

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
KENNETH BROWN  
Submariner, Navy, Cold War

2003

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**Brown, Kenneth A.** (b. 1954?). Oral History Interview, 2003.

Approximate length: 59 minutes

Contact *WVM Research Center* for access to original recording.

**Abstract:**

In this oral history interview, Kenneth Brown, a native of Cherry Point, North Carolina, discusses his service in the US Navy from 1972 to 1994, with the submarine service during the latter Cold War era. Brown and his mother followed his father, a career Marine, to various postings around the country, eventually settling in Grafton, Wisconsin. "Seeing the handwriting on the wall" during the Vietnam War, Brown signed up for military service and availed himself of the advantage of choice, signing up for six years to satisfy a fascination with submarines, "boats." Basic training at Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Illinois was followed by electrician's maintenance school. Brown reflects that, though his goal had been to be an electronics technician in the nuclear propulsion program, testing into an electrician's mate slot proved to his advantage. He was assigned to an "old" cruiser based in Norfolk, Virginia, while awaiting attendance at nuclear power school in Maryland. Brown covers his first submarine tour on the missile-armed USS *James Madison*, home port Charleston, South Carolina. After receiving additional training at Great Lakes, Brown boarded the fast attack sub, USS *Richard B. Russell*, in Connecticut. He was made chief petty officer while subsequently an instructor in the advanced engineering training department in Groton. In September 1983, Brown returned to Charleston and a new missile boat, USS *Daniel Boone*, as head of his division. In May 1985 he was commissioned an ensign. Subsequent postings made Brown a nuclear ship superintendent at Norfolk Naval Shipyard overseeing sub overhauls; and, a lieutenant junior grade, the nuclear repair officer on the submarine tender USS *L.Y. Spear*. In all, Brown participated in eight ballistic missile patrols. He spent two years on an attack sub. He acknowledges the claustrophobia attending submarine life. He highlights the main difference between diesel powered and nuclear submarines; covers the disposal of trash as well as the maintenance schedule on the subs; and states that hiding and hoping were the hallmarks of their eighty days at sea aboard a nuclear sub. Brown speaks of "immensely" enjoying sub life; the crew cohesion, duty shifts and recreation. He reveals how his wife communicated with him while he was undersurface. He imparts a sense of what it was like being on alert status and defines "rigging for ultra quiet." He conveys the tension surrounding the flooding at sea of one of the submarines he was on. Brown is the Ozaukee County Veterans Services Officer.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Brown served in the US Navy for twenty-two and a half years from 1972-1994, much of it aboard submarines, during the era of the Cold War. In all, Brown participated in eight ballistic missile patrols. He spent two years on an attack sub. Basic training at Great

Lakes Naval Training Station in Illinois was followed by electrician's maintenance school. In May 1985 he was commissioned an ensign. He was the Ozaukee, Wisconsin County Veterans Services Officer.

Interviewed by Laurie Arendt, 2003.

Transcribed by Lorelee Brumund, 2013, completed by Alison Hyde, 2014.

Abstract by Jeff Javid, 2016.

### **Interview Transcript:**

- Arendt: This is an interview with Ken Brown who served in the--what's your branch of service?
- Brown: Navy.
- Arendt: And, ah, how long did you serve?
- Brown: Twenty-two and a half years.
- Arendt: When did you go in?
- Brown: February of 1972.
- Arendt: Okay. And you got out in, ninety –
- Brown: Well–
- Arendt: Oh yeah, go—
- Brown: My, my retirement ceremony was in June of '94 but my official retirement date wasn't until October.
- Arendt: Okay.
- Brown: Of '94.
- Arendt: Did you have time built up or, was that how that—or were you still working, you know how you, like, sometimes—
- Brown: I had ah, it's called "basket move" ["basket leave" is a kind of contingency leave taken by officers who are away from their authorized post or station on a weekend or holiday; a request for leave is placed in the commander's in-basket before the officer departs and is destroyed in the event the officer returns before the leave expires] —
- Arendt: Okay.
- Brown: When I had—you get s--because I was at technically an overseas duty station—
- Arendt: Okay.
- Brown: It, it was Hawaii—

Arendt: Okay [laughs].

Brown: I got ah, thirty days house hunting and job hunting—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Plus, I had six, almost sixty days of leave built up that I had saved.

Arendt: All right, good. Ah, the interview is being conducted at his office. Ah, he is the Ozaukee County Veterans' Service Officer. What is the address here?

Brown: [REDACTED]

Arendt: In Port Wash—

Brown: Port Washington.

Arendt: Today is April 18—

Brown: Eighteenth.

Arendt: 2003, ah, and the interviewer is Laurie Arendt, myself, for the Ozaukee Veterans Book Project. So, the first part of the interview is prior to your service. Where, where were you born, where did you grow up, why did you go into the military?

Brown: Now let me see, one of my favorite quotes ah, when I'm asked where I'm from is, "I'm from everywhere and I'm from nowhere."

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, my dad was a career Marine, I was born in Cherry Point, North Carolina.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: At the naval hospital on the Marine Corps Air Station.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: I traipsed around the country obviously, with my dad and my dad retired in 1971.

Arendt: Oh wow! Okay.

Brown: Six months after dad retired, I took the oath of office and then I did not go on active duty for about six months after that.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So—

Arendt: Was it—

Brown: I've lived up and down the east coast, Georgia, Virginia, Rhode Island, did ah, three years in Joliet, Illinois—

Arendt: Oh boy.

