite, whatever they do, you know. And then I worked at a skating rink, outdoor ice-skating rink, in the wintertime, cleaning the snow from the skates off the ice. Did that up until the time I went into the Navy. And I went I worked in the Navy, I was a seaman, worked the seamanship, cargo handling, rigging, Shore Patrol, I don't know, just about general-service-type thing.

Tell me about your brothers and sisters.

I had an older brother. His name was Eugene. He died, oh, I forget how old he was. He died of cancer, I think it was. But he went on to get his teaching degree and lived in a place called New Paltz, New York. Married a wonderful lady. Her name was Edna Segal. She came from Brooklyn. And they had two children, Pamela—she still lives up there—and Paul, he went on and got his doctorate; now he's—I forget exactly what he—like administrative—I'm trying to think of what Paul does.

It's OK.

But anyway, they still live in a place called New Paltz, New York. And I had my brother Bill; Billy was the one that had this Down's syndrome. He died when he was about eighteen years old. And I had a brother Gerry, or Gerard. He went on and became—he was an electrician but he

was also in a place called Baldwin on Long Island, New York. He passed away when he was seventy-three. I like to call him my kid brother. He was three years younger than me. And he was a volunteer fireman for forty-nine years there. And his boys are all in the Baldwin Fire Department now. In fact they all worked that 9/11 fire.

Is that right?

[Rudolf] Giuliani asked them to volunteer, so they did. They were non-paid, you know. And then my sister Arlene, she had Cathy, Peggy, Donald, and Lawrence. She had four children. She passed away. She went in for a gall bladder operation and they botched it.

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

Yeah. Anyway, my brother-in-law George, he's still alive. He lives in Florida, down in Punta Gordo or someplace down there. And I have my sister Peggy, Margaret Anne. She lives in **[00:10:00]** Park Forest, Illinois now. She's eighty-four or eighty-five years old now. She raised five children, I think it was. See, I can't put these—I'd have to sit down and write all this stuff out, you know, it's—

No, it's OK. I was just, you know, just it sounds like you were a close family.

Oh, very close. Very close. In fact, every time, even during the war, I got home a few times. Convoys would pull into New York and stuff. I always made it a point to get together with the family.

It's nice.

There was no friction at all, like you see in most families. And let's see, there was Billy, Gerry, me, Eugene, Alene, and Peggy, and that was it. And then I went on and I married that lovely lady out there, Peggy, in 1953. We've got fifty-two years together that she put up with me. And we had Michael, Jimmy, Danny, Jackie, and Elizabeth. Jimmy passed away when he was thirty-two.

And Danny and Jackie and Elizabeth and Michael are still here in Las Vegas. We have six grandchildren here.

Oh, that's great.

And we just acquired a new, I guess, grandson-in-law. We went to a party last Saturday night, a wedding party. And I have another granddaughter getting married in November. So I guess the brood's going to keep increasing. My son Michael, he's an auto parts store manager, I don't know which one it is, downtown here. And my son Dan is a locksmith over at the university. My daughter Jackie is a nurse for twenty-five years now. She inserts catheters in heart patients. She's over at this new hospital that they put in there; I forget the name. Elizabeth is a stay-at-home mom. She has two wonderful little girls, Josi and Julia; they're eleven and nine, in that age bracket. Michael has Megan—she's twenty-six now, I think—and Blair and Sean, their three children. And Danny, he married a lady, Kim, who had two children, and he just became a grandpa I guess—one of Kim's girls just had a beautiful little baby girl. I guess that just about covers the family, the immediate family here.

So you had a close family and you lived in, was it like an Irish community in Brooklyn, is that right, primarily Irish?

Yeah, it was all Irish, mostly. Well, almost all of them.

So that seems like a fairly—not only was it a close-knit family, but it sounds like a close-knit neighborhood, too.

Yes. We had my cousins. We lived on East 49th Street. Like I say, this would be Church Avenue and this would be Snyder Avenue. This is on East 49th Street, and they were 48—it was different than Vegas. The streets had the same name all the way through or number all the way through. And my cousins lived on East 38th Street. You know what I mean?

OK.

And they were all raised before there—well, they used to have an area off Eastern Parkway called St. Matthew's Parish, and we used to call it Over the Lane—they brought expressions from the old country, you know—and as things got a little bit better they spread out. But see, when the immigrants all come off the ships to Ellis Island, they all settled together for security is really what **[00:15:00]** it was, which is typical of everybody else in this country. And then they moved—well I don't know how to say it—into St. Catherine's Parish. And when you used to say to somebody, "Where do come from?" they didn't say, I came from here. Now they say "I came from Flatbush," where the Brooklyn Dodgers used to play. In those days you'd say, "I'm St. Catherine's," or "Holy Cross," something like—it was all—the majority of them were Irish. And later on a lot of Italian families moved in. But we never had any problems. The most you ever did is get in a fist fight, something like that. They didn't do like they do now, settle it with guns. I don't know what else I can tell you on that.

How do you think growing up in the Depression kind of shaped you as an adult?

Pretty rough. It was pretty rough. Even to this day, if somebody gives me some lip, I'm ready to go.

Was that from the Depression or from the Navy?

Oh, I think it was both. You see, it's hard to—it's the type of people. I don't know how to say it. We weren't mean, but by the same token—like even to this day, put it this way, I'll hold the door open for you when you come by, but I expect you to say thank you, and if you don't, then I'm going to tell you what to do with yourself. And that's the way I am.

I'm the same way.

She [my wife] keeps saying to me, `One of these days, somebody's going to beat you up. It's happened before.`

Did growing up in an era that, you didn't have much, did that kind of shape you, too? I mean just, you know—

We didn't have anything. In fact, I remember one kid, Bobby Harms, I envied him because he had a wagon and we used to have to go—well, the ice house was on 53rd Street, and we used to be able to get a cake of ice for a dime and then take it and bring it all the way home and put it in the icebox. We didn't have such a thing as a refrigerator in those days. And Bobby Harms had a new wagon. I envied that.

The kind of wagon that you pull behind you, right, so you could put the ice in the wagon?

Yeah. Like you walked, it was probably about six blocks. It was a little bit smaller by the time you got home but it was the facts of life and I think it cost a dime for it.

I don't want to cry, but when I joined the Navy, the clothes I had on, my guidance counselor in high school gave them to me because my clothes were rags—gave me the suit that her husband was going to throw away because the rags I had on, you know.

Wow.

Yeah. But that was—it was rough, with six kids, no money coming in. My grandmother was a housekeeper. I keep going back to the old days. Most of the Irish immigrants, the Catholics, were servants in people's houses. They're no different than right now, what people say about the people from—Hispanics doing those menial jobs. Granny was a housekeeper for a family that had a couple of bucks, and then my mother took care of her house, and we moved into that house. We all lived off the money that Granny made. She worked for a lady called Mrs. Brashear. And, well, to give you an example, you know the weather back there gets pretty severe at times. In fact the last time I was back there in a snowstorm was December 26, 1946. We had twenty-six inches in twenty-four hours. I remember when the soles on our shoes wore through,

we'd put a piece of cardboard in there to keep from walking on the ground. And in the snow, that **[00:20:00]** cardboard would get soaking wet. But you didn't have any buses. And they had a streetcar, but you had to have a nickel to ride it. In fact I have a friend of mine, he's still alive, God bless him, back there. He was out here to visit me for our fiftieth wedding anniversary. He came from Florida. And we used to hitchhike. They had what they called a trolley car. Are you familiar with that?

Yes.

They get their power from the wire. And what we used to do was we'd hitchhike on the back of the trolley car, and when we wanted to get off, we'd pull the one off the trolley and it'd stop and the conductor would come out and he's trying to get our butt, but he couldn't. You know we were kids and we could run.

