Richard Brennan
Sergeant E-7 SGT 1st Class
Narrator

Michael Russert and Wayne Clark
Oral History Project

Interviewers
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MR: Can you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please?

RB: Richard Francis Brennan—March 16, 1940—Bronx, NY

MR: Did you enlist or where you drafted?

RB: Enlisted.

MR: When did you enlist and what was your time of enlistment?

RB: February 28, 1959 to March 28, 1961. [Note: This date was corrected later in the interview. The actual discharge year was 1962.]

MR: Why did you select the Army?

RB: [Laughs] Because none of the other services would take me. I was 6'4" and weighed 150 pounds—too skinny—they didn't want me.

MR: Where were you inducted—where did you go for your basic training?

RB: I went to Fort Dix, February through April—I don't know—something like that. Then I went to something called AIT—I went to Aberdeen Proving Grounds. My MOS was 422-10—I was a welder-blacksmith. I want to say [this lasted] sixteen weeks. Then, from there I went to Guam—South Pacific. [I was with] the 809th Engineers—combat engineers. I landed in September [1959] and I stayed through until June [1960]. Then we went TDY [temporary duty] to Korea. We put in two missile sites in Korea: one in Yeoju and one in—I want to say Osan, but I'm not absolutely positive.

MR: Could you tell us a little detail of how you put these sites in and what kind of work you did on them?

RB: I was a welder and what we did in Korea was we took the top of a mountain off and put the control tower for the missile site up on top of the mountain. At the base of the mountain was the launch pad—I never did see them actually go in.

MR: Now were these in a silo, or—

RB: I have no idea—no idea—couldn't tell you, really. All we did was prepare the ground for the missiles and then whoever took over after that, I don't know. We left there when it was starting to get cold, so I figure it was somewhere around November we left Korea.

In the interim, the whole battalion was transferred to Okinawa. So, we left Korea and went straight to Okinawa. I stayed there from sometime in November—I think—until the 28th of December when I was shipped home. I had completed my eighteen months, or whatever it is. Oh—and another thing too—on Guam, we took a B17 airstrip and lengthened it to make it big enough for B52s.

WC: Was it one of those metal airstrips or—

RB: No, concrete, and believe it or not, as we were digging up the ground to extend the airfield, we uncovered all kinds of stuff from the Japanese—old air planes and tank parts and ammunition—all kinds of stuff we dug up. While I was there we took two Japanese soldiers out of the jungle. As a matter of fact, at home I have a newspaper clipping my mother had sent me.

MR: So this is in—

RB: 1959—It could have been early '60—you know, in there. It was a long time ago—I just can't pinpoint it—one was a sergeant and one was a private.

MR: Now, did they come to you?

RB: No—we had to go in and get them.

MR: Did they offer any resistance?

RB: [Shrugs] It wouldn't have made any difference if they did. The weapons were so badly rusted that they wouldn't have fired anyway. They were naked and lived in a [breadfood ?] bush. They were caught stealing chickens—that's how they got caught. They weren't about to give up, but—you know the sad part about it—I really felt bad for them. They were so emaciated—they were skinny, you know. And when they got home, the Japanese government—from what I understand—did nothing for them. Terrible really—there's no need for that. Sorry, I skipped it around—

MR and WC: No—that's okay—that's kind of interesting. I think we were just talking about something like that yesterday.

RB: I just got finished reading that book, “Flags of Our Fathers”…

MR: Oh, yes.

RB: …I just got finished reading it and…Suribachi—Mount Suribachi…it was in 1970 something [or] '80 something that the last Japanese soldier came out.

MR and WC: Yes.

MR: So you were discharged when you—

RB: No.

MR: What did you do when you came back to the states?

