

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

Robert Broene

An interview conducted on

June 8, 2022

Interviewer: Dr. Bruce Hunt, Dr. Allison Huntley, Daisy Herr

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“William and Don Griffis Vietnam War Oral History Archive”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Robert Broene are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 8, 2022.

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HUNT: Ok, so this is Dr. Bruce Hunt here with Dr. Allison Huntley, uh, interviewing Mr. Robert Broene for the, uh, William and Don Griffis Vietnam War Oral History Archive. The date is January- uh, June 8th, 2022 it's about 1:11pm, and we will get right to it with our first question: What is your name sir?

BROENE: Robert Lee Broene.

HUNT: And where and when were you born?

BROENE: I was born uh, September 29th, 1945 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Grew up in Michigan, ran away to sea as soon as I could.

[Laughter]

HUNT: Uh, grew up in Michigan. When'd you make it to Texas?

BROENE: When I was in the Navy I got stationed at Goodfellow back in- well the first time was as a student in 70, and then as an instructor 'bout 74-77.

HUNT: Ok [breathes] but you grew up in Michigan...

BROENE: Yeah.

HUNT: Ok, and is that where you entered the armed forces?

BROENE: Yes.

HUNT: Ok, where specifically and which branch did you?

BROENE: Navy, I always wanted to be a sailor, never wanted to do anything else.

HUNT: And what y-year was that?

BROENE: Uh, June '66, 1966.

HUNT: Uh, and uh, when did you leave the service?

BROENE: Uh, end of June 1987.

HUNT: Ok. [pause] And which military conflicts did you serve during?

BROENE: Basically the Cold War, Vietnam was going on but I wasn't really in country. So we were playing with the Soviet Navy so it was more the Cold War.

HUNT: And which units did you serve in?

BROENE: Well I served in the Naval- the Nationa- I'll get it. Naval Security Group uh and I was first a Chinese linguist and then a Russian linguist, and uh, so my- no ship required me full time so I went TAD, which stands for Temporary Additional Duties, and I'd go to sea while the ship was doing special operations and then come back home and then go out on a different ship and do it again. [pause] That was great because I got to ride a variety of ships, if it was a good ship you had a good time, if it was a bad ship you weren't on it that long.

[Laughter]

BROENE: And I had both.

[Laughter]

HUNT: And does that pretty much capture the time from '66 to '87?

BROENE: Pretty much some of it was shore duty, but uh, I served [breathes] two tours as an instructor at Goodfellow. And uh, I um, a tour in Scotland I didn't get much sea duty, but in the Western Pacific, stationed out of Japan I saw a fair amount.

HUNT: Ok. So that's the basic questions, not to...

BROENE: Get the background.

HUNT: ...get too painful, uhm, and a little bit more digging down into your experience, why did you enlist and what was your training like?

BROENE: I always wanted to be a sailor. Uh, unlike most kids I didnt wanna be a policeman or a fireman or a cowboy I wanted to be a sailor. It's all I ever wanted. So, I really wanted to go in right outta highschool but my parents talked me into goin' to college so I went two years of college and then said "Pshh, this is doin' me no good at all. I'm sorry they're not teaching any courses in celestial navigation or seamanship."

[Laughter]

DAISY: So-

BROENE: I dropped outta college, went into the Navy, went to basic training at Great Lakes and then uh, there they- they test you and um, figure out what you can do, what you like to do, and what the Navy needs and if they line up. Y'know if the plans line up it's good uh, I found out about the linguist program and said "That sounds cool," and so I put in for that and they said "What languages?" and I don't know.

[Laughter]

BROENE: So they gave me Chinese Mandarin and I did that and so then I went to language school in Monterey for a year and then came here for about three months- four months, and then went to Okinawa where I learned the Chinese didn't have a Navy.

[Laughter]

BROENE: And I said "Great! The only duty stations are gonna be Okinawa to Philippines or Taiwan. That's the only places they'll send me, and there's no Navy." So I said uh, I had about three years in and I said, "See if they'll re-enlist me for Russian. I'll re-enlist if you give me Russian." 'Cause in the late 60s - 70s the Russian Navy was flourishing under, um, Gorshkov, yeah Gorshkov. And, they said the career counselor said "They won't do it, I just had two guys ask for that from your class and they said, 'No they won't give you two major languages.'" I said, "Ask! The worst thing they can do is say no." They asked and they said yes. So I spent the next 17 years as a Russian linguist. That was a good move, that was fun.

DAISY: Do you um- out of curiosity do you still speak the language fluently? Or-

BROENE: No.

DAISY: No.

BROENE: No, I got some uh, I can people say something in Chinese and I got a few things to say that sound really impressive but- but I can't ya know like I uh, ran into an exchange student here at Angelo State University a while back from China and I said "有以前我会了说中国话 (*you yiqian wo huile shuo zhongguo hua*)."