I don't know. I sound like I'm complaining. I don't mean it. We had a good life. We did the best we could with what we had, but I also believe that that's what molded the kids that went to war.

I think you're right.

They didn't get mollycoddled. They weren't babied. And I was seventeen years old and was in combat. Now I hear, `Well, he's only twenty-one years old and he killed his mother; give him time off for good behavior.` It's a different type of people.

It's a completely different generation.

It is.

You said you were asked to leave high school by one of your teachers?

Well, almost.

What happened?

Well, one of the kids called him a sonofa—

It's OK.

Sonofabitch. And I stood up and says, `Yeah, and I agree with him.` So he said get out, and I never went back. And when I went down to join the Navy, I was seventeen, see, and I had to get permission from my mother. And so she checked my school record, and I hadn't been there since I was fifteen. And they'd sent her my school record because I wanted to join the Navy. And I went down to enlist that day, the day I was seventeen, June 6, 1941, and they rejected me because I bit my fingernails. That was before the war. And the doctor said to me, he said, `If you let them grow for two weeks, I'll let you enlist.` And I went back in two weeks and I have never bitten them since.

They gave me a chit for a meal at a restaurant in New York when I enlisted, and I went down there and they had frankfurters and beans. And they said you could have all you wanted. So I had a nickel left over. I borrowed a quarter to get to the recruiting station. I called this lady that lived two doors down from us called Aunt Belle. Mrs. Turner was her name. See, we called a lot of people "aunt" and "uncle," you know, a family-type deal even though they weren't related to us. And I called Aunt Belle and she walked two doors down and got Mom and Mom came to the phone. And I said, `Mom, my belly's full.` And I stayed for twenty-two years.

Wow.

I don't know whether this is what you are interested in or not but it's the story of the old man's life, I guess.

Yeah, and I want to talk to you about your experience in the Navy but before we do that, I wanted to ask you a couple of things. Growing up in the Depression, what were your feelings of FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt]?

Never thought about him, to tell you the truth. I think it was survival. We didn't have time for that crap, you know what I mean? Maybe the people who could sit around and relax. We had friends of ours, this same Mrs. Turner, Uncle George, they had enough money that they had a cabin in the Bear Mountains in the New York, that they used to go up there on vacation. He worked for the Post Office Department, see? Well, people like him might've thought something about it. Because by the time I got about five or six hours in the morning and about four or five hours in **[00:25:00]** the evening, plus the fact that I went to school…. And when I was in grammar school we had nuns, and you would do your lessons or else you wished you did. And then when I got to high school I had pretty much freedom. It's no different than nowadays. The teachers are scared of the kids. So I never thought about politics. Survival, I guess, was our main theme in those days. That's about it, as far as I know.

And just because I'm a Dodger fan and you grew up in Brooklyn, are you a Dodger fan? Did you like the Dodgers, growing up?

Not so much anymore, because I remember Pee Wee Reese out in center field and stuff like that, but see, I don't look at sports as sports anymore. It's whoever has the most money can buy the best players. You know, this stuff like [Barry] Bonds and all this, steroids, it's hypocrisy.

But when you were a kid in the thirties, did you follow the Dodgers?

Yeah.

You ever go to Ebbets Field?

Once.

Really?

Didn't have the money. It was funny. Yeah, well, I could walk to Ebbets Field. It's right off Flatbush Avenue there. And of course in those days you could walk through the streets of

Brooklyn, too. You wouldn't do it nowadays. Yeah, I remember Duke Snider and Pee Wee Reese and that stuff. In fact my father, the little bit I remember about him and I don't remember much, he liked to play baseball. He had a catcher's mitt and, you know. But we really never had time to do anything. I did a lot of ice skating because I worked at the ice skating rink. It was an outdoors rink. And I did a lot of bicycle riding because of the fact that I had a paper route, delivering. And I delivered the papers, so I got to ride the bicycle pretty well. And that's just about it, really.

So what led you to—why the Navy? What led you to wanting to join the Navy?

Get away. I'll be honest with you, I wanted a decent life.In 1941 there was no war and it didn't look like there was going to get any better. All of the men were out of work. They were just starting to go back because a lot of it was they started production to the Lend-Lease. I don't know whether you're familiar with that or not.

Yes.

We were sending our stuff, like we used to say, you lend it to them and they lease it back to us. But the country itself was against the war. In fact, I still think they manufactured it but that's history. Like this thing over there now [the Iraq war]. But I guess the main thing was that I had a desire to go to sea.

So it wasn't just to get away. It was specifically the Navy to go to sea.

Oh, yeah, I wasn't going to join those dogfaces. No, I didn't want to be a soldier. I lived with them in a foxhole for a time in 1943 and they had a dirty life.

What about your childhood do you think kind of led you to being attracted to the sea?

Well, right there we had the Atlantic Ocean. We used to be able to go swimming in the Atlantic Ocean out at Reese Park at Rockaway. And I just, I don't know, I just liked it, I guess. I've

always liked to be outdoors. In fact right now I spend most of my time either sitting out in the front or the back if I'm not doing something. You can tell by the look of me.

And so you do finally join the Navy, and was it the summer of '41?

[00:30:00] June '41. Actually I went down June 6 and they rejected me as I told you, and two weeks later, June 24, I went down and the doctor said, `All right, you can enlist`, because I didn't bite my fingernails for the two weeks. So I had to wait around, and I did it. And like I say, my first enlistment was up in June of 1945, and I was sure I was going to get killed, so I extended my enlistment for two years so Mom would get some more money. That was, I think, $1,500 or something like that. And then they fooled me. The war ended, so I still had time to do, and so what they did is they transferred me—I had forty-two months' credit for being overseas when the war started, and the people with the most credits were the ones that got discharged first. So they sent me back to Lido Beach, Long Beach, New York, and I went in there and they said, `You can't get out, you just reenlisted.` And I says, `They sent me here.` I didn't know what was the reason. So I reenlisted after that and kept going.

What made you certain that you were going to get killed?

Well, first of all, that first ship I was on got torpedoed; we lost 10 percent of our kids. And well, one of the jobs I had, I was a gun captain on a five-inch .38, and we had hedgehogs—they were rockets—on the fo'c'sle [forecastle], and when we were antiaircraft, we manned the five-inch .38, and if it was for antisubmarine we manned the hedgehogs, and I was gun captain because I was a petty officer in those days. And May 29 of '44, we were at with the *USS Block Island*, the *USS Barr*, the—Jesus Christ, I have to go all the way back now. The *Buckley* rammed a sub and they had a little bit of hand-to-hand combat. The Germans was trying to save their life. The sailors, we want to keep ours going. And the *Block Island* got torpedoed and she went down. We

picked up a bunch of their survivors. In fact there was one person who had to be sewn in canvas for burial. My rate at that time, I was a Boatswain's Mate, and that was seamanship. And they put this guy on a table and we laid a piece of canvas there and I had to take a stitch all the way around him, you know, and we put him on a board and slid him over the side. And the 29th of May one of the other destroyer escorts made contact with a submarine and we picked up the contact and I fired the hedgehogs and got three direct hits, no survivors. You know, I don't know what to say.

That's got to feel good, though, right? I mean what does that feel like, to get the three direct hits? When you got the three direct hits, what did that feel like?

I said to my pointer, a fellow by the name of Red Campbell, I have a picture of him inside there, I said, `I just killed eighty-five of them bastards.` It was us or them. So anyway, after V-E Day, that's when we went, as I said before, we went down through the Canal. Everything that could float went through the Canal.

OK. We'll stop the tape real quick. [Pause]

[00:34:39] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 3, Disc 1.

So before we get too far, I wanted just to ask you, what was your boot camp experience like? How long did that last?

It was eight weeks.