Brown: When my dad was working in a Reserve Marine Corps, Reserve Station.

Arendt: Okay. Were you were always stateside? Did you ever go—?

Brown: I did not, when my dad went overseas we stayed stateside.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, he did what's called an "unaccompanied tour", you do thirteen months overseas and he did a tour in Korea, and then two in Okinawa [Japan].

Arendt: All right.

Brown: So, when we bought our house in Grafton [Wisconsin], that was the twenty-ninth time in my life I had moved.

Arendt: Wow!

Brown: Between my dad's twenty years of active duty with the Marine Corps and my twenty-two plus.

Arendt: Wow. Okay. So, why did you decide to go in the Navy, what, you, did you *mind* this type of life or did you not *know* any other life?

Brown: It was more along the lines of-- it was two-fold—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, my parents didn't have money to send me to college. Ah, I had not exactly set any world records in high school with my grades—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And ah, I was nineteen years old, the Vietnam War was in process—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Seeing the handwriting on the wall, I knew that if I waited too long, Uncle Sam was going to tell me what branch of the service I was going to go into.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So rather than wait for him to decide for me where I was going, I opted to make the choice myself.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And then like many a young person I got hornswaggled by the ah, [clears throat, Arendt laughs] recruiter—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, who happened to be a, a ah, first class machinist mate, who had—was in the Navy nuclear power program—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And a submarine. So I said “Gee, I’ve always been kind of fascinated by all this”, matter of fact I did a seventh grade ah, high school science project on nuclear propulsion in submarines.

Arendt: Okay, oh, wow!

Brown: So, seemed like a natural fit, so, like a dummy I signed up for six years and go off and go do that!

Arendt: Ah-huh.

Brown: Figuring if nothing else I would learn a profession that was easily transferable to the outside.

Arendt: Okay. Had you ever been on a submarine?

Brown: Three different ones.

Arendt: Okay, before that?

Brown: Nope.

Arendt: No.

Brown: *Not* in the traditional sense.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: I had toured World War II diesel submarines that were tied up.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Or, or were in museums or whatnot.

Arendt: Ah-huh.

Brown: So, yes I was aware of the close quarters.

Arendt: ‘Cause I’ve been in submarines, on, you know, tours, and I couldn’t, I couldn’t wait to get out of there! [laughs] And, okay—

Brown: My wife used to come visit periodically when we were in port—

Arendt: Ah-huh.

Brown: And she couldn’t take it for more than about forty-five minutes to an hour because she’d get a headache.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: It didn’t have to do with the close quarters, but ah, the ventilation fans were running continuously, the background noise drove her crazy.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: But ah, for those of us who were part of the crew it was just that—

Arendt: You got used to it.

Brown: Background noise.

Arendt: Yeah, okay.

Brown: You got worried when it stopped.



Arendt: So, why didn't you choose the Marines?

Brown: 'Cause I knew better.

Arendt: Okay [laughs].

Brown: Having spent, ah, nineteen years traipsing around with my dad, I was well aware what the Marine Corps was all about.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: A very fine group of individuals, but ah, it does take a different sort of person, I think, to be a Marine.

Arendt: I think they're a little crazy.

Brown: Ah, I don't know if crazy's the right word, I don't know if it's strong enough.

Arendt: [laughs]

Brown: Ah, no, I had no, no intention of being a Marine, for one thing, ah, they certainly didn't offer me anything that I was intrigued with as far as learning a skill that I could use—

Arendt: How does—

Brown: Should I choose, if I had left the service, after my first tour.

Arendt: If, does the Marines work the same way that the Army, Navy and Air Force does, do you get an MOS [list of Military Occupation Specialties] or do they just put you—it's just like all the other branches?

Brown: You have to go through, ah, what's called a "classifier."

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And, ah, you usually do that at, at boot camp, now things have changed over the years. It used to be when you went through a recruiter you could say, "Well, this is what I want, what I think I wanna do." *That* might be subject to change, when you get to boot camp.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: As a matter of fact, when I first, ah, signed up, I wanted to be an electronics technician.

Arendt: Yeah.

Brown: In the nuclear propulsion program. Well, after a series of tests and whatnot, they decided I was better suited to being an electrician's mate.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Which did not make me entirely happy at the beginning.

Arendt: What was the difference?

Brown: Ah, base, just the, the basic training you went through, the electronics technician spent a lot more time, you know, dealing with transistorized circuitry and whatnot.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Whereas the electricians, we spent more of our time um, working with motors and, ah, electrical generators. Um, over time, as it turned out, the electrician's mate was a better fit for me, and it worked to my advantage on more than one occasion.

Arendt: Okay. How so?

Brown: The promotion opportunities within the electrician's mate rating were a lot more open—

Arendt: Good.

Brown: —than they were for the electronics technicians. And I took full advantage of that [laughs].

Arendt: Good, very good. Where—when you enlisted, and I don't really know anything about nuclear propulsion or, but where were our submarines? Were they pretty archaic, were they somewhat advanced, I mean, obviously, they're nowhere near where they are *now*, but what, like what were their capabilities, what—how were they different than their predecessor?

Brown: Well, a nuclear submarine's leaps and bounds above the old diesel boats.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: The old diesel boats, ah, could only stay submerged for about twenty-four to forty-eight hours. The nuclear submarines—

Arendt: They can go forever.