"Once upon a time I spoke Chinese."

[Laughter]

BROENE: And she goes "Really? Say something else."

[Laughter]

BROENE: And I said, “Well this is gonna date me, how old I am: “我们伟大的领袖毛主席教导我们说... (*women weida de lingxiu mao zhuxi jiaodao women shuo...*).” “Our greatest leader, Chairman Mao teaches us.”

[Laughter]

BROENE: “Oh.”

[Laughter]

BROENE: So I-I-I know enough to get in trouble, but uh, not fluent by any matter of means.

HUNT: Our interview transcribers will have a lot of fun.

[Laughter]

DAISY: Yes. Yes they will.

BROENE: Just put: propaganda.

[Laughter]

HUNT: So your enlisting in '66, what are you thinking about Vietnam as your-

BROENE: Uh well, I wasn't thinking about it specifically in a way- uh, I wanted to be a sailor and depending on what job I got in the Navy would depend on whether or not I went to Vietnam. Now there may be a change there, the thing you have to understand is that. [pause] This line of work requires uh, more than a top secret clearance. We-we-we-we got very highly classified stuff and so while I was over in Okinawa they s- they put out the word they needed volunteers for riverboats in Vietnam and I went “Yea!” and they went “No.”

[Laughter]

BROENE: I tried twice and after the second time- second time I tried they went “No. Don't ask again.”

[Laughter]

BROENE: We're not gonna let somebody with what's in your mind go somewhere where you can get captured.

HUNTLEY: Oh. Right.

HUNT: Oh ok, I was thinking more it was because of the short supply of people with your training.

BROENE: No it's what I knew.

BROENE: Ah, I see.

DAISY: That makes sense.

BROENE: Pardon?

DAISY: I said that makes sense.

BROENE: Yeah.

HUNT: Uh, What conception did you have of the United States when you enlisted? What did America symbolize to you? What do you think it stood for?

BROENE: I mean it's just what I -I- I grew up in the '50's so you know? Everybody thought the United States was the greatest country on Earth. I did too. But I didn't- I can't really say I enlisted for patriotic reasons, I enlisted cause I wanted to be a sailor. And ya know I coulda' applied for Merchant Marine or somethin' but didn't really know how to go about it. I knew how to go to a Navy recruiter. It was easy.

HUNT: Do you have any ideas about where that uh, desire to become a sailor came from?

BROENE: No, No I-I thought about that and I think you're just born with it. Cause nobody else in my family had it.

[Laughter]

BROENE: I mean nobody had anything like it and uh, it just-but I just never wanted anything else. And I would- oh couple things that influenced me was watching movies you'd see the ships the war ships puttin' - pulling into harbor and the misty morning and just go "Oh I wanna do that." And I really wanted to be an aviator, but by fifth grade I found out with my eyes that was

not gonna happen. And then they had a program called *Silent Service* on TV in the 50s and you can find it on Youtube and I strongly recommend it cause it was filmed on real World War Two submarines and its real stories, and I just went “Wow, I can do that.”

[Laughter]

BROENE: So from then on that's what I wanted.

HUNT: Um. Since um, your enlistment and even after your retirement in the military has your conception of the United States changed at all?

BROENE: Uh [laughs] Not really, I mean it's got its flaws but I still think it's the best place to be. No place I'd rather be.

HUNT: Ok, uh, so far as your um, time overseas while you were- you had a long career you learned a lot of uh sub-submarines mostly? Was it mostly submarines?

BROENE: Mostly submarines yeah. These were the submarines and those were the surface ships.

HUNT: Ah, Ok

BROENE: So about two to one.

DAISY: Do you mind if I see?

BROENE: No, go ahead.

HUNT: I see about six surface ships and maybe double that.

BROENE: Those are the kinds of submarines.

HUNT: Ok.

BROENE: All the submarines were attack submarines, no Boomers. You know the difference? You know what I'm talkin' about?

HUNT: No.

BROENE: Ok the Boomers are like the *Ohio*-class, the ballistic missile submarines and their motto is: "We hide with pride." And they go out an' just their main goal, their only goal in life is to remain undetected and if a nuclear war should occur...

HUNT: Ah.

HUNTLEY: So its- that's what that...

BROENE: They finish things off. But the attack boats, [laughs] they're called fast attacks because they embody John Paul Jones' motto "I will sail on no ship that is not fast, for I intend to go in harm's way."

[Laughter]

BROENE: And that's what they - they- they would- we would do some cool things.

HUNTLEY: But the one that you were in in that one that was the Boomer?

BROENE: That was what?

HUNTLEY: This- the one in the United States that would be a Boomer?

BROENE: No.

HUNTLEY: Ok, that was an attack ship too?

BROENE: No I never rode boomers.

HUNTLEY: Oh I see.

BROENE: All fast attacks.

HUNTLEY: Ok.