RB: I came home and I got a thirty-day leave and I was ordered to go to Fort Belvoir, Virginia. My MOS at the time was 442-10 and they decided they were going to have an experimental project and needed every welder they could get their hands on. So I got snatched along with fifty to sixty other guys—or whatever it was—and they sent us back to welding school to learn how to weld pipe—eight and sixteen inch pipe. After we graduated from that, they sent us up to Fishers Island—it's in the Long Island Sound up here [pointing]. What we did was we welded eight miles of sixteen and eight miles of eight inch. It was to see whether or not off shore unloading of fuel could be accomplished by whatever method they were coming up with. So I stayed there—I don't know—it was all through the summer—and the funny part about it is I got married while I was up there.

WC: What kind of welding were you doing? Stick welding?

RB: Yes. In those days the army didn't have heliarc or mig or tig or any of those things—they just had stick and gas, so I was a stick man. Of course we did cutting, brazing and silver soldering and all that stuff. Yes—it was interesting—it was very interesting. Then we left there after the mission was completed.

MR: Was it a successful mission?

RB: I have no idea whether it was or not—I was never let in on that stuff. I was only a spec four [E4]—they're not going to tell me anything. I just did my job and that was the end of it—I didn't care.

I went back to Fort Belvoir a couple of weeks later. I went back on a Sunday night—my bags were all packed for me. They told me to report to Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania—immediately. My friend and I both got orders to go, [so we] drove up to Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania. We pulled in there—well actually, to be honest with you—it was 7:55 in the morning when we pulled in there. It was all trucks lined up and I said, I'm so and so and this guy said, I'm so and so, and I said, yup. “Yea, okay—throw your stuff on the back of that truck and let's get going.”
“Where are we going?”
“France”
“We're going where?”
“France”
“Not me—I'm not going to France. What—are you kidding? No notice—no nothing? You're just telling me I'm going?”
No—that don't work. So I went to the chaplain—myself and the other guy—and we got, ah, I think it was two weeks emergency leave. That was when Kennedy had his Berlin build up—you know, the wall thing—and I wound up over there in Saumur, France from September, October of—has to be '61 to April of '62. Oh, yea—by the way—it's not '61 when I got out—it was '62, now that I'm thinking about it.

WC: Were you in during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

RB: No, no, no—thank you for that—enough is enough. [Shaking head]

MR: Now, what did you do in France? Just a build up, or—

RB: [Nods] Just sat there. But I got lucky—my wife's cousin was a master sergeant who was stationed in Saumur, so everyone lived in tents except me—I lived in a private hut. That's one good thing to come out of it anyway. But we had no work to do—absolutely nothing—total boredom. It was incredible.

MR: Did you get to do any sightseeing?

RB: Oh, yea. You could take off all the time you want just so long as you let them know where you were going. So, I went to Tours—that's the same one [?] came from—and Paris, and Normandy, and little towns—ya know—really nothing exciting. That's just about that—and when I came home we took a train from Saumur to Bremerhaven, Germany, which took about two days from my recollection. We got on the troop transport and came home and I was discharged right on the dock. My father was dying in the hospital so they took me out and had all the papers lined up on the dock—I signed my life away. That's just about it—for active, anyway.

MR: Now, when did you go into the reserves?

RB: Eighteen years later.

MR: So there was an eighteen-year gap?

RB: Yes—1980 I went into the reserves. My friend was the first sergeant—kept breaking my horns, "Come on, come on—we'll have a ball—we'll have a great time."

MR: So it was because of his influence—

RB: Well, ya know, the funny part about it is, I went into the Navy. My son says to me, "I want to join the Navy. Do you want to come down to the recruiter with

me?" I said, "Yeah—sure—let's go." So I go down to the recruiter with him and he's filling out his papers and he says to me, "I'll do four years of active if you do four years of reserves." I said, "You got it."

MR: Now, how old were you at this time in—

WC: You must have been about forty or so?

MR: So it was 1980—you must have been about forty years old.

RB: Yes—and I was put up here in Huntington—they had a naval reserve station up there. I was hooked into LST—Harlan County was the name of the LST—and I was a hull tech—that's welding and, ya know, that kind of thing.
I kept taking promotional exams and they wouldn't promote me. I kept getting what they call "PNA" which is Passed-Not Advanced. I kept getting PNA, PNA, PNA and I said, "Listen—this is not going anywhere."