Brown: They can stay submerged for as long as the food holds out.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And when we would go out on deployment, we would pack food into every available storage space and as a matter of fact, we would stack the, um, the cases of can goods on the deck throughout the [inaudible] spaces and throughout some of the passageways.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So, for the first few weeks, to a month, we would actually, literally, be eating our way down to the floor.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Because those—the canned goods that were on the, on deck were the first ones we ate. To get those out of the way.

Arendt: Here's maybe a dumb question, but, you ate a lot of canned goods, correct? Now cans take up a lot of space when they're empty, what happened to the cans? Did you guys crush 'em down?

Brown: We had a trash compactor on board—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And you would take the, the, wet garbage, packed it as trash and they'd go in these aluminum cylinders—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: —that ah, when we brought them on board, they were flat, then we—

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Brown: —put them in a rolling machine—

Arendt: Ah-huh.

Brown: —and they'd roll them into a tube—

Arendt: Oh, cool!

Brown: And then you put the garbage with a couple of lead weights into these aluminum tubes—

Arendt: Ah-huh.

Brown: And ah, you'd put them into what was essentially a vertical torpedo tube, and when you had this unit, it was called the "trash disposal unit," full, when you had multiple cans stacked up waiting to go, then we would do what they called TDU [trash disposal unit] Ops; we dumped the garbage. And—

Arendt: So we have submarine garbage all over the place?

Brown: All over the ocean floor.

Arendt: [laughs] Okay.

Brown: That's what we'd do. We stack it up, close the breach, flood the tube, and open the muzzle and out the cans would drop.

Arendt: Oh my goodness. Oh, Green Peace doesn't know about that do they?

Brown: Aw, yeah they do.

Arendt: [laughs] Okay. Um, tell me a little bit about—did you, how did it work? Did you have deployments, then you had time on land, was that pretty regular or—

Brown: Well, it depended. Ah, two of the submarines I was stationed on were SSBNs [Submarine equipped to launch submarine-launched ballistic missiles; nicknamed "boomers"], the, ah, ballistic missile submarines.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: We had a set schedule, with those.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: That is, only once did we deviate from it. And it was typically you'd be gone for one-hundred and five days, then you'd come home for ninety-five.

Arendt: And during the ninety-five days was there more maintenance stuff that you were doing?

Brown: We, we didn't even have the submarine. We turned it over to the other crew.

Arendt: Oh, really?!

Brown: The ballistic missile submarines had two complete crews, so when we would go over to pick up the submarine, as the crew that was coming on—

Arendt: Uh-huh.

Brown: —have a three or four day period of time where we interfaced with the other crew and find out what was broke, basically.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And then they would leave to go home.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Then we had three to four weeks to fix everything that was broke, reload the ship to get it ready to deploy again, and then we'd deploy. We'd go out; they'd give us a plot in the ocean, basically, to go hide in—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And that was our job for the next eighty days, was to hide in this place in the ocean, and hope nobody ever called and asked us to launch.

Arendt: When you were onboard ship did you know where you were going or was that—did just the commanding officer know where you were?

Brown: There were very few people onboard who actually knew where we were.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And the charts were always covered, so that, ah, our, our navigator and his quartermasters and obviously the CO [Commanding Officer] and the XO [Executive Officer] knew where we were, but that was about it.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And, for the most part, you never found out.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And, it didn't matter because all you cared about was how many more days you had before you had to go back into port, to give it back to the other crew [laughs].

Arendt: Okay, alright. Did you find it difficult to adjust to life onboard a submarine?

Brown: No.

Arendt: No? Okay.

Brown: I enjoyed it immensely because—not the cramped quarters or the lack of *numerous* amenities that you would have elsewhere including the surface fleet, ah, but it was a different, different atmosphere and the crew was very, very close, tightknit. You had to be.

Arendt: Alright.

Brown: There was only about a hundred and thirty to a hundred and fifty of you onboard and each and every person on board had to perform their job right or the entire crew was in trouble.

Arendt: Right. So, onboard, what type of shifts did you work? I mean, did you guys know if it was night or day and did it matter, or—

Brown: It didn't matter.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: But, ah, typically on a deployed submarine what you had was six-hour shifts. Ah, they'd wake you up about thirty minutes before you were due to go on watch, and in that thirty minutes you would get cleaned up, grab a bite to eat, and then get back there and get a turn-over from the guy who was off-going; he'd let you know the status of your equipment and if you were responsible for what else was going on and whatever planned evolutions might be coming up [cough]. Stand watch for six hours [clears throat]. At the end of six hours somebody would come back and take your place and then, ah, you would go and usually grab a bite to eat, and for the most part, there was maintenance that needed to be done. So, then you would spend a portion of the next six hours, doing maintenance. Then you'd get cleaned up, go to bed, catch four and a half or five hours of sleep, and then get up and start it all over again. So we did not operate on a twenty-four hour day, we operated on an eighteen-hour day.

Arendt: Okay. So, if you were aboard for a hundred and eighty days, or eighty days, or whatever it was, what did you do to stay physically active. I mean

did you—p‘cause wouldn’t your muscles kind of atrophy a little bit from—

Brown: Oh, trust me, we had enough work to do.

Arendt: Okay, you had manual labor to—

Brown: Yeah. And, we had some very limited and rudimentary exercise equipment.