So you were out by what, early fall?

No, it was June. I went right to boot camp in Newport, Rhode Island from the recruiting station. Didn't go back home. In fact it brings back memories. We rode a train up to Newport, Rhode Island from New York. I got in there and we all lined up and they started issuing us clothes, and

they give us a big cardboard box for everything you owned. And I said to this man, he was a petty officer, I didn't know what he was at the time, I said, Do I have to send these home?

He said, Why, don't you want them?

I says, No.

And I threw them right in the trash, everything I owned. They was rags, you know. It wasn't dirty, don't get me wrong, but then again we didn't have fancy washing machines. My mother washed by hand. You know the old washerwoman with the washboard? So I threw all of those things away. And when they issued me my uniforms, we went through eight weeks of training in Newport, Rhode Island, and then I was transferred. At the end of boot camp, I was sent right down to a place called Opa-locka in Florida, which was a naval air station back in those days.

Did you have any sense of what you wanted to do for the Navy?

Not that I know of. It was all a new experience for me. I was content. It didn't make any difference to me what I did. I did everything from cleaning the toilets to mess cooking. We called it "captain of the head" in the Navy, in charge of all little vessels.

So what's your first assignment?

I was what they call a plane captain. It's a glorified janitor, really. We had, what do you call it, old fighter planes, those ones like, oh, we had some with shotgun starters, others that you pulled around by hand to start them. We had one that you put a boot on the prop and then a bunch of guys took a strain on a bungee cord and they let it go and spun it over and they went all the way up to seventy-five miles an hour, some of those things in those days. And I volunteered to fly as a rear gunner in an open-cockpit dive bomber. You know Snoopy with the swivel guns?

Yeah.

When the pilot dropped a bomb, you swiveled around to see where it hit. Everything was ancient.

So you actually did that? You were actually the gunner in a—?

I enjoyed it. I often tell people how smart I was. I was a mental giant, believe it or not. Here we're flying with a guy that's a kid and he's got a leather helmet to protect his head. He didn't know what he was doing and we volunteered to fly with him. But we stayed there until the day that Pearl Harbor happened. And I was in my bunk and I heard, they come over the PA [public address] system and said that Pearl Harbor was bombed and I said to one of the guys next to me, I says, `Where the hell is Pearl Harbor?` I didn't even know what it was.

And it changed. The Navy changed immediately. I went to sea in February of '42, and I sound like I'm blowing my own horn but I guess I had leadership qualities because I went right up. I made what they called coxswain. I ran a whaleboat and I had a couple of men working for me. I was responsible for seamanship. I don't know whether you want to talk about the duties I had the in the Navy or whatever.

Well, yeah, anything you want to talk about, but I was just curious, was there any sense before Pearl Harbor that there was trouble on the horizon?

[00:05:00] If there was, I don't remember it. I was too busy enjoying myself.

What was your emotional reaction to Pearl Harbor?

I didn't have any. No, I don't have any. The only time I get excited is when some sonofabitch cuts me off in traffic. I didn't think about it, to tell you the truth. See, I've had surgery and everything else. It doesn't even bother me. I don't think about that stuff. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen.

When we declared war on Japan, do you have any thoughts on that?

The war with Japan?

Well, when FDR declares war, when the United States declares war on Japan, what are your thoughts on that?

It's all part of the job. Them yellow bastards is all I thought of, and especially in those days we were exposed to an awful lot of, I don't know what you call it, propaganda and so on and so forth. That's when we saw the pictures of the Jews, the German treatment of them. Then there was one, I don't know whether it was a newsreel or what, showing Japanese throwing babies up in the air and catching them on their bayonets. It was awful hard to try to—even to this day, I'm not prejudiced, I don't care what your background is, that's your business—but it's awful hard to accept the fact that people could do this to people.

I see the pictures now of these kids in Uganda and those places with flies eating on their face and I'm seeing them people in charge, they're living like kings. Or like today I see where our illustrious leader [George W. Bush] says save gasoline and he's flying around the country in a jet, wasting thousands of gallons of fuel, for political purposes. I shouldn't—I don't want to get into politics. But it's the way I feel. I don't drive my car any more than I have to now. I can afford to buy the gas, but I don't want to because I don't think it's right. I've got my sprinklers set down to what the Water District says. Anyway, I'm getting away from the story.

So we're in February of '42 and this is when you ship off?

Yeah, it was fun. I was stationed in Miami and in February of '42 a ship come in, PC-496. Didn't have a name. It was a PC, which was a patrol craft. It was a 173-footer, and they had just put her in commission in a place called Letham Smith Shipbuilding Company in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. So anyway, she pulled into this pier, Pier Two, at a sub chaser training center in Miami, and I was going through sub chaser training at that time because as soon as the war

started they transferred me right over to this sub chaser training center. The government moved in and took over Pier Two. And so we put her in commission and we saw the sea trials. And I went to sea on her and I loved it, except the first convoy we went out on. I have to keep going back because I can't, you know.

That's fine.

We'd pick up merchant ships. The submarines, the U-boats were sinking the ships faster than we could build them. In fact the first convoy we went out on, we had seven ships and six of them **[00:10:00]** got sunk off the coast. And what they did is the Germans would lay off the coast here and see the silhouette of the ship. This is before they darkened out there. In wartime everything was dark. They'd take the silhouette of the ship and they had a perfect target. So we'd pick up a convoy, then we'd take it from Norfolk [Virginia] to Key West [Florida] which really was a long way. So we only had maybe two ships that come and escort this. And we hit a hurricane, just like they had here, off Cape Hatteras. And it was so rough that it actually peeled back the steel deck on that ship. But I was fortunate, I never got seasick, and I enjoyed it. It never really bothered me.

I remember one convoy, we went out and we had, I think, six thirty-six-foot cabin cruisers, like the things they use down on Lake Mead. They had them so that the Germans would think they were escorts. They were, but unarmed and as soon as we got a little more organized, then we took convoys to Europe. And that was a thrill. In fact I have a book in there—if you like, I could look up the title for you—about the PCs. [*The War Offshore, 1942* by Robert H. Freeman and *PC Patrol Craft of World War II: A History of the Ships and Their Crews* by William J. Veigele]

We couldn't make enough water. See, when you took a convoy to Europe, you could only go as fast as the slowest ship, because if you didn't you'd leave this guy as a straggler. And so it took us thirty days to get across. And we were limited to brushing our teeth and washing our hands, unless it rained, and then you went up on deck and you took a shower. In fact I was talking to somebody the other night about this. They had what they called salt water soap. It was a bar of soap, it was brown and about this long [indicating size], and you couldn't make it lather if it had to. We were supposed to use that for scrubbing your clothes. Well, what we ended up doing is you'd take and put a line through your belt loops on your trousers and you'd hang them over the stern and drag them through the water, then dried them out on deck. So by the time you got to Europe, we had athlete's foot, jock itch, fungus. But the evaporators for those small craft were never built to go, convoy that long. They were built to pull into port and fill up your water tanks and stuff like that. But it's no worse than the kids are doing out there in Iraq now.

Must've been tense. Was it tense on those convoys, never knowing when you'd be attacked?

I guess. I don't know. I imagine it was. You slept with one eye opened. You slept with your clothes on. You'd curl into your bunk fully dressed, and as soon as that alarm went off you went up to your gun stations. I guess a lot of it was you always figured the other guy would get hit. I don't know. I don't want to sound dramatic about it but I don't remember what it was like, except for the fact that we did it. It was part of the job. We didn't have Mommy to cry to.

Tell me about when you got torpedoed.