WC: Now you went in as an E-4?

RB: [Nods] I went in as an E-4 'cause I got lucky—they didn't take any of my rank away from me. Usually they drop you one [when enlisting in a different branch] and I didn't get dropped. I said, "Listen—you guys keep playing around—I'm not in here for…I'd like a little rank, ya know." I had the impression I was too old. I was the oldest one in the bunch—I was older than the commander. I said, "I'm getting out of here." So I went to my friend that was the first sergeant—of course, he was annoyed at me for even going into the navy in the first place—but we finagled it and we got it. I went to 623rd Transportation Company, which was tractor-trailer 5,000 gallon fuel tankers, and I learned how to drive them. Six months later I made E-5, and progression—[with] time and grade and whatever—I made E-6. Then I went to the Persian Gulf and I was there from November through April. I was on the initial invasion into Iraq with the 24th Infantry Division.

MR: Okay. Could you tell us about that?

RB: Yes. We lived 450 miles out in the desert in a base camp—tents, ya know—the usual stuff. We ran missions from there. There was a National Guard outfit up above us—oh, I'd say about two-miles above us—they were quartermaster. They had bladders—fuel bladders—and it was our job to keep them full. From what I understand, they had a million-gallon capacity—and we filled them. From time to time we had to draw from them to bring to someplace else. In the meantime, we were drawing it and another platoon in our company was refilling them. When we didn't have fuel to move, we moved anything from picnic tables to ten-million-dollar operating rooms—I pulled that one. Sixty-foot box trailer—a complete operating room—everything in there—CT Scans—everything—it was amazing. I really got a lot of enjoyment out of that.

WC: You must have been about fifty years old at that time.

RB: Fifty-one. I was grandpa. I was sergeant of the guard one night down in an area just outside of Dehloran [?] and I had roving patrol that night in the hummer. We come around the back end of the perimeter—first sergeant's standing out in the middle of the street in his underwear doing this [waving arms in the air]. I said to my driver, "Look at this knucklehead, will ya." [Laughs] Then he hands me a piece of paper—I still have it at home: "BOY—9lbs, something ounces—length, such and such—good health." That's all that was on it. That was my grandson—and that was Thanksgiving night. Yea—fifty-one. But I wasn't the oldest.

WC: No?

RB: No—guys a lot older than me—we had one guy over sixty. But, you know, in our particular position, we weren't required to run from foxhole to foxhole and carry all kinds of weight—we drove trucks. Of course—if push comes to shove—

we're all Eleven Bravo—we're all [shrugs]. But—thank God—it never came to that.

WC: How long were you over there for?

RB: Well, November to April—what's that? November, December, January, February, March, April—six months—maybe closer to seven—I'm not quite sure of the date we got over there. I know one thing—it was hot as hell.

WC: Have you had any problems since then with illnesses like you hear about affecting Gulf War vets?

RB: No. I went for this [pointing at head] for a while cause you see things that you don't normally see—it sort of bothers you. I was up on Highway Eight and, you know, it wasn't very pretty. It's not something that a man of my age…we've just about finished with our life—these young kids can deal with that stuff a lot better, I think. Maybe I'm wrong—I don't know. I think I did alright. I didn't come home a raving lunatic, but, you know, I had issues. We took care of them thanks to the vet's center down on Montauk Highway. They have a thing over there—it's run by the Veteran's Administration—and you go in and they talk to you and they analyze what your situation is. I was there for five years going once a week—very nice people—very warm people. It worked, thank God.

MR: Now, your son you went in with went active. Did he—

RB: Aircraft carrier—he was an electrician on an aircraft carrier. He was in Beirut when they blew up the barracks there [1983] and killed all those guys. Yea—he was there then. He was on the Nassau—it's a LHA helicopter carrier—and he had, of course, helicopters and harrier jets—the vertical take off jets—and there was a full compliment of marines inside. It's an amazing ship—absolutely amazing. They've got a full—I don't know how the marines work it—a full

battalion? Two thousand men? I don't know what that encompasses—whether it's a regiment or battalion or whatever. The whole back of that ship opens up and they've got landing craft lined up on hooks, or whatever it is, and they just fill the water in and float the hooks and the marines get into it. It's an amazing ship—absolutely amazing.