Arendt: Okay! [laughs]

Brown: Ah, we used to get a little creative with the things we would do but we had some people that were fitness freaks and would bring some of their own equipment onboard and they would work out constantly. Ah, for the most part, ah, just the normal day-to-day routine would keep you in reasonably good shape.

Arendt: Okay. Did you have free time; did you read, did you—

Brown: I used to, ah, before we would deploy my wife and I would go to the bookstore and I would literally scarf up every book I could find that I was even remotely interested in reading.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, and during an eighty-day patrol, I would read somewhere between ten and fifteen books.

Arendt: Okay [loud microphone noise]. I suppose you would have no, no reason at all to write letters because you had no way of getting them anywhere.

Brown: That’s right.

Arendt: They have email though, don’t they?

Brown: Yes and no.

Arendt: They, they have some—

Brown: What we had, they were called “family grams”.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And when I was, was doing the patrols, ah, my wife got six of these.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And they were six little forms that she had, she had to fill out, and then either mail or drop off at our off-crew office, where the other crew was located.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: They would then screen it, to make sure that there was nothing in there that would be construed as bad news—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Or what-not.

Arendt: Yeah.

Brown: And then it would go on the radio broadcast. And we would pick it up and then our radio room onboard the submarine would print it out and we'd get these little strips of paper about—

Arendt: Like a telegram.

Brown: Two, or two and a half inches high and you know—

Arendt: Uh-huh.

Brown: Eight, eight and a half inches wide 'cause it was printed out on standard paper.

Arendt: Uh-huh.

Brown: And they'd come around and hand you your family gram. You got only six of those in eighty days.

Arendt: Oh! Okay. Was she good about pacing them or—

Brown: Oh yes.

Arendt: Yeah [laughs].

Brown: She, she caught on real quick. And, ah, it's gotten better over the years, ah, I think they can get eight or ten of 'em now and they're limited to like fifty words or something like that.



Arendt: Yeah, I suppose sending you bad news would be pointless 'cause there's nothing you can do anyway.

Brown: That's a fact.

Arendt: You know. Okay.

Brown: Ah, and while the time I was gone—what, what I used to do and what my wife used to do, and a whole lot of us did this, is we would look ahead at whatever holidays or birthdays or whatever were coming up, and we knew we were going to be out of communications, and you'd go out ahead of time, buy the cards and you'd fill them out and then we'd leave an envelope at home, a big manila envelope and have all the cards and everything stacked up in order they would be opened—

Arendt: Oh! Ah, okay.

Brown: And you know you'd also write little letters and what-not, those would be stashed also in the envelope; my wife would do the same thing, she'd send it with me and I had my little package of goodies to remind me of home—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: When I was out there.

Arendt: So, did you have children at this time?

Brown: Ah, our son was born in November of '76.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So, by that time I had already made one, two, I think I made three patrols at that point already.

Arendt: Okay. Were you home for the, the births?

Brown: Just barely.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, my wife had had some, ah, I wouldn't call it complications, but ah, she ah, got pretty depressed towards the end of the pregnancy. Ah, because she was petrified that I wasn't gonna be there.

Arendt: Pregnancy will do that to you—

Brown: And it was our first child, and—

Arendt: [laughs]

Brown: —and she was only twenty-one, you know—

Arendt: Oh, okay. Was she by herself? Or, was she—

Brown: Yeah, we were in Charleston, South Carolina.

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Brown: And her folks are from up here in Two Rivers [Wisconsin].

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Brown: So, ah, she was pretty much solo. She had the other wives of the boat for support. But, ah, what had happened was it was right down to the wire, and my crew had all the party [?] flown over to Scotland to pick up the boat.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: But, ah, they had allowed me to stay behind for two weeks to see if I could be there for the baby to be born, but at the end of that two-week period of time, *I had to go* because it was *the* last flight over there that was gonna get there in time for me to be on onboard the submarine, you see.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: My son was born *very early* on a Monday morning. I'm talking 5:00 a.m.

Arendt: Mm-hm.

Brown: I brought he and his mother home from the hospital on Wednesday afternoon. On Thursday night, my wife took me to the airport to go to Scotland.

Arendt: Wow. Okay.

Brown: But by that time her mother had come down to help out.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: I was there when he was born.

Arendt: Good for you! [laughs]

Brown: —and I—

Arendt: [laughs] You got—

Brown: —break for just a second.

Arendt: Oh sure! You got to eat.

[break in recording, approx. 5 sec.]

[microphone noises]

Arendt: Okay. So, you mentioned that you had to fly to Scotland. Did, was your submarine, like, did it have a base in America and a base in Europe?

Brown: We were home-ported, if you wanna call it that, ah, it was my first submarine in Charleston, South Carolina.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: But, in point-of-fact, in the three, three-and-a-half years I was on board her we were only physically in Charleston with the submarine for about two-and-a-half weeks. The remainder of the time we would fly from Charleston, South Carolina to Prestwick, Scotland then get bused down to a little town called Greenock, then we'd ride these old bike-boats which were basically converted landing craft—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: —across the Firth of Clyde to, ah, where the tender [a type of ship that supplies and supports submarines] was anchored out in the hole [?] of the *loch*.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And the submarine tender was anchored out in the middle of this Scottish *loch* [lake], and submarines would tie up to it and it's where we would do our maintenance.

Arendt: Wow. What was the name of your first submarine? Do you remember that?

Brown: [USS] *James Madison*.

Arendt: And the second one?