Well, I was on watch. Again, this is in that book in there. It has my name mentioned even. I was on watch and all of a sudden I heard this tremendous explosion and this whole stern disappeared. And the captain come running out of his cabin. This is a small ship, see, it was only 173 foot **[00:15:00]** long. And he said, `Abandon ship!` So what I did is I cut the life rafts loose and went

over the side with everybody else. And she went right down. It took a little over a minute, I guess it was. And was in the water for a while. I don't remember exactly how long. A 110-foot sub chaser came along, then she rolled over and I grabbed what they called the foot rope and I rode her back up, got on her, and they put me ashore in a place called Bizerte over in North Africa. And the interesting side note on that is when I went over the side, I kicked off my shoes because it was hell swimming with the shoes on, and when they put me ashore I didn't have any shoes. And the Army had just taken over that part of North Africa, so some soldier gave me a pair of shoes that he had in his pack.

That's great. Was that '42?

Forty-three. June 4, two days before I was nineteen years old. I was nineteen June 6. Yeah, those were the days, my friend.

So you were stationed in the Atlantic for the most part of World War II, until after V-E Day?

Until after V-E Day. We stayed over until Victory in Europe Day, and as soon as that went, we went right down through the Panama Canal, as I said before, and we island-hopped to places like Bora Bora, you probably never even heard of them, New Guinea, Halmahera, and then we went out to the Philippines for the invasion of Lingayan, and then old Harry [Truman], he saved us a lot of work. He authorized the dropping of the bombs. That put an end to it.

What was the general mood after that? What was your impressions after the atomic bombs were dropped?

Thank God. They deserved it. They're the ones who started it. You know I've retired from the Navy, I've told you.

I'm sorry, say it again.

You know what I retired from the Navy as?

No.

Chief Nuclear Weaponsman. Worked on warheads. That's the way I ended up out at the [Nevada] test site.

Were you involved in the D-Day invasion at all?

No, we were just covering the coast. I wasn't involved in the Normandy landings and that stuff, no. Thank God.

After the surrender of Germany, what was your impression of that?

I thought it was fun. Well, after the war, went ashore in Paris, went ashore in Rome, Piraeus, Athens, Izmir, Turkey. Loaded a statue of David aboard ship and brought him back to the States in 1947. Had an audience with the pope. In fact I got a picture of him in there with me.

You had an audience with the pope?

Yeah.

How did that happen?

Well, when the war ended, I was on the destroyer tender, USS *Grand Canyon* (AD-28), and we were coming back to the States and we had supplies for ships, and what they did is the Navy Department ordered us to unload all of our supplies and give them to the Italian orphanages, which we did. Well, in those days, the war had ended but we weren't finished, and we'd come back to the States for three months, then we'd go back out for six months. And so after we got back to the States, it was our next deployment, we got into Naples, and because of the giving the food to the orphanages, the Italian government asked us if we would like to transport the statue of David back to the States, because they were going to put it on exhibit back **[00:20:00]** in Washington. This is by Michelangelo. And I'll tell you, talk about tight jaws. That thing, there's no price at all to it: `Hey, Brown, load it`. [Laughter] And you know I had transferred David. I

don't know whether you know what the high line procedure is aboard ship, but it's between ships. You transfer people or supplies one ship to the other when they're underway, you know, the boom, the yard and stay, that type of thing. So I had the responsibility of loading David on the ship, but at the same time, because of the fact that we gave the food to the orphanages, they asked if anybody wanted an audience, a private audience. So I wanted to go, and I went up and saw him. And it's a very interesting little side note, when you meet the pope, you kiss the ring, papal ring, and say, `Good morning, Your Holiness`, strictly formal. And I had two hash marks at the time. I was a second class [petty officer], I think I was, the picture's in there. And he said something about my time in the Navy and I said, `Yes, Father.` And the chaplain says to me, `It's His Holiness.` And I says, `He's a priest.`

Well, for an Irish kid that came from Brooklyn, raised Catholic, that must've been an amazing experience.

Oh, yes! I still brag about it.

Not very many people could say they had an audience with the pope.

Not many people have a picture of him. I'll show it to you in a minute.

That's amazing! Which pope was that?

I don't know [Pius XII]. Called him the Skinny Guinea. I don't know. Tell the lady that transcribes this I didn't mean anything.

And then you actually—you were the one in charge of moving the statue of David?

I was responsible for signaling to the boom operator, yeah.

Not many people can say they've done that either.

Well, I like to brag about that there's nothing that I haven't done. In fact I'm doing leather embossing in my spare time now, and I'll show it on the disc if you want to see it, I'm studying Spanish.

Really?

Eighty-one years old. I like to play with the computer. I've done some beautiful leather work that's part of my work.

Those on the wall there?

Yeah, the leather. That's leather. One piece.

It's very nice.

I take and I stretch them—they're all over the house—and stuff it with leather dust. I was taking—brings back a lot of memories. The old man. But I've made bowls. I've made furniture. I've done just about everything a man can do. I've got a picture of me with Harry Reid.

Harry Reid. The senator.

Yes. I got it with the other guy that was before, Senator Richard Bryan. I got a picture of him. So he went on that tour. [For SeniorNet set up by Dixie Frisk and sponsored by the Shepherd Eye Clinic.]

Let me ask you. Describe how you were informed that the atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan. Where were you? Were you with other guys? Did you all hear it together?

I was out in the Pacific, aboard ship. I got the news just like everybody else.

And it came over the loudspeaker?

I guess so. I don't really remember. All I know is they said it's over with and everybody said hurray! Because we figured that there was going to be an awful lot of deaths. You thought about the kamikazes. Those poor—I should say "poor bastards," them bastards, they weren't even

taught to land those planes. Like those Arabs right now, they go up and see how many people they can **[00:25:00]** kill. We got seven of them in one raid. Because they were like flies. They tried to kill as many as possible and if we'd had to send our soldiers in there, see, all this stuff now, they didn't take prisoners. If they did, the prisoners wished they didn't take them. All I remember is everybody was saying what a wonderful guy Harry Truman was because he gave them permission to drop it, because I don't think anybody else would've had the guts, especially after I went into the program and found out what those things are like. You'd better hope that they never have to use them again.

Just that feeling of knowing it's over now, I mean you're four years down the road and it's finally over, that must've been the most exhilarating feeling of your life.

Well, it gave you the incentive to go out and have a beer.

Was there a lot of celebrating?

Oh, yeah. Sure.

Did it really sink in at first that it's over?

I don't know, you're talking sixty years ago. I guess to the professional person it was another part of the job. In fact I come back to the States as soon as it was over with and I was stationed in New York for I guess about a year and a half, and then I went right back to sea again. But after that I met my friend, my wife Peggy, out there in probably about 1950. We got married in '53. But it was just a job. It's like you went to work this morning. The only sad part about it is, you're away most of the time. Didn't spend as much time with the kids as you could've. But you had to make a living. I was very fortunate. I always blame one thing on my—I don't blame it, I use the wrong term, but the reason for what I have right now, I learned how to read. And I try to tell the kids, young people, because it's unfortunate, nowadays they're graduating from school and they

can't even read their own name, and I see that all the time. I work a lot with—well, I don't work, but I see a lot of young people. The nuns made me read.

My mom used to always say, if you can read, you can do anything.

That's right. I don't care what it is like I said, I was instructing in nuclear weapons when I retired from the Navy.

When you retired from the Navy you were an instructor in nuclear weapons in Albuquerque, New Mexico?

I never graduated high school; that's where I kid you. I got a GED [general equivalency diploma].

So what happens after the war? What's next? You re-upped for the Navy, so you're still in the Navy, but what kind of leads you towards the test site and nuclear testing and that kind of stuff?