BROENE: Boomers stay way out by themselves, hopefully they never see or hear anybody. We went lookin' for people.

HUNT: So when you - when you were deployed did you ever reflect uh, about your unit's mission and how you fit into that or how you felt about it?

BROENE: Oh yea, all the time- all the time. That was my- my primary mission was called direct support. And my job was to tell the submarine if we were in danger. As-as-as an E-6, I was an E-6 at the time and if I called. I-I could call control and go control and go "Control take an E. Get the hell outta here!" and they'd do it. On my word and then they'd come and ask why.

[Laughter]

BROENE: They'd do it first.

HUNT: So you were very much involved in support, security, survival.

BROENE: Yep, planning uh, you know w- uh one of my problems was Captain came and asked me if I was busy it was on the midwatch thing, it was slow and I said "No, sir" and he said "Come with me" and we went into the wardroom and they had a big chart laid out and he says "Ok we got these things that potentially happening tomorrow. Where do you think we should be?" And I said "uh I put t- I think right here cause if they do this we're good for there and if they do this we're good for there." And he goes "Ok. Navigator, 0-500, make it so."

HUNT: Wow.

BROENE: Woah!

DAISY: That's uh, that's a lot of power.

BROENE: Yeah! Whole submarine goin' where I tell it to. That's pretty cool!

HUNT: Wow. Uh.

HUNTLEY: And how old were you with this much power?

[Laughter]

BROENE: At that time, I was probably about thirty.

HUNTLEY: Ah ok, that's still a lot.

HUNT: And this was generally part of the Cold War?

BROENE: Yeah.

HUNT: And you were fully on board with the US?

BROENE: Yeah we were monitoring the Soviet fleet to see how they operated, if they made changes to their operations, and what kinda new equipment they got. That's mainly what we were doin'.

HUNT: Uh, we have a couple questions here that I wanna adapt a little bit. Generally they ask about local inhabitants, but I guess you were mostly with other service members.

BROENE: Well I mean we were uh, in Japan we lived off base and in Scotland we lived on base but we still interacted a lot with the local people.

HUNT: Ok. A- and so what did you think of them? Did you get uh, any sense of their American sentiments?

BROENE: Oh yeah well, when we- especially when we lived off base. Ok- the Japanese are very interesting people. Um, and- and anonymous situation, like riding in a train or driving on a highway or buying something at a store, where they don't know you, they can be, to us, incredibly rude and because they're so proud of their concept of personal space.

[Laughter]

BROENE: It's very different from ours. But if they know you, they are just the nicest people in the world. They -they're- we had some really good Japanese friends. [pause] It was really great. And the Scots are- are a warm people too. You know you don't think of them so much but they're- you think of Scot as kinda dull, or ya' know but they're really- you get to know people, they're nice people, people are people you get to know 'em if you stay on base and only associate with Americans, you missed half the value of being in the service. I think.

HUNT: Do you remember the topic of Vietnam ever coming up or?

BROENE: No actually, well World War Two. We had a- we were in Japan, living off base in Japan. Nor- Northern Japan so we're talkin' snow like Northern Minnesota or Montana and I heard a noise at the door and I went and a Jap- a little old Japanese guy is reading the electrical meter and he- it- i mean it's cold and so I said "Ah- [Speaks Japanese]". "It's cold isn't it?" He says, "[Speaks Japanese]." I says, "[Speaks Japanese]." "You want some hot tea?" "Oh, [Speaks Japanese]" and he came inside and we made him some hot tea and he says to me, "Air Force?" Cause it's an Air Force base so you know I had to forgive him.

HUNT: Lucky guess.

[Laughter]

BROENE: And I said, “No, no, Navy” and he goes “Oh! I Navy!” And I said “Really? Where were you stationed?” He said, “Guam, China, Philippines.” And I went-

[Laughter]

BROENE: "Oh, I know when you were in the Navy.”

[Laughter]

BROENE: It was just one of those, “A-ha!” moments you know?

HUNT: Wow.

BROENE: And [intelligible] we had Saburō Sakai, the leading surviving Japanese ace of World War Two, as our guest of honor.

DAISY: Oh wow.

BROENE: So it's kinda cool. But ya know Vietnam was more of a hot topic in the US but in Japan no, they- they weren't involved. They didn't really care I don't think. I didn't get the impression. Nobody asked me about it.

HUNTLEY: And the same with Scotland or I guess it was-

BROENE: In Scotland it was over.

HUNTLEY: Ok.

BROENE: We were in Scotland in the early 80's so the war that they were concerned about was the Falklands War.

HUNTLEY: Ok.

[Laughter]

HUNT: Well that's interesting, that's interesting to know. Just that there wasn't much interest in Japan.

BROENE: No. No, I can't say there was any.

HUNT: Hm, did you receive any special recognitions or medals for your service? Um, and if so could you explain the circumstances?