Brown: Now, I went from there, ah, second submarine was [USS] *Richard B. Russell* which was a fast attack. The first one was a missile boat. The *Russell* was a fast attack. Then, my third submarine was the [USS] *Daniel Boone* which was another missile boat.

Arendt: Did you—I don't know if you can tell me this—were you ever activated for anything?

Brown: What do you mean by "activated"?

Arendt: Well, I, I, you said that you would go out to a point in the ocean and sit there—

Brown: Mm-hm.

Arendt: Wh—was it a matter of, like, stepping up to another level of being of, like, you know, like our "terror alert"? Did, was it—'cause I know there are some things you can't tell me.

Brown: We had—we had COs [Commanding Officers] with different philosophies.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, the missile boat captains, most of the ones that I served under when I was on the boat—we had a different level, if you want to call it that, once we got to our patrol area we would go to "alert status"—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: —and most of the COs would basically say, "At this point, we're at war and the only thing we're waiting for is the order to launch." And that was the way they ran the submarine.

Arendt: Wow. Was that—stressful? I mean—

Brown: No.

Arendt: It was just their way of doing business?

Brown: That was just the way they conducted business.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: We did things a little differently once we went to alert status. Like, the submarine's biggest advantage is the ability to hide, so any extraneous noise was *more* than just frowned on.

Arendt: Okay. Now, this is a question for me, because, like, I've seen *Das Boot*, [1981 German film], a number of times, which is actually one of my favorite movies, and all the other, you know, pop movies. How, how do they pick up noise? I, I, if you're making noise in your submarine, how does somebody else hear it in a different submarine?

Brown: Noise trans-[coughs]—

Arendt: Through the water?

Brown: —transmits through the water a tremendous distance.

Arendt: Really! Okay.

Brown: And they have sonar just like we have sonar. Ours is just better than theirs.

Arendt: [laughs] Okay. How small of a noise could be picked up? Anything?

Brown: You could drop a wrench, and it could be heard miles away.

Arendt: Really? Okay. I've always wondered that. I, I didn't get that at all. So, when you were—my tape player doesn't stop when I get to halfway.

[break in recording] [[00:29:34.22]

Arendt: When you were on board ship, or, do you call it a ship? What do you call it? The sub?

Brown: We call it “boats.”

Arendt: The boat. I always say it wrong. But, I know it offends you guys—when you're on board the boat, um, what you do is pretty specialized, wasn't it? I mean, did you have any knowledge of what was going on *elsewhere* on the boat?

Brown: You had to know a little bit of everybody else's business.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: It's part of the submarine qualification process. You literally have to learn where every component for every major system is, from the bow to the

stern. And, you have to know; at least be conversant on the topics of what everybody's job is on board.

Arendt: So, did you ever know, I don't know, did anybody ever discover you or did you ever know if there was another sub in the area?

Brown: Oh yeah.

Arendt: You did know that stuff? Okay.

Brown: We would know, 'cause then we'd change our status and we'd do what was called "rigging for ultra quiet". That's where we would turn off every piece of equipment that wasn't absolutely essential to the safe operation of the boat.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And everybody, no matter what you were doing, was sent to bed.

Arendt: Okay. Was it hard to sleep?

Brown: Nah.

Arendt: No?

Brown: 'Cause it usually didn't last too long.

Arendt: Okay. Did you ever have any scary situations or stressful situations? Did you—

Brown: Lots of stressful situations [laughs].

Arendt: Okay. [Laughs]. Um, situations that you didn't think you'd maybe pull out out of, or that were—

Brown: Only one.

Arendt: Can you tell me about it?

Brown: Ah, the ocean got where it didn't belong.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: We had a flooding incident on one of the submarines I was on.

Arendt: Oh wow. Okay.

Brown: It got pretty scary for about ten minutes.

Arendt: I just read an article about the guys on the *Kursk* [a Russian submarine that sank with men aboard in August 2000 in the Barents Sea], I've been kind of like—in *National Geographic*—I've been kinda keeping track of that, and, I—wow [laughs]—I can't fathom that. So when you had your incident, can you explain what happened? I mean was it a—

Brown: It's a little technical. A big ol' valve that was supposed to automatically cycle when it sensed seawater, didn't cycle shut.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So we had this big ol' empty pipe, basically, that was pushing seawater where we had been previously sucking air.

Arendt: Okay. Wow.

Brown: And it doesn't take long.

Arendt: Yeah, I would think so. Okay. Wow. Um. I would assume that part of your training is that you drill for stuff like this, a lot.

Brown: Constantly.

Arendt: Was it, did it seem real when it was actually happening?

Brown: All too real.

Arendt: Really.

Brown: The training's gotten better over the years. The shore trainers; now they have what they call "wet trainers," and they put groups of the crew inside these wet trainers, and they'd pop leaks on 'em.

Arendt: My dad was telling me about that, because he'll take me to Great Lakes once in a while; like he bought me a pea coat for Christmas one year, and he was, like, pointing out stuff and how they do that.

Brown: The training is much more realistic now than it was when I was going through the training cycle.

Arendt: Okay. Good. Um, did you—as you were coming back, did you have to do any preparations, or was it just more your jobs when you got into port?

Brown: I had a t-shirt made up one time as a joke; this was on the attack submarine we were on at the time, and I drew it up with a nuclear power symbol. a lightning bolt, and some other stuff we doing a—we were having a party of sorts underway to celebrate halfway through our deployment. It, it said, "Richard B. Russell Power and Light".