Well, I stayed in the Navy because I'd already had, I guess '41 through '52, eleven, twelve years in, and so I'd already had a career and you see, I didn't know anything about the outside. All I knew was a kid working and going to the city, and that was my whole existence. So I just stayed till I had twenty-two in, and I took my pension, and the Navy in its magnificent benevolence gave me $230 a month, $10 for each year completed. That was my pension, believe it or not. And when I got out, I didn't know what to do really. I had five children. And I retired in Albuquerque [New **[00:30:00]** Mexico] because that's where I—I was stationed there my last two years as an instructor in assembly, test, and storage procedures for the warheads, nuclear warheads. Before that I was stationed over in Japan with the First Marine Air Wing. In fact I have a daughter that was born in Japan.

And I retired in Albuquerque and I got a job as research technologist, reading samples for Loveless Foundation. I don't know whether you ever heard of them or not. But anyway, I was

working there—I keep using that expression "anyway," don't I? I hope the typist isn't mad at me. I was working there and I got a phone call that asked me if I wanted to go to work at the Nevada Test Site as a radiation monitor. So I said sure, so I took the family—

And this is when you were living in Albuquerque?

Yes.

And this is what?

Sixty-five. Actually we came here in '65. I retired in '62. And come out here and went to work for Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company [REECo]. And we bought a house at the corner of Jones and Fremont Street, before the freeway was there, a tri-level, a Sproul home in those days. Maybe you've heard of them or not. It was $19,000.

And I went to work out there as a radiation monitor in the tunnels. I don't know whether you know what our job was. After they detonated the devices, we were responsible for the surveys, to make sure that the workers were not exposed. So we went in and set up a perimeter and surveyed the area, but in addition we took gas samples. We used a Drager tube. I don't know whether you know what that is or not. Drager—you take an air sample and it's a discolored tube. And we changed film badges. We'd issue anti-contamination clothing. We set up a hotline, I guess is what I'm trying to say. And then when the people come out, you made sure that they were cleaned. And really that was the biggest part of the job, I guess. I don't really know.

You said you were stationed in Japan. Was it late forties?

Fifties.

Fifties? Did you see the effects of the atomic blasts?

No. I had nothing to do with it. No, I was just stationed there.

And had you been to Las Vegas prior to your getting hired by REECo?

Yes, we used to have a Navy base here, called Lake Mead Base. You heard about it?

Yes.

Well, I was one of the people out there, and in fact that's where I got into the program. I come from Albuquerque to Lake Mead Base, and from Lake Mead Base I went aboard the USS *Los Angeles* (CA-135), which is a heavy cruiser, and we were the first ship that deployed with the surface-to-surface nuclear-tipped missile, called the Regulus.

So you got involved with the nuclear program at Lake Mead, is that right?

No, in Albuquerque. I was on a destroyer and I was a first class petty officer and I got a set of orders to the Nuclear Weapons Training Center [NWTC] in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I went, and I couldn't figure why I would go there, because they were all health physics people. And what the Navy did is, I guess, culled through our records and they looked at my GCT [general comprehension test] and ARI [arithmetic] and selected me to go there for training. And so I went there and went to school, and it was tough. The first day in class, the instructor **[00:35:00]** was talking about dynes and ergs. I said, what the hell kind of language is this? "Joules." I don't know what's your background, it's your business, but you know for a kid like me, what the hell? And when it came time, I was the nineteenth chief nuclear weaponsman the Navy ever had. But Peggy will tell you, to study, I wrote all the books out in longhand because I wanted to make chief before I retired, and so I did. And then the Navy changed their rate from nuclear weapons to gunner's mate technician because when we went ashore in Japan, they saw the rating badge with a bomb with electrons in orbit and they spit on us and said atomic. So they changed us to gunner's mate technician. I don't think they even have it anymore. But then again it's forty-some years since I retired.

So did you enjoy the work? Once you kind of got a sense of it, did you enjoy working with nuclear energy?

Yeah.

And then what leads you to Lake Mead?

That was aboard the ship, and they sent me to the Nuclear Weapons Training Center. When I graduated from school there, they sent me to Lake Mead Base.

What'd you do at Lake Mead?

Worked.

For instance? Like, you know, what was some of the stuff you did out there?

I worked.

Do you know there's a B-29 at the bottom of Lake Mead?

Oh, this didn't have anything to do with the lake.

No, I know. I was just—

No, I didn't know that.

It crashed.

They call this Area 51 now, I think.

And so then you start working for the test site in '65.

Sixty-five I went to work for Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company.

So that's not the first time you'd been to the test site, right?

Yes, it was.

Oh, it was?

Yeah.

What was your first initial impression of the test site?

Another job. Finding my way around, I think, was a little bit different because, first of all, traveling from here, it's seventy miles. They give me an office in a forward area—are you familiar with the site at all?

A little bit.

You know where CP [control point] Two is?

I've seen a lot of maps. It doesn't ring a bell right now.

Well, CP Two was where forward ops were. Mercury was where all of the front office people were. And then CP was where the field operations were, like my boss, Cliff Penwell, he's still here in town, he's the superintendent that I reported to him there. And then from CP you were sent out to places like Area 20, Area 9, Area 13, and Sedan Crater.

And so I think the beginning was just a matter of finding your way around. And the trip. We'd leave town probably 4:30, five o'clock, and get home at seven o'clock at night. We rode buses, like Greyhound buses, except you could drive if you wanted to. But well, you left before it was daylight and you got home after it was dark. The biggest thing I did, I guess, during those years, and it was years, was read. I got to the point where I was reading a paperback a day. I was young enough that I didn't sleep all the time like I do now.

So that you would read like a novel like between riding a bus out there and back?

Yeah. And I think it was the last eight years, they started the Radioactive Waste Management Site. You've heard about that out there?

Yes.

Well, I was the supervisor out there when they started that. When I was in the tunnels, they offered me the job as supervisor, so I accepted that, and I had my own crew. And then I went out to Area 5 and was the supervisor out there for the last seven or eight years I was there. As soon

as I was sixty-two, I just told them I wanted to quit, and they wanted to know why. They were satisfied with my work, I guess. I was very fortunate. I never had any problem with producing. People were always satisfied with my leadership, I guess is what you'd call it. In fact my old superintendent still says I was a nice guy.

That's great. We're coming up to the end of the first CD, so I figure we can stop, take a little break, and I want to see the picture of you and the pope.

Oh, OK.

[00:40:53] End Track 3, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 2.

OK, and we're back. So I was just kind of curious to get your impressions when you first moved to Las Vegas. What was that like?

Vegas was a nice place. When we were there in the fifties, there were only 60,000 in the whole valley. We lived at Wherry housing out at Nellis Air Force Base, in base housing, the enlisted quarters. And then when I come back in '65, as I said, we lived near the corner of Jones and Fremont, 108 South Jones. It's commercial now. That was before they put the freeway through. But that was the edge of town. I liked Vegas, because it was small. You could drive all the way to Lake Mead in fifteen minutes. You had no traffic. And people like Sophie Tucker were down on Fremont Street. It wasn't the place it is now. And it was nice. It was friendly. We knew all the people in the neighborhood. I remember one day walking along Fremont Street and John Mowbray says, `Hi, J.J.` That's what they all called me. You know who he was?

No.

He was the chief justice of the Nevada Supreme Court. But it was small. In fact if you look on the wall in my room there, you'll see in 1985 I was the Father of the Year in Clark County. It's

signed by John Mowbray and Joe Botos and those guys. And we used to have a very active Son of Erin group, the Irish group. We used to have Fremont Street on St. Paddy's Day, and Joe Delaney [longtime Las Vegas Sun entertainment columnist], ever hear of him?

It sounds familiar.

Well, he was St. Patrick. He had a beard.

It was an entirely different town. It was a small town. It was a friendly town. It wasn't the type of place that you see now where everybody says they have to own their Audi or their Porsche, or try to impress people, you know, these 1.2 million dollar apartments. I have neighbors across the street; I've been saying hello to them for years but they never say hello to me and I say to hell with them. I don't need them. I got my friends. I got my memories.