BROENE: Yeah I-I don't know there were- there were some I got uh, at Goodfellow mostly they were unit citations rather than personal. I got um, a presidential unit citation for-

[taps frame]

BROENE: That one. And a couple of Navy unit citations for others so it's really some interesting stuff. But uh.

HUNT: Could you maybe describe for the- uh the interview that-

BROENE: Oh, ok.

HUNT: Yes.

BROENE: Yeah we were it was uh- it was uh, *Permit*-class submarine uh so it's- it was pretty good- pretty good boat, and we were doing our normal thing off Vladivostok. And President Nixon mined Haiphong Harbor in '72 and the Soviet Navy went ape. They just- sh- all this -we didn't know what was going on. All we knew is that their whole Navy was put in the sea. And one of them was an Echo II class submarine which fires cruise missiles that have a range of three hundred nautical miles and it is the whole purpose, it's only goal in life is to kill aircraft carriers. That's why it was built. And so, we did something that I've never done, I mean I didn't- don't know how we did it- but we sent a critic message, and a critic message is such high priority that once it is received at the National Command Authority in the Pentagon in Washington, they have ten minutes to get it in the hands of the president.

HUNT: Wow.

BROENE: And we said "The whole Soviet Navy is leaving port. And one of them's an Echo II and we don't know- What do you want us to do?" And by the time the word got back, we'd lost the Echo II, but they said "Follow the Echo II, see where he's going." So we-we-we figured he was headin' South so we - we raced ahead to the Tsushima Strait between Korea and Japan.

DAISY: Mhmm.

BROENE: And set up a patrol and picked it up as it went through the Tsushima Strait and we followed it. And they said uh- in those days you had to follow close, it was like the movie *The Hunt for Red October* with those Crazy Ivans.

DAISY:(whispers) Need to watch that.

BROENE: Just like that and uh-

HUNT: Did you have to be silent on the...?

BROENE: Oh yeah. Everybody. We took our shoes off.

DAISY: Oh.

BROENE: Most of us walked around stocking footed. We put taped sponges to the doors so they wouldn't accidentally slam. I mean- signs all over says, "Stay Quiet." Ya know we were very quiet and uh, we trailed it and every- once a day we'd have to come to periscope depth to receive messages and sometimes we'd fire one off to let them know we were still trailing and where it was headed, cause they wanted to clear everybody out of the way. They don't want extra submarines to get involved in this. And um, when it became obvious it was headed for Vietnam and our carriers operated in a box off the coast of Vietnam called Yankee station and they said - we got orders that if that Echo II got within three hundred miles of Yankee station, just- that box in the water, it was a three hundred miles it had to surface to launch its missiles and if it tried to surface we'd make sure it didn't.

HUNT: Wow.

BROENE: So we had two torpedoes with fire control solutions locked in every minute of every day. All we had to do was flood the tube open the other doors

DAISY: It's stressful, I would imagine.

BROENE: Pardon?

DAISY: That's stressful, I would imagine.

BROENE: Yeah. Fortunately for him he didn't have any problems that made him have to try to surface.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Cause he would not of made it.

HUNT: Do you remember the level of stress in the air?

BROENE: Well yeah. At first it was stress, but after you'd been doing it for five or six days its the new normal and I-I-it just kinda I-I-I- and then it's kinda boring.

[Laughter]

BROENE: And- and so I- people s- I tell people say, "What's it like on a submarine?" And I say, "Long periods of boredom punctuated by brief periods where you really wish you were bored again."

[Laughter]

BROENE: And so, you know things are goin' along and every thirty seconds a guys makin' a dot you know trackin' it. And sonar's listening and all of a sudden he goes, "Con, sonar aspect change. Target's turnin' starboard, Crazy Ivan! Crazy Ivan!" And then all of a sudden goes up there and everybody's [silence] Holdin' water we're holdin' water nobody sees us nobody knows, and when he's back on course, "Ok."

[Laughter]

BROENE: So it- it's like that.

[Laughter]

HUNT: Wow, uh.

[Talking over each other]

HUNT: No go ahead.

HUNTLEY: So I had a question: How long did that go for?

BROENE: Uh about two weeks I think.

HUNTLEY: Oh.

BROENE: Yeah we were toward the end of our patrol when it happened and I think the uh, quarter- commissary officer, we called him “Porkchop”, we think he screwed up. and we were running out of food - we were...

[gasp]

BROENE: We were running out of food. They baked our own bread and we were running out of flour and so- we tried baking it with less flour and he had a loaf a bread that was only about that high and it was very dense, or then they added dried potatoes to it but then you had a big loaf a slice a bread, potato bread ya know? But uh, they kept saying “How much longer can ya stay out?” and at first the Captain would figure how much food we had and we got down to the- the bottom of the barrel of bad rations. We got canned-

END RECORDING ONE

BEGIN RECORDING TWO

HUNT: Ok so we are resuming after-

BROENE: Oh, technology!