Arendt: [laughs] Okay.

Brown: That was my t-shirt for our halfway night celebration. Ah, because that was, that was my job. We made sure that, ah, the propeller kept turning, that the lights stayed on, and that there was fresh water so that we could drink and eat and take showers.

Arendt: Yeah, did you have normal showers on board, or—

Brown: We had what's a called submarine shower.

Arendt: Okay. Can you explain that to me?

Brown: Ah, you would get into the shower stall, which was smaller than your average phone booth—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: —And you would turn the water on, you would get wet, you would turn the water off—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: —You would soap down, you would turn the water on to rinse off, you would turn the water off and get out.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So that the total time that the water was on was maybe a minute.

Arendt: Okay. How often were you allowed to take a shower?

Brown: As long as we didn't have problems with our water-making capability, we could shower every day.

Arendt: Didn't matter, okay. Did you, on-on board a submarine, did you have any sort of—ceremonies or things that are specific to submariners—like you know how people cross the equator and they have their little ceremonies, did you guys do anything?



Brown: Yep.

Arendt: Okay. Is it PG rated? [laughs].

Brown: Ah, well I'll give you the PG version.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, we went north of the Arctic Circle on one particular occasion. Ah, and we had what's called a "Blue Nose Ceremony."

Arendt: "Blue nose"?

Brown: Yeah, and it's very similar in composition to the, to the Shellback Ceremony that's used for crossing the equator. In that we were, ah, those of us who had not previously, ah, enjoyed this little journey that far north, ah, were subjected to, ah, the same sorts of initiations that the Shellbacks' are. Ours was just more focused around how *cold* you could get.

Arendt: Okay [laughs].

Brown: Let me see, we all got usually painted some version of blue in the process, which took a while to wear off. We all got to sit on blocks of ice until you were assured that your rear-end was, in fact, frostbitten. [Coughs]. You got to pluck, usually a cherry, from the bellybutton of the biggest, fattest slob they could find on board after they had lubed him up with, usually Crisco, or something.

Arendt: [laughs].

Brown: Obviously when you went you couldn't use your hands, you had to pick it out with your teeth and as soon as you got near, the individual would usually ensure that an ample amount of Crisco was transferred from his hairy belly to your face.

Arendt: Sure! [laughs]. Ohhhh! Okay.

Brown: We also had what was called, "Halfway Night", and "Halfway Night" was halfway through the under way portion of the deployment. And, that's a, it's a party. Usually have entertainment. We would—every submarine crew has a group, at least a few guys who play guitar or that sort of thing, and they put on good ol' things, and then there'd be skits, and then we'd have beauty contests.

Arendt: Oh! Okay.

Brown: Some of the guys got a little carried away with the beauty contests. We had one gentleman on one of the submarines I was on who shopped at the thrift stores during the off-crew, so that he would have a new outfit for the next Halfway Night party.

Arendt: O-kay.

Brown: And they would go to great lengths to make themselves appear as feminine as possible. Ah, wigs, makeup, nylons, high heels, dresses.

Arendt: Were you limited as to what you could bring on board? Like, obviously you can't bring a lot on board, but was there a pound—?

Brown: There was no weight limit. It had to fit inside what little space you had in the bunk.

Arendt: Okay, well they chose to bring that.

Brown: Yup.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: I chose to take up my excess space with junk food.

Arendt: Oh, okay! [laughs].

Brown: Beef Jerky, M&Ms, little pudding cups—

Arendt: [laughs]

Brown: I would just load up. See the surface ships, they have a store onboard where you can go and buy a soda or, you know, buy a snack or something. You ain't got that on a submarine. What you bring with you, is what you got.

Arendt: Like camping?

Brown: The recreation committee onboard the boat, and we did have one, would have a locker that was maybe about eighteen inches wide and about, maybe, three feet high and they would usually load it up with candy bars, and then they would sell the candy bars throughout the patrol and then the profits would go, you know, to the recreation fund. But, ah, they didn't have a lot of space, and if there were any candy bars left by Halfway Night it was usually a miracle.

Arendt: Okay. [laughs]. Do you know how many, you call them, "missions"? How many things you went on as a submarine?

Brown: Well, we called 'em "patrols."

Arendt: Oh, patrols, okay.

Brown: On the missile boats, I did eight—ballistic missile patrols. On the attack submarine, we didn't refer to it as that, but of the two years I was on the attack submarine we were in homeport four months. Part of that included a six-month deployment in the Mediterranean.

Arendt: So you didn't spend your whole naval career on submarines, correct?

Brown: No.

Arendt: What happened next?

Brown: Well, it was staggered. When I got out of boot camp I went through electrician's maintenance school down here at Great Lakes. Graduated from there, and they sent me to an oooooold cruiser, USS *Columbus*, and I spent nine [inaudible] months aboard *Columbus* waiting for my class to convene for nuclear power school [?], and it was on board the *Columbus* I learned the brass tacks of being an electrician. She was built in 1946. In 1960, sometime, they came along and, we used to joke, they took a razor blade and they cut off everything above the main deck, and they replaced it with missile systems and took the old heavy guns off. So the power plant that we were dealing with—

Arendt: You were you under power?

Brown: —was still, ah, that was not nuclear power—

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Brown: She was an oil-fired plant—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: —but it was of World War Two vintage, and she was forever breaking. So, I got to learn how to fix stuff like you wouldn't believe.

Arendt: Okay. Good!