Well, when you get here in '65, that's right when Vegas is beginning to kind of—I mean you get Caesars and the Aladdin and the building boom of the mid-to-late sixties.

The Strip was small. Everything was downtown. Like I say, it was right at Fremont Street and Main Street. The Rio was out by itself. In fact I remember we used to brag about how the Rio had the best buffet in town in those days, and then when the town got bigger, the food went downhill like everything else. You didn't have the traffic, which is I guess the main thing. Well, I think everybody up here is trying to outdo themselves. I think 99—this is a personal opinion; I don't know whether I should even be saying this—

Oh, no, it's fine.

I think 99.999 percent of them are living way above their means.

I think you're right. When you first moved here, did you go to the casinos? Did you go see shows? Did you go out to dinner in the casinos or anything like that?

Never gambled. That means I got a nice house. I never seen anybody gamble in my forty-two years here that they got ahead.

Yeah, well, there's a reason why they build these places, right?

That's right. Like I say, I'm not an educated person. I think that's pretty obvious the way I talk. Give me a dollar and I'll give you ninety-nine cents back. Who's going to end up with the **[00:05:00]** dollar? That's the way they built this stuff. No, I don't—I think money is too hard to come by. Don't get me wrong, if I want something I buy it, but it has to be practical. That's just like you were talking about those smokes [cigarettes]. What do you pay, thirty-five cents apiece for them?

No, I haven't figured it out per—

Why don't you sit down sometime and use that fancy machine and figure.

Well, no, I'm sure a lot of your attitudes are shaped by the fact that you came of age during the Depression, where money was really, really hard to come by.

I'm sure it is. In fact still, to this day, we don't spend anything that we don't have. The only bills we owe are for the house, and I owe on my car because I got the money tax-free, interest-free when I bought that Chevy. In 2003 I bought an SUV and it's interest-free. Otherwise I would've paid for that. I owe for the house because at eighty-one years old I'd be stupid to buy a $185,000 house. Let the kids worry about it or let them get the equity out of it. That all goes in the thinking. But as far as—like right now she wants to get French doors put in the family room going out to the patio. We're putting the money aside to get it. And when we get the money, we'll get Home Depot to come in and put it and pay for it. This floor, we wanted to get it put in. It's $2,000. We made sure we had the $2,000 to decide. That's the way we live.

As far as Vegas goes, I am not impressed with Vegas. I've never been to the New York-New York. I saw the dancing waters at the Bellagio just recently because I had a nephew come in from New York and he wanted to see them. I've never been to most hotels; well, I go to the Sun Coast for the buffet because it's around the corner, or the Rampart. But the rest of them? I've never been to them. I don't even know how to get to some of them. I guess people like me.

You're not the one helping this town grow. With the test site and what they were doing, how do you think having a city like Las Vegas be so close, do you think that impacted the test site at all?

I don't think they even thought about it. I went out there to go to work, to earn a living for my kids. What happened with those, if those people come in here and they want to throw their money away, that's their business. I know a few people that are involved in going to casinos but for the most part, no, I don't think the average person does it, to tell you the truth. I think it's the—

Tourists?

The people that can't afford it, for the most part, or the people that have too much money. There's nothing in between, I don't think. I don't know. I don't think about it at all because it doesn't affect me.

Do you think the test site and the people that worked out there impacted Las Vegas? Had an effect on Las Vegas?

I don't think so.

I was talking to Bruce Wilhelm who worked for REECo.

Who?

Bruce Wilhelm.

Oh, yeah. I remember Bruce.

And he was saying how a lot of times on the weekends, a lot of the REECo guys would volunteer their time and put lights up in the parks and they built the Boys' and Girls' Club and stuff like that.

Oh, yeah. Well, that had nothing to do with—I was under the impression you were talking about Las Vegas, the gambling part.

Oh, no, just Las Vegas as a city.

When they first opened the American Legion hall on Legion Drive down there and when they tried to get this Veterans' Museum started, I donated my medals and that stuff, but I got them back. It was a flop. Nobody even cared about it. They did a lot for the town in those days. But by the same token, the town was a different town, too. It wasn't run by the people from out of state. **[00:10:00]** I remember the name Bruce. I forget what he did now. We just lost a couple of guys that worked out there, Mike Joyner [sp] and Herb Doberstein [sp]. Darwin Hoskins [sp], he was a supervisor at RADSAFE [Radiological Safety]. An awful lot of them. Bama [Charles] McKnight, he died of cancer of the thyroid.

I had some surgery on my thyroid but I can't say it was from the test site because they claimed when they ran that survey, the berylliosis and the radiation, that I had no exposures. I don't know whether I do or not. I don't see how you can work twelve years in those tunnels and not be exposed to it, but yeah, I'm fortunate. Right now, all they can find on me is a sinus problem.

Your job out there was to monitor radiation, right?

That's right.

Why don't you maybe take me through like a typical day, a day in the life of a radiation monitor.

Well, you went into CP, got your orders, went out to the station, got dressed like if you were working—well, say you were underground. You had your own boots, you put on your anti-contamination clothing. When I retired from the test site, I have a certificate someplace around here. I don't know whether you wanted pictures of some of this stuff. I didn't know. But I was mine rescue qualified. I guess I was sixty-one or sixty-two and I was still mine rescue qualified, so I couldn't very well put in a claim for disability. I don't know whether you know what that entails.

No, not exactly.

Putting on a self-contained breathing apparatus and going back in and rescuing people in case of a tunnel collapse. That type—it's the same thing as like you see with the firemen doing. Bill Beam was the supervisor for qualifying G members—you're part of a team. It was a pretty exclusive group, and I belonged to that. I didn't get any money for it that I know of, but I don't think it hurt me as far as my position, my job. I don't know what else.

As you were monitoring for radiation, did you ever have any close calls? Was there any—?

Well, when we detected it.

So what would that process be like when you detected it?

Well, you had an instrument. Let's say you were looking for alpha contamination. You use what they call the proportional alpha counter. If you go down to the [Atomic Testing] museum, you can see them. It's got a foil probe on it. Alpha is not a penetrating radiation, so you use the proportional alpha counter to count for alpha emitters. It's very contaminating. If it was beta-gamma, you used the beta-gamma probe and you took your readings and if you approached the limits that they had set, then you withdrew and made sure the people were back. And if there was

any chance of getting the contamination on you, then you sent people to the decontamination station which we had set up in the field to decontaminate.

And I apologize, this is a question based on my ignorance, but how do you know what kind of radiation to look for?

Whatever they tell you, plus the fact you have your different instruments. I mean you don't look for your floppy disc on this computer. I'm not trying to be smart but—

[00:15:00] *No, no, that's—*

And they also—just trying to remember back, I think quite a bit of it depended on the distance from the source. With a beta-gamma instrument, you detected it a pretty good ways because it's very penetrating. In fact that's what they're worried about now with all this crap coming across country through casks and lead shielding and all that. And you get the shielding from the beta-gamma radiation, where a piece of paper will protect you, shield you from the alpha. It depends on the energy. OK, let's put it this way. When you go to the dentist, he checks you with an X ray. It's the same thing, too. It develops on the plate that's on the inside and you can see the impression that shows the density of your tooth. I don't know whether that makes sense or not.

Yeah, it makes sense. So I guess, what do you do before a test? Because I understand that after a test, you'd go in and there'd be a lot of work for you, I'd imagine, but what's your job like in the days, weeks, months preceding a test?

Well, in that particular case, we didn't have that much of a job per se except to set up where we would have our hotline, the preplanning stuff. But we also, part of RADSAFE, we had the electronics set up. They put out instruments in a perimeter around the area so that in case there was any venting, like they had at I think it was Baneberry. When she came out of the ground, they knew about it because of the detection equipment. But most of that was all electronics work.