WC: Now did your son make a career of it?

RB: No.

WC: Did he go into the reserves?

RB: No.

WC: Just did four years and got out?

RB: Yes. He had enough. Now he's an electrician for the Long Island railroad. He does very well.

WC: Well, that's a good job.

RB: Well, you see, the electrical system on a carrier is the same as it is on a railroad—it's all DC. They grabbed him immediately, and I thank God for that.

MR: So do you have any regrets about going in the reserves at all?

RB: Not that much.

WC: What rank were you when you retired?

RB: E-7—I was up for E-8, but I had a heart attack and they wouldn't let me.

MR: Now, when did you retire out of the reserves?

RB: 2000—yea, 2000. Twenty-three years in [?] was the total of the active and the reserve.

MR: How do you think your time in the service affected your life?

RB: Well, it didn't do much for my social life, that's for sure [smiling]. It seems as though every time we had a party scheduled, or a barbecue, or what-have-you, it was always that weekend when you had to be away. So she's kind of happy about that—now that it's all over.

As a matter of fact—this museum that I'm starting—you guys have helped me out tremendously—tremendously. We just bought our building—and it's a tremendous big building and the basement is vacant—there's nothing there—so we're fixing up the basement. It's a huge, huge basement and we're fixing it all up and put lighting in there. I'm going to get mannequins for the uniforms and everything and set them all up. It's going to take a while 'cause we can't touch the building too much 'cause it's under historical…whatever…so we can't do too much. So what we can do—we're doing.

MR: Are you active in veteran organizations?

RB: Not really—just the American Legion and VFW. I don't do too much with the VFW.

MR: Do you ever stay in contact with anyone that you were in the service with?

RB: Yes. As a matter of fact, my old company commander...I had a key to his house over here—they moved him down to Virginia and I'm keeping an eye on his house for him.

WC: Was that from active duty or—

RB: No—the reserves. That reserve thing…that Gulf thing was quite an experience…I mean, eleven o'clock at night…I have a little story for you. Do you have time for it?

MR and WC: Sure.

RB: At eleven o'clock at night they called us into the orderly room and they said, “Alright.” We'd been there for months, but now they said, "We're going tonight." Oh, really! Okay. "Get your people together, make sure your equipment is good…" Blah, blah, blah—you know how it works. We got all set up—now we were involved in a 600-truck convoy. We were direct combat support for the 24th Infantry Division—plus the French and the British. We got called out at about two o'clock in the morning on the radio in the truck, “GO, GO, GO.” We started to go—we started heading out.

Now—prior to going over there—I had made up a lot of tapes—little music tapes—and I had a machine gun cartridge box. I kept my tapes in there, my batteries, and the usual stuff…little Walkman, you know. I've got the radio on [points to ears] and we're tooling along getting ready to go [mimics steering] and somewhere in the interim of all this activity the military radio says, "We're there." That was my commander at the time, and when he said that I'm listening to—on my radio—“You'll Never Walk Alone.” It's a guy by the name of Johnny Maestro singing, and the song that he's singing is “You'll Never Walk Alone.” Well, the hackles went right up on the back of my neck cause it was...I don't know what it was, but I like to believe that I'm being told that everything's gonna be okay. And we went in and it was rough for a while—we ran through a minefield one night [and] one of the trucks got blown up. Ah, it’s funny. [Meaning the following story is coincidental as relating to the song “You’ll Never Walk Alone”]. I had MLRSs on the back of a flatbed—the multi launch rocket systems—you know—