HUNT: A break in the recording. Yep, Mr. Broene.

BROENE: So we had radio- normal VHF radios, that's mainly what I used. We had HF for the manual voice operator. We had recorders 'cause we would try to record it, we could record up to four conversations simultaneously uh, we had a specialty modulators for underwater communications so basically we could copy anything in the audio spectrum.

HUNT: Mm.

DAISY: Was there ever a limit to how much you could copy or was it just kind of endless?

BROENE: Yeah, no there was- there- I mean at times you'd have split headsets, split headphones so you'd have different conversations in each ear, plus one on the speaker you're trying to keep up with all three of 'em on a typewriter.

[Laughter]

BROENE: So whoa yea, don't worry about typos.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Get the spelling right later.

HUNT: Uh. Good, uh what were um, race and or gender relations like in your experience? Uh, in your uh, units you were in?

BROENE: It was tough, because while I was in that we got the first blacks and the first women.

HUNT: Oh.

BROENE: To really be Navy.

DAISY: Mhmm.

BROENE: Prior to that blacks were just commissary or-or-or uh, stewards [coughs] and it caused some problems but a lot of 'em were inadvertent.

[Laughs]

BROENE: For example, this happened at Goodfellow. Because serving on submarines was- it was- the fact that we even served on 'em at the time was classified. So they- they actually had two sailing lists, two manifests for personnel, one with our names on and it one without. And if the submarine sank on the mission then they'd use the ones with our names so our families could get the insurance and-

[mumblings of agreement]

BROENE: -benefits. But if we made it back then they kind of threw that one away and had the one without our names on it as if we were never there, so it's like we're spooks. Or ghosts. You know where this is goin'.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Like we're ghosts, spooks. So you know here at Goodfellow, I- I was catcher on the Navy softball team and I - we put our nicknames on our back and I put "spook." 'Cause that's what they're called. And this Air Force guy one day, we were gonna play that night, it was about three in the afternoon he said, "Well I'll see ya tonight Spook" and this black girl walkin by said,

"What'd you say?" He goes, "No I was talkin' to him," She goes, "Sure you were talkin' to him." And I go, "No really, he was, that's my nickname." And she says "Why?" So I kind of explained it, and I said, "Tell you what come out tonight, sit in the bleachers right behind home plate, you'll see it right on the back of my shirt." She did and thought it was- From then on she thought it was the funniest thing in the world, every time she saw me she said "Hey Spook!"

[Laughter]

HUNT: Uh, um, what um the- These get more broad now, make sure we didn't miss anything but your most vivid memories from your time in the service.

BROENE: Ok. One of mine was on a destroyer in the sea of Japan and the edges of a typhoon. And we set a ship's record and it was an old ship-

DAISY: What year?

BROENE: This was '73 thereabouts. Set a ship's record and a personal best I hope, I never match, and according to the instruments we rolled fifty-six degrees.

[Gasp]

BROENE: That's a vivid memory.

[Laughter]

DAISY: How did that happen?

BROENE: Huh?

DAISY: How did that happen?

BROENE: It's a storm, it rolls, but that's a big roll, we averaged thirty-five to forty degree rolls in each direction for three days. An- and it would bury the bow-

[gasp]

BROENE: -So deep that there was white water against the bridge windows, and the screws of the rudder came out of the water. And that wa- it just went on and on and people say, "Weren't you terrified?" And I'd say, "No I was too sick I didn't care. I didn't care if we died."

[Laughter]

BROENE: First you're afraid you're gonna die, then you're afraid you won't. Oh man.

HUNT: Seasick?

BROENE: Yeah. Oh jeez that was vivid. And um, one other one, we didn't know what was happening at first. But we were on station and all of a sudden there was a huge explosion wasn't real close, we didn't know how far away, all you can tell from pass of sonar is the direction, so we knew there was a big explosion over there, it sounded really big, but it didn't shake us too bad. So it probably wasn't too close. and then there were more, and it was like being depth charged, but by a very inept-

[laughter]

BROENE: -hunter who didn't get very close, and we figured out later on that they were probably calibrating their- their uh, sonar systems that were buried on the bottom, and setting off big explosions and measuring how much time it took to get places, so they were calibrating it.

HUNT: Oh.

BRONE: It's the kind of thing they're not trying to get ya, but they don't know you're there.

[Laughter]

BROENE: We get that too, uh torpedo exercise you wanna see life come to a complete stop? When you're workin' a torpedo exercise, the Russians are live firing torpedoes. They're dummy torpedoes, there's no warhead, ya know they're gonna pick em up, reuse 'em. But it doesn't matter, if it hits ya it's gonna be painful, and you say, "Got it on sonar!" He would be working along and go, [tapping] "Got it on sonar, high speeds cruise torpedo in the water." [pause] "Drawing left."