I didn't get involved in that at all. I have friends of mine that did it, but I didn't. I was strictly a grunt-type.

And so in the events leading up to an event, you would just basically set up your equipment and get ready.

Well, yeah, but you had other jobs to do. I mean that wasn't the only—while they were setting up for the next event, you were taking care of the other—see, there's—

Overlapping.

There's a couple of hundred tests out there. I mean it wasn't just one, like getting ready for the Apollo shot where everybody assigned to NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] sits up looking at one thing. There was paperwork and routine surveys. In fact they still have surveys out there now.

What was the actual test day like, the day of an event, the day of a shot? What was the actual day of an event like?

Well, you withdrew, for one thing. You were out there early in the morning. And you felt the earth move a little bit. You waited for orders to do what you were supposed to do. It wasn't excited. I mean it wasn't like, you know. It was just a job. I don't know how to explain it.

Well, did you know anything about the atmospheric testing when it was going on?

No, I didn't work with any of that.

But I mean did you know it was going on? Did you have any sense of it? No?

No, I think most of that was done out in the atolls.

Bikini and Enewetak.

Enewetak. Eenie-Weenie. I never had anything to do with that at all. Those poor bastards that they exposed out there. That was wrong.

But as far as the containment, when it held it was just the routine surveys and recording the surveys and turning in the reports and let the health physicists actually take and make the **[00:20:00]** determination as to what the health problems were as far as the workers went and how long they'd have to wait to go back in for the key period and stuff like that. But like I say, you can still go right at the lip of Sedan Crater right now there's where you can see they post the readings, the residual contamination.

Did the fact that you were working around and dealing with such dangerous stuff, did that ever have an impact on you?

Not that I know of.

No, but I mean did it ever occur to you at the time, wow, I'm working around—

Not that I know of. There must be something wrong with me. Seriously, I never thought about stuff like that. It was just part of a job.

Were you out there for Baneberry?

Yeah.

What was that like?

Work.

Well, I mean why don't you describe that day to me.

I don't remember exactly what happened except I remember that my boss called me and he says, `We got work for you to do`, something like that. I'm pretty sure of—an awful lot of these things, they meld together. I know one out there was—I'm not sure whether it was Baneberry or what. In fact I forget what date Baneberry was.

I don't know what day it was. I'm not even exactly—remember the year, '70 or '71 or something like that?

Yeah, well, I went out there in ’65 and I didn’t leave there till ’85. But I think, I’m not sure now, this is going to be printed, but I think my boss called me up and says, `Hey, Brown, get out there and take care of that.` And I forget how many people. It was a mob. We had to set up the hotlines. I think I worked out there for, oh, a couple of weeks. I didn’t even bother coming home. See, when I was in supervision, I didn’t get overtime; I got comp time, et cetera. And I remember there was a lot time that, you know, the records. It’s hard to explain this stuff. It really doesn’t make an impression on you when you’re doing it. It’s just like if I ask you what’d you do two weeks ago today.

Yeah, and it was your job. There was, you know—

Well, you know what I mean. I’m not trying to be flip about it.

No, I understand.

Details. But it was just—did what you were told when the time came, and thank God you didn’t get overexposed.

You talked about a couple of people that developed thyroid problems out there. I mean do you want to talk about that at all?

Well, all I can say is I had a boss with thyroid removal. They said that it wasn’t from exposure. Well, the government says that Pat Tillman didn’t get killed by his friends [friendly fire] either. I don’t care if they do put that down. Bama McKnight, he just died of throat cancer. I think Darwin Hoskins died of throat cancer. There wasn’t that many of us. It seems a little bit different that so many people died of throat cancer. But I don’t think the government would tell if it were happening. I really don’t. And that’s the honest opinion.

But I mean I’m getting the impression that you do think that there was a connection.

Yes, definitely. I don't think you could work in that type of atmosphere and not have something happen to some people. Maybe it's because, again this is my opinion, that some people are more susceptible to some things. Like the flu. They say, when you get to be my age you expect to get the flu, where a young person like yourself, they don't. But I think someday **[00:25:00]** somebody should look at how many people died of thyroid problems from the inhalation. I don't want any money from them, but I believe that if it happened to me, it would happen to the guy around the corner.

You've said it several times now that you were doing a job and there wasn't much sense of the bigger picture, but did you have any feelings about the Cold War at the time?

No.

So you weren't very political?

Never have been. We dropped the sonofabitch. I don't care. I get involved in—well, I guess I've learned over the years in the military and that stuff that they're going to do what they want to do anyway. The Cold War, to me, I guess, was just another way of living. You aren't alert a lot. When we went to sea during that Kemoy-Matsu [Chinese islands] deal where they—see the picture of the heavy cruiser? I got one of me with the helicopter alongside of me and alongside an eight-inch turret. That's when we went to sea with the Regulus missile. We were prepared to launch it if they said so. It was just part of the game. If we would've, Kemoy would've been gone. I don't even know what to say except it's like when you're in the service so long, you automatically respond and you don't think about it. It's just like that thing that says, "Brown cut the life raft loose." That was my job.

Because I mean, the work you're doing at the test site, I mean obviously—I was just curious as to whether or not you guys have a sense of the bigger picture, that you're actually doing something—

I don't think so.

No? Do you have any experience with the protesters that used to—do you remember seeing them on the way out there?

Well, you mean when I was working out there, people protesting? No. I never even saw them. I never paid attention to them. I don't think they made any impression on anybody. Just like these people going on now, they're idiots. I don't know. I really don't think—I'm just trying to think. I can't even remember any instances where they were outside the gate or something. And it wouldn't have affected us anyway. We had a job to do. It's just like right now, if I want to go into Wal-Mart, I don't care if those idiots are standing outside saying it's not union. That's their business.

Were you RADSAFE the twenty years you were out there? Did your job change at all? Did it evolve? Did your job change at all or evolve or anything like that?

No. I went out there as a radiation monitor and I ended up as a supervisor in the waste management site, but it was all the same, working for RADSAFE itself.

When you say "the waste site," do you mean Yucca?

Where they bury the low-level waste. Where they've been burying the low-level waste since 1978.

Did safety kind of improve throughout your time there?

I think it's probably just the same. They dig a hole in the ground and put these four-by-eight boxes in there and stack them in there and covered it with dirt. Area 5 has always been a low-

level waste site. And where that waste comes from, I remember it used to come in on trucks **[00:30:00]** and we'd unload it, and that was it. I spend a lot of time wondering what the hell they're talking about, about Yucca Mountain. I think that's reactor waste. I don't know.

So there's a difference between what they put in Area 5 and what they're talking about with Yucca Mountain, is that what you're saying?

One is low-level waste. Yucca Mountain I think is what they're talking about from reactors. I really don't know. I'd be guessing no matter what I said about it.

When did you start working at Area 5?

Someplace around '78.

Was it something you wanted to do or they just offered to you or—?

It was just to take over supervision out there, so I went out and did it. Just like they said load the statue of David.

What ultimately led to you—why did you leave in '85? Did you retire in '85?

Yeah, I retired in 1985. I was still out there in Area 5. I'll tell you why I retired. I got sick and tired of paying the government half my goddamn pay in taxes. That's the reason I retired. They offered me more money. They said, `We'll give you what you want.` I said, `I don't want anymore.` I been working since I was nine years old. And you know I try to keep myself in pretty good shape, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life waiting to die out there. Like I say, I got a wonderful house, got a wonderful lady in there, she likes me a little bit.

Is there any coincidence to the fact that you retired in '85 and you also won Father of the Year in '85?