Brown: I left the *Columbus*, and I went to the classroom phase first in nuclear power school in Maryland, and that lasted about six-and-a-half months. I

left there, and I went to a land-based training reactor in Connecticut and spend almost seven months up there. Then I left there and went to my first submarine.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: In between the second phase of nuclear power school and my first submarine I got married. [laughs].

Arendt: Did you know your wife before you went in?

Brown: Nope.

Arendt: You met her along the way?

Brown: Yup. I came home—when we were going through nuclear power school, the classroom phase, well even before that when I was on that cruiser—the cruiser was in Norfolk, Virginia—my dad had retired in northern Virginia—one of the guys I had gone through "A" School [technical training, usually after boot camp] with ended up on the same cruiser with me. And Terry and I used to go up to my folks' place on the weekends, frequently, and we done several holidays at my parents place and here we were in Maryland, and it was coming up on Thanksgiving he goes, "Let's do something different. Let's go to my folks' place." So I mean, when you're young and stupid, you know—

Arendt: You pick up and you go—

Brown: You pick up and you go. We drove eighteen hours straight, to get from Maryland up to Two Rivers, Wisconsin. We got in on Thanksgiving morning. *Really* early. It was about nine or ten in the morning, I guess. We immediately collapsed and slept for about five hours, got up, ate Thanksgiving dinner.

Arendt: What a big dinner [?].

Brown: No. No. Then we went out.

Arendt: Well you guys weren't used to—

Brown: —with his friends, and on Friday night we went bar hopping and met up with some of his other high school buddies and what-not. Then on Saturday night, we went to this night club, and he was chit-chatting with some people he knew from the area, and there was a group of three ladies there, and one of 'em—

Arendt: She had the aura around her, and the birds [laughs]—

Brown: Nah, she was just willing to talk to strange sailors, I guess. So, we started talking, then we started writing letters after that. Periodic phone calls. I'd come visit her, or she—then on one occasion when I was at the land-based reactor she came out and stayed with us in our apartment out there. I say "us" because I shared it with two other guys. And, um, one thing led to another. They told us we had to get married. Between postage and telephone bills—

Arendt: It's cheaper! [laughs]

Brown: —we were [inaudible] both broke.

Arendt: Oh, Doug used to call me once a month from Korea.

Brown: Yeah.

Arendt: He'd gamble all his money away over there, so I had to pay for it. Thirty bucks. One phone call.

Brown: Oh yeah. That's about what they cost from Scotland.

Arendt: Eleven minutes. And I would sit there, and he'd give me a call at two in the morning, and I'd put the clock up next to the phone, and I would be half asleep talking to him, and when eleven minutes was up I'd have to hang up because I couldn't afford it.

Brown: Yeah.

Arendt: So, okay. Wow.

Brown: But after the first submarine tour I came back to Great Lakes, and went to school for another nine months. Left there and went to the attack submarine in Connecticut. Roughly two years on there, and I transferred off of the attack submarine, and went to submarine school there in Groton [Connecticut] as an instructor in the advanced engineering training department.

Brown: Yeah.

Arendt: Yeah. He's with the USS *Jimmy Carter*. Okay. How long did you serve an instructor?

Brown: Three years.

Arendt: Did you like teaching?

Brown: Yes, I did. I had a good time. Ah, that was really, ah, really the first time my wife got *really* involved with the wives activities. I made chief petty officer while we were there, and I also applied the first time to get a commission. Didn't make it the first time.

Arendt: It's difficult, right, to rise up from the enlisted ranks?

Brown: It ain't easy. The ratio of people selected is dependent on their needs, and how many people apply, and the program that you're applying to get from commissioned from. So, when we left sub school that was in September of '83. We went back to Charleston, South Carolina. Different boat this time, this was the *Boone* second time. But when I went down there this time, now I was in charge of the division.

Arendt: Oh, wow. Okay.

Brown: And, ah, that was just kind of, ah, if there was a heaven-sent assignment that was it.

Arendt: Really?!

Brown: I checked onboard, and the first person I met was the ship's navigator who had been a junior officer on my first submarine.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Because the submarine community is pretty close knit, and there ain't a heck of a lot of us. So, I knew him right away, and then I bumped into this other guy, and I went, "I know you." And, he and I had gone to nuclear power school together, and he had gotten a commission under a different program.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So, he was now a junior officer onboard the submarine, and he and I had been third-classes together. So, ah, when I applied the second time to the officer's program the CO, who really liked me, stacked the deck on my interview board and he made sure that those two guys were on it. [laughs].

Arendt: Oh! Darn!

Brown: So two of the three officers that were there knew me already. Ah, and the third one, I think the third one was my engineer. When I checked onboard my predecessor had not been doing a bang-up job, and he had a very

disgruntled group of guys working for him, and, ah, the division did not have a good reputation. It took me six months to turn them completely around, and the CO was so happy with me that when I applied for the officer's program the second time, like I said, he stacked the deck in my favor [laughs].

Arendt: Good. Wow. So what happened at that point? Do you have to go for officer's schooling? How does that work?

Brown: Well, yeah. I did not—well at the point—at this point I had picked up my Associate's degree, but I did not have my Bachelor's degree. The Navy does—and the Marine Corps are the only ones that have this program. It's called “Limited Duty Officer” or “Chief Warrant Officer.”

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, do not need a four-year degree. Don't need a two-year degree in order to get selected. Ah, you're selected based solely on merit.