[Laughter]

BROENE: Everything stops until you get a bearing rate. Ok. So yeah there- there's a few good sea stories like that.

HUNT: Um, returning now to blocker questions on um, civilian life and uh, your interactions with civilians that maybe had different perspectives on the Cold War and the military than you did?

BROENE: Uh, yeah.

HUNT: Did you face any challenges when returning to civilian life?

BROENE: Not when I returned to civilian life particularly, but while I was still in the Navy, that's when Vietnam was goin' on and i-it got to where the Navy authorized you to wear uni-take civilian clothes on ships, because it was dangerous to wear uniforms ashore, and uh-

HUNT: In the US?

BROENE: In the US.

DAISY: Wow.

BROENE Yeah. Yeah um, ya know if you walk through an airport with a uniform you just expect people to at best give you dirty looks.

[Long Pause]

BROENE: I - I'm not politically correct, I'm quite insensitive, so some hippy'd go, "Peace man" and I'd go "War!"

[Laughter]

HUNT: So it sounds like you took it in stride-

BROENE: Yeah.

HUNT: -for the most part.

BROENE: Well, that is kind of the mark of a submariner. That's something they look for, you just take stuff in stride. You gotta be adaptable, you gotta be able to get along. You can't let stuff get to you cause-they'll- they'll try to get to you on a submarine, your- your own shipmates will try to get to ya cause they find out they can get to ya- oh!

[Laughter]

BROENE: You got it I mean that's your done, so you just-

HUNTLEY: Lean into it?

BROENE: Yeah.

DAISY: I guess that imagining being in close quarters with a whole-

BROENE: Yeah.

DAISY: -other guys over time I imagine people get, like, on eachothers nerves.

BROENE: Yeah I mean, see you rag eachother you gotta be able to accept it and you gotta be able to dish it out. If you can't. But a good sense of humor is worth a ton. We had one guy. God what- ok there's a - there's a deal we didn't get it because we were visitors, riders. But the regular crew got somethin called "Family Grams" and they were short messages that people back home could send and uh, they could send like three of 'em in a Spec. Op. and uh, they came over the broadcast when it was time. But that came in and the captain would read 'em first and then make sure that they were ok, then pass 'em on to the guys, 'cause if it's bad news, the guy can't do anything about it, jeez. But uh, one guy got kinda bad news because he had picked up a girl at the ships pre-deployment party and that was a party held aboard the boat, it would not have been a problem cause she couldn't fit through the weapons loading hatch, she was round. And now she's gonna be rounder, because she texts him that -er sends in her family gram that she's in a family way.

[gasp]

BROENE: And oh man, everybody's giving him a hard time. You know, "Say, you gonna trade in your Monte Carlo for a pickup so you can carry your bride around?"

HUNTLEY: Oh, man.

[Laughter]

BROENE: And he's just like, "Oh." And as you can fake those family grams and the big question was "Is this real? Or is he bein' fooled?" Well, the answer was no, and no. It was not real, it was a fake family gram, but he had faked it.

DAISY: Oh.

BROENE: And he was puttin' on the entire show.

[Laughter]

BROENE: They shoulda given him a medal.

[Laughter]

HUNTLEY: How'd you find out?

BROENE: I knew 'cause I worked in radio and they all come through radio.

HUNTLEY: Oh,ok.

[Laughter]

BROENE: So I knew, but I just played along.

DAISY: That's a good trick.

BROENE: "Is that real?" "I don't know, must a hap- come in while I was not on watch."

HUNT: Wow.

BROENE: Just to make it perfect, it was over Halloween that we were out, and for Halloween the skipper said 'Anybody want to dress up for Halloween they can.'" And they had these little bottles of alcohol that they have on airplanes back then, which is totally illegal on a submarine.

[Laughter]

BROENE: So I won't mention the submarine. But little bottles of liquor, but he said "I'll give out ya know, prizes for the best costumes' and this guy took a whole bed sheet and- and safety pins about that big and made a diaper.

[Laughter]

HUNT: Did he win?

BROENE: Yeah- Yeah.

[Laughter]

BROENE: He- He won one. He won one

HUNTLEY: He put that on before he had the alcohol.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Ya know I- I took advantage of that cause I was on an LST, out of Scotland, North of Murmansk and we had a young ensign with us, brand new ensign right out of the academy, and they told us if you wanna send a family gram back to the base this Friday you can, but tell them that they can send one next Friday and alternate Fridays we'll do it. And I faked family grams to him and from him. And he was worried. Everybody knew about it but him, the Captain of the ship called him in and counseled him on fraternization.

[Laughter]

DAISY: I wonder what you were sending.

BROENE: It was clean, he's an officer and she was enlisted. And that's forbidden.

HUNT: Um, uh, how did your service influence or affect your family? Haven't heard much about your family.