No. It just so happened. I went out to Area 5 in '78. There was the fact that I turned sixty-two years old, and at that time it was legal to get Social Security and I took it. And I don't regret it

one iota. We've spent a lot of time till just recently on cruises, reunions with shipmates. In fact one of the guys called me the other day. His wife passed away, fifty-eight years, in Florida. He got hit by that hurricane the last year and he's living in some neighbor's garage. But we got billions of dollars to give to China.

What were some of the high points of your experience at the test site?

I don't really know if there's anything except for the fact that I enjoyed the people, that I enjoyed my job, and I think that was the main thing. Ego. I think it goes back to when you were talking about the Depression. I think, and Peggy and I have talked about this, that I felt less then when I was a kid because of the economic situation and stuff like that. And I always felt I had to prove something, and that's why when I went into the Navy I wanted to make chief petty officer. They offered me lieutenant commander one time and I turned it down because I was having so much fun. When I went to work at the test site, I didn't want to end up—I don't look down on people, don't get me wrong, but I wanted to say that I did something with my life. I'm proud of the fact now, like I say, I'm going to be eighty-two in June, and we live pretty good, and I do over a hundred miles a month on a bike, and I don't smoke.

That's impressive. So tell me, you said you enjoyed the work and you enjoyed the people. Why don't you tell me about what the camaraderie was.

[00:35:00] Well, we had good friends. In fact I just went to—one of the fellows I worked with moved back to New Mexico last month. We went over to his house and there was a bunch of the people that we worked with at the test site. There's one fellow, Bill Smith, he sends e-mail to a bunch of the people. He's one of these people that forwards e-mails. I don't know whether you're familiar with that stuff. I don't answer it. I just, you know. I think we had—it wasn't as close as the military, guys you're in combat with, but there was friendship. I ran into a guy the

other day at the BX [Base Exchange] out at Nellis, you know, you shake hands, you get a hug, you talk about old times. I hadn't seen him in years. I don't think it's any different than anybody else really. I don't know anybody in the hotels, but of course I don't gamble either.

Did you socialize, did you hang out together while you were working out there? Would you in your free time on the weekends?

There'd be no time. We had a fourteen-hour day every day, five kids, taking care of the house. When we lived on Jones, my mom was eighty years old and she moved out with me, so I had to build a room on the house. I did all the work myself. We just hung around, I guess. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't an isolationist but it just wasn't a picnic in the park type thing either. Everybody worked, and like you said, Wilhelm and those guys, a lot of guys were socializers but I was never—let's put it this way, my best man at my wedding was a guy I was aboard ship with for four years. You know what I mean? So I didn't go back home to get Joe or Louie. But I've had a good life. What's left of it, I want to enjoy.

It must've been tough on the family to away so much.

Tough on Peggy. It was tough. She's a wonderful lady. She not only took care of the house but she went and worked besides, with the Department of Education.

Is that right? Was it difficult to have a lot of your work be so secretive, that you had to keep what you did a secret, especially when you worked like at Lake Mead Base?

Never thought about it, to tell you the truth. When you walked out, you left it there. You didn't take it home with you. It's like anything else. I'm sure you don't take your work home with you, do you?

Well, yeah, sometimes, but I'm not under direct orders to not take it home.

Yeah. Oh no, it was—when you got your top secret clearance, you just agreed to keep your mouth shut, and that was mainly for the military. The stuff I did at the test site, it was the civilians that were involved, and I wasn't involved in any classified work per se at the test site, like planning the size of the device or date of detonation, stuff like that. I never even had anything to do with that, that I know of, so I never thought about it. I went home and she'd say, `How was it today?` And I'd say, `Shitty.` Like everything else. One of the **[00:40:00]** tough jobs out there that you don't hear much about is on the drill rigs. Like I say, had I known I could've got all these things out to you. I have a picture of us sitting at the drill head where they're drilling back into ground zero after a device, after setup, and you're out there and it's 113 degrees and you got no shade and you're monitoring for radioactive gas that might come out of that hole, because you got to protect those drillers. Underground it wasn't too bad because you had the blowers that were sucking in fresh air, but you get out on the flats, they had big drill rigs, just like they do for oil or anything else, and you just had to be sure that the driller didn't get exposed. I have a picture of myself sitting at the drill head there with one of my monitors. I got another one at a base. Underground they'd set up a little alcove and that's where you'd set up, well, like a rack with—they could take off their anti-contamination clothes and throw them in. Of course they were clean. Very rarely did we ever have any contamination on anybody. But I remember on the flats, the drill rigs, it got pretty hot in the summer, and in the wintertime it got pretty damn cold out on that desert. But it was part of the game.

So what was your favorite part of the job, the actual work? Did you like anything more than—?

Payday. You want me to be honest with you.

Yeah. OK, what was your second favorite part of the job?

I didn't have one. It's all a job. I did what they told me and what I thought was proper, just to protect my people. I guess I did a pretty good job because in twenty-two years I had no complaints.

When Hiroshima and Nagasaki happened, that obviously was the first time you'd heard of atomic weapons, right? When we dropped the atomic bomb on Japan, that was your first experience with every—

Oh, yeah.

I was just wondering, has your perceptions of the atomic bomb changed in the last sixty years? Like what do you think now as opposed to then? Just of atomic weapons and atomic testing and all that.

Well, I don't know. One issue produced Osama bin Laden. I don't know. I know one thing, when I first got involved in this stuff, we were talking about kilotons. When I quit working with them, we were talking about megatons. If we could vaporize a city with a kiloton bomb, imagine what we'd do with megaton. I really don't have many thoughts about it anymore except for the fact that I think that if they start playing that game, I'm glad that I'm not going to be around that much longer anyway. I'm realistic. But if you have any children or grandchildren, if they start playing with those things. Of course first of all I don't know. I hate to speculate. But you can see, if you have an opportunity, and you can do it by putting in for it, go out to see, you want to learn something about this, go out to see Sedan Crater. And that was for peaceful uses.

It was Plowshare, right?

Plowshare. You want to see something big, to see a hole you can't hardly see across that thing. And that's not one of these penetration weapons. But you ought to go see it. I just went back out there a couple of months ago with a friend of mine, to show him around.

What was that like?

[00:45:00] What was it like?

I mean going back. Was that the first time you'd been back in twenty years or so?

Same thing. You know, the signs are in the same places. They have teams out there surveying now. In fact one of the supervisors out there was a kid that went to work for me. He started out there. He was on my crew. Gives the name Big Boss Man on an e-mail. No, I don't have any feelings at all. I'll tell you the truth, I don't think about that stuff. I just stay busy, I guess. I don't know what the hell else to say except for the fact that life is good and I'm going to enjoy what's left of it. Me and my friend in there. I would love to be able to get in the car and drive to San Diego but I hate that goddarn traffic. She can't get across the airport anymore because you know you have one of those electric scooter deals; I have the lift in the car and stuff. But she can't walk very far. She's an old broad.

Well, we've been going for about an hour and a half or so. I was just wondering if you had any kind of last—

Are you satisfied?

I mean unless there's something else you want to tell me about your experiences out there or something you felt like you should've talked about but didn't.

Not that I know of. Like I say, it was a routine job. I think it was a rewarding job. I satisfied my bosses, and that's all work experience has been all my life is to do the best I could. And I'm proud of the fact that I have attained what I have, and I had to do it through my own labor. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I tell young people, you can do it if you want to, and I'm a good example of it. I guess what I'm trying to say is I led a good life and I have no regrets. I've done whatever a man can do. I'm 100 percent disabled, a veteran of World War II,

veteran of Korea War, I don't owe anybody anything, I don't have to prove anything. What the hell more can a man say at my age?

All right. Well, thank you.

That's all right.

[00:48:09] End Track 2, Disc 2.

[End of interview]