Arendt: Okay. And they still have this?

Brown: Yup. And, ah, I *did* get selected the second time. So, in May of 1985 I got commissioned as an ensign. And, took a pay cut I might add.

Arendt: Really!?

Brown: Yes, 'cause in the interim I had made E8 [An E8, or the eight enlisted rank, is a Senior Chief Petty Officer in the Navy], so I went from an E8 with, ah, twelve, thirteen—thirteen years of service in submarine pay to an ensign or 1E, and they do have a separate pay category for us because of our prior enlisted service.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So, I was making more than your run-of-the-mill ensign, but I wasn't making as much as I was before.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: And for two years, I suffered a pay cut, but when I got commissioned I went to LDO slash CWO [Limited Duty Officer/Chief Warrant Officer] indoctrination school in Pensacola, Florida—

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: —for six weeks. We called it, "knife and fork school"—

Arendt: Ah, okay.

Brown: —because, believe it or not, there was a forty hour course that was included as part of that on etiquette.

Arendt: Really!?

Brown: And I mean right down to what every fork is for, why it's placed where it is on the table, how to eat your soup without slurping; and we actually had a graduation luncheon where we had to prove we had learned all of the requisite skills, so that we would not embarrass ourselves. It was, it was hilarious. Ah, the lady who taught the course, there are two etiquette instructors in the United States Navy, one of them is in Pensacola, Florida because that's where all the aviation cadets go through. The other one's at the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

Arendt: [Laughs].

Brown: Her father's the one who taught when I was in Pensacola, her father was a chief—was a retired Chief Warrant Officer. So, she knew exactly where we were coming from, and most of our instructors were either other LDOs or warrant officers or senior enlisted. One of the things that we had to do that was really amusing was an officer carries a sword, for ceremonial occasions, and we had to learn the—what's called the "Manual of the Sword".

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Because there's certain movements you're supposed to make with it, you know, ways to do it without lopping your ear off. [Coughs] And the guy that was teaching us was a crusty, old Marine drill instructor, and the guy was—he was just a riot. He got up there, on the podium 'cause we were out on a parade—the only place where we could obviously have enough space for thirty people with swords—

Arendt: [Laughs].

Brown: —and not stab each other. He's like, "Uh, excuse me gentlemen," He goes, "I know you're all ex-enlisted so you know what I gotta put up with here, so let's just get through this so we can all go have a beer." [Laughs].

Arendt: [Laughs]. That's good.

Brown: Because his normal job was pushing the aviation cadets through.

Arendt: Ah huh.



Brown: And he rode those kids mercilessly. Then I'd [?] come over, and he'd have to teach us and we were all, you know, we'd all been senior enlisted people.

Arendt: Sure.

Brown: So, he knew exactly where—who we were and what we were capable of, because, ah, he you didn't get selected because you were a dirt bag.

Arendt: Yeah. Okay. Wow. So you were there for—six months?

Brown: Ah, I was there for six weeks.

Arendt: Six weeks.

Brown: Then I went to my first assignment as a young ensign. Young, I use that term loosely.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Ah, and I was at Norfolk Naval Shipyard. Which is actually Portsmouth, Virginia. I was a nuclear ship superintendent, and we did submarine overhauls, and I was—one of the people responsible for making sure the nuclear power plant was prepared.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: Up to standards.

Arendt: Did you like being an officer? I mean, it's a dumb question, but did you miss anything about being enlisted?

Brown: At first I did.

Arendt: Yeah?

Brown: There was, ah, the shipyard I didn't [?]  
—I was at the shipyard for two-and-a-half years, and that wasn't too bad. Ah, but I left the shipyard and basically went up the river a little ways to Norfolk, and I was on the *L. Y. Spear*. And by that time I'd made JG [Junior Grade Lieutenant] and I made lieutenant while I was on the *Spear*. Ah, that was rough. That was probably—probably the worst three-and-a-half years of my entire career on board that ship.

Arendt: Why?

Brown: Because the demands that were placed on me.

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Brown: The workload was *horrendous*; and one of the jobs I had on there it was never-ending. Ah, for a year I was the nuclear repair officer. That was twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

Arendt: Oh.

Brown: I would get phone calls at two o'clock in the morning, more times than my wife could count on.

Arendt: Really?

Brown: And she used to ask me, "Do you remember what you told 'em to do?" I said, "No." She goes, "Then how do you know it's right?" And I says, "'Cause I ain't messed it up yet." Then I'd get in, and I'd find out I had told 'em to do the right thing. Whew. But sometimes I was amazed that I could do that just out of a dead sleep—

Arendt: —it was just subconscious.

Brown: —without knowing what the problem was, I'd tell 'em what to do to fix it.

Arendt: Wow. So—

Brown: But, ah, while I was onboard there, ah, I also qualified as a surface warfare officer and ship driver, so I had that pressure on me, too—to, to get qualified to drive a ship.

Arendt: When you say, "drive a ship", was it like the cap—were you the captain of the ship?

Brown: Captain is an assigned duty.

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Brown: Okay.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: In the head bubble would be in charge [?]

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: All right. Now, I was what they called, the officer of the deck. The captain did not stay up on the bridge all the time and make sure the ship drove.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: The captain had his jobs to do, too.

Arendt: Okay.

Brown: So there were others of us who stood in his place up there on the bridge and made sure the ship stayed pointed in the direction

[End of Tape]