BROENE: Well it's hard to say I-I-I- I had a wife but no children, but I met my wife while I was in the service. She knew I was a sailor, she knew I wanted to be a sailor, she knew it was gonna be a career. And so going into it she had an idea of what she was letting herself in for and she put up a good- put a good face on, but I think it was hard for her. But she kept busy while I was at sea, in fact the joke was that people could tell when I got back because the car was parked in front of the house for more than an hour at a time.

[Laughter]

BROENE: She was- she was really busy but ya know it made the times we had together really valuable. My- my experience was that, [coughs] sailors in general but submariners in particular either have very strong marriages or very short ones, and there's not much in between.

HUNT: Um how about uh with respect to your parents?

BROENE: Well, drove my mother crazy cause she wants me to put right all the time and one reason I wanted that job is he said, "It's highly classified, you can't tell anybody what you're doin'." [claps]

[Laughter]

BROENE: But they came, ya know they - they - they liked it they came to visit us in Japan, they came to visit us in Scotland. So they got to [pause] interact in that way too, that was kinda nice, they liked that.

HUNT: Um how- uh - getting real close to the end now. How well do you think communities in West Texas or other communities you encountered that treated returning veterans in general, not just yourself?

BROENE: Well San Angelo has always been- has always had a warm spot probably in the heart of every guy who was ever stationed here. Um, unless you just stayed on base, San Angelo treated us good all the time. And uh, Texas in general is good for the military. I had a friend who would hitchhike to San Antonio on the weekend just put on his uniform and stick his thumb out and [claps] get a ride. That kinda thing was nice. Another example in California, a bad example, is all of the deal- all of the places in town that sold motorcycles or cars or anything, they were way more expensive than they were twenty miles away, because if you're in the military and you need a vehicle you can't go twenty miles to go look for one. You're gonna have to buy it locally and they knew it and they just jumped the prices. up.

DAISY: Business.

BROENE: And uh, ya know you felt kinda like you were a um, [pauses] they welcomed your money much more than you but here. No it's much nicer different attitude, much different attitude in Texas than was in California.

HUNT: It strikes me that point about the uniform, like you said earlier, not to wear the uniform a lot of times but-

BROENE: Yea- Yeah. It- it varied. We would pull into Australia and guys went to shore in civilian clothes, came back to the ship, changed into uniform.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Because they were very welcoming to us.

HUNTLEY: You almost had to be two people. You had to know how to read every situation

BROENE: Yeah, yeah.

HUNT: Uh. What long term impact do you believe veterans such as yourself had on the communities in uh, West Texas?

BROENE: Well I think veterans are uh, I don't know what the word I want is. Stabilizing influence I think. Uh. we're fairly conservative, for the most part and we're very reliable we take pride in - we say we're gonna do something, we do it. I give you an absolute, opposite example of that from last week.

[Laughter]

BROENE: My- my girlfriend, my current girlfriend is from Minnesota. And we were gonna go up there and get her stuff and bring it back down so we hired a moving company to meet us up there so we drove up there two days to Minnesota, spent two days packing, arranging, taking furniture apart and getting it ready and two days waiting for movers who never came.

DAISY: Oh no.

HUNTLEY: That's not helpful.

BROENE: And then we had to drive back with nothing but what we could fit in the pickup truck. I mean that- that- you don't have that with military. Uh-uh we say we're gonna be there, we're gonna be there.

HUNT: 15 minutes early.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Yeah! Right on time.

HUNT: Um, how do you feel about your military service looking back?

BROENE: Oh I loved it. I liked it then and I like it now. I like swappin' sea stories with people. I was just getting an oil change yesterday and a guy saw my belt buckle, and he said, "Oh, Navy!" And I went, "Yeah." And he said, "So was I, when were you in?" We talked, said he was on *Midway* same time I was- same time I was in.

DAISY: Wow.

BROENE: So.

HUNT: Do you have any advice for young men and women who are just entering the service?

BROENE: [Laughs] Keep your ears open, your mouth shut.

[Laughter]

BROENE: What a time. Well talked about things that stand out in my memory, but then he has three big initiations. Crossing the equator, crossing the line, you go from Pollywog to Shellback. And that is a big deal. Crossing the Arctic Circle.

DAISY: Sorry, what's Pollywog and Shellback?

BROENE: Well you're a Pollywog before, until you cross it, you're a Shellback after you cross it.

DAISY: Oh gotcha, gotcha, thank you.

BROENE: And then crossing the Arctic Circle, and you're a Warm Body before, and a Blue Nose after. and then when you make Chief. And I went through all three. I'm a Shellback, a Blue Nose and a Chief.

HUNT: Is there any ritualistic ceremonies or-

[Everyone talking over each other]

BROENE: Oh yeah, there's a big initiation. The initiation for crossing the Equator's the biggest one but that took all day.

HUNT: Oh.