missiles. So, they stopped us all…when the truck blew up, they stopped us all. "Don't anybody move." It was nighttime and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face and they said, "Alright—we're going to stay here until the sun comes up—until we see where we are." Okay. So my partner and I, we just went to sleep. [Clasp hands behind head and leans back to mimic sleeping while sitting up.] In the morning we get up and a guy knocks on the door—[he was] my platoon sergeant at the time I was a squad leader—he knocks on the door and says, "Come here, I want to show you something." So I get out of the truck and I look down, and I step down and walk back, and in between the rear duals on the trailer is a pin sticking out of the ground and he says, "You see that?" And I just got…oh, man…and I says, "What happened?" … “Obviously nothing. If it was active or if it was a good one, it would have...you wouldn't be standing here right now.” It was a dud. The pin was right between...these trailers had six [tires] on one side and six on the other—it was the big long trailer and there's this pin. They didn't have any forklifts big enough to pick up the back end of the trailer so I said, “What am I going to do? I can't sit here.” And they didn't have anyone to dig it out of there because there was no room to dig it out in the first place. So I went back into the truck and I told my assistant, "Get out of the truck and go way over there someplace."

What am I gonna do? [Shrugs] I drove over it.

I figured, the other wheels didn't bother it—why is the last two gonna bother it? And it didn't—thank God. Half the countryside would have went with all those missiles [on board].

We got up onto Highway Eight and I've never seen carnage like that in my life—I mean there were bodies all over the place. And then when we got the word we got to move—

MR: Were there American also or—

RB: No—they were all Iraqi. And they told us we've got to move because the 24th [Infantry Division] is pushing and we've got to keep up with them. So we got off on the highway and started running down the highway and we had to drive this way [making zigzag motions] to keep from running over the bodies—and half the time you missed. And then we got parked—they staged us—and we started unloading. Then we got mortared one night—Iraqis started laying mortars in—I don't know where the hell they were coming from. Then Apaches went over and they took care of them. Then there was some T55s and 72s and the Warthogs took care of them, so it was pretty much more one sided.

I did find two Iraqis—three Iraqi soldiers, actually. They were wounded—very seriously wounded—and I called MedEvac and they came down and got them. We ran out of food and water because we were supplying the Iraqi soldiers with food and water. They were dying—these people—they were starving. No water—no nothing. I went in with four cases of water and four cases of MREs on the back of the truck and within a couple of hours it was all gone. We kept handing it out to them and they kept going [points repeatedly to mouth to communicate a request for more food]. I mean they're human beings—come on, ya know. I mean, as much as you think you hate them—you really don't. [Shrugs] Half of them didn't even have uniforms—[only] sneakers and odd pants and an odd shirt. I mean—terrible. Nothing to be afraid of, really. And they'd come up to you like this [puts his arms up] with their hands in the air. How are you going to...you can't shoot anyone like that—it's just not right.

After we got the cease-fire, we had to start bringing back out everything we brought in. So we brought ammunition back to a place called KKMC which is King Khalid Military City—it's a Saudi air base—and drop off the ammunition there and then run over to the fuel dump and hook into your fuel tanker and bring it out into the desert and hook into these huge pipe lines—hoses, actually. And Chinooks would come down—five, six at a time—and we'd fuel them hot—the engines running. And then a couple of Cobras would come in and we'd fuel

them—and they had to be re-armed because they were pulling security. And we just kept back and forth, back and forth. I went in and out of Iraq eleven times and finally they just said, "Okay—everything's in. We've got to start breaking down camp."

Would you believe we had plywood floorboards in the tents and we had to put armed guards on the plywood floorboards? The Saudi people…they never saw plywood before, I guess. They wanted that wood in the worst way—and they were going to take it. They were all starting to crowd around the base camp, you know, so we had to go out there with loaded weapons. I told them, "Listen—you want the wood? Wait until we leave, then you can have it." We weren't about to get into a situation with these people, but it all worked out in the end. They waited until we left and then they went in and they took everything—they cleaned the place out—there was nothing left.

Then we went down to Khobar and we were in Khobar Towers for, I don't know, two weeks—two and a half weeks. It was the very building that the air force guys got killed in when they blew up the buildings.

MR: Oh, yea.

RB: We were in those buildings. Then we got on a Pan Am flight and came home. That's just about it.

MR and WC: Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

RB: You're welcome.