BROENE: I was on a cruiser and it took- it took pretty much the whole day. Now I [pause] was smart and I went to the shellbacks and said, "Look we got a problem. All of us want to get initiated, all of us want to do this. We want to, but we gotta have two people in the spaces at all times." That's the rules, you got to have two people in the spaces. So we can't just lock the door and do this. "So can we fix it so I'm in the front of the line, and then I finish and go relieve them and they run to the back of the line and start over." They went, "Yeah, we can do that." Well, at the front of the line you got like fifty Shellbacks and two hundred and eighty Pollywogs and they're goin, "Oh God, we'll never finish this." And so they kinda push us through. Toward the end they went, "Oh yeah, we got time."

[Laughter]

BROENE: So that worked out well. But Shellbacks, the basic color is green, and you go to breakfast and the toast is green and the juice is green, and the ham is green, and the bacon is green, and the eggs are green and then you go out and all your clothes are inside out and backwards, and they tell you to strap shower shoes to your knees, cause you're gonna be on your knees all day on non skid decking. Then you line up and you got fire hoses that wet you down, raw eggs that they drop on ya, pieces of old fire hose that they use to slap you.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Yeah and then you got the fattest person aboard, well you got King Neptune, then you got the Royal Baby and the Royal Baby is the fattest guy on the ship. Unfortunately, I'm embarrassed to say it, usually the Chief. And they cover his belly. He's wearing a diaper, and they cover his bare belly with some noxious concoction. I don't know what's in it and you gotta kiss the baby belly.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Well this one guy, black guy, he wouldn't do it. He got up there and went, "No, I ain't kissin' that, I ain't doing it." And the Chief goes, "Listen son, I can't just let ya go by, if I just let ya go by, everybody's gonna just go by so just fake it, come that close, blow a little kiss and go on." And he went, 'Yeah, ok.'" So he got right up there and the chief went, "Hah!"

[Laughter]

BROENE: Oh, bad mistake!

[Laughter]

HUNTLEY: Those listening at home-

[Laughter]

HUNTLEY: -pulled him straight to his belly.

BROENE: Yeah, but the uh, for-for blue nose the dominant color is blue and you don't wear anything other than your underpants, your underwear and it's full of ice.

DAISY: [Gasps] Oh, no.

HUNT: Wow.

BROENE: So while you use up a lotta eggs on the Equator, you use up a lotta ice cubes on the, crossing the Arctic Circle. And there are some people who were so, [pause] I hate to say stupid.

BUNT: Unwise?

BROENE: So ignorant, ok, ignorant means you just don't know, and when we cross the Arctic Circle, actually cross the Arctic Circle, the- the- the the they do the ceremony a day- a day after ya know but when they cross the Arctic Circle they announced it over the one MC's the loud speaker, "The ship is now crossing over the Arctic Circle." And guys ran up to get a picture.

[Laughter]

HUNT: It's over.

BROENE: Oh shoot.

HUNT: I can see why a lot of this prepared you for gettin' through those airports in uniform.

BROENE: Oh yeah.

[Laughter]

HUNT: Uh this is our last big catchall question, would you like to share anything else about your service that we didn't get to?

BROENE: I don't think so. People today, it's nice, people come up to me and say, "Thank you for your service" and I finally come up with an answer 'cause it's not hard to say and I say, "Thank you for payin' taxes so I can do it."

[Laughter]

BROENE: 'Cause to me it was- it was a privilege it was fun, I don't. The scariest day of my life was when I went to take my physical, to go in. 'cause I had no backup plan. If I failed that physical I had no idea what I woulda' done with my life. I didn't have a clue.

DAISY: What were you going to college originally for?

BROENE: Nothing. I mean for school teaching, but ya know just cause you had to do something and I liked history and political science, and history and political science slot in for teaching. I mean what else do you use a history degree for? So-

HUNTLEY: Haven't found that answer.

[Laughter]

BROENE: I was going for that but I had no intention of doing that. So, yeah.

HUNT: This was great. Thank you. Thank you very much Mr. Robert Broene-

HUNTLEY: Do you have any questions, Daisy?

HUNT: Oh.

Daisy: Um.

BRONE: Aw, come on, come on.

DAISY: Yeah Yeah, I'm thinking. Were there any particular challenges you had to face being in, like, a submarine? That's a very unique environment I would imagine.

BROENE: Yeah. There were lots of challenges. One of 'em is hurting yourself cause everything is steel, and it's all that far away.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Um. Things like, ok, we were excess personnel on the submarine, and submarines were already, back then, were already cramped. So there were not, there was not a bunk, every man did not have a bunk.

HUNT: Oh.

BROENE: They hot bunked, you had to kind of, there'd be three guys to two bunks kinda situation, but not for us, it was two guys to one bunk. 'Cause we worked twelve on and twelve off. So we worked twelve on, twelve off, seven days a week. So if you're my counterpart, you roll outta the bunk and I roll into it. Well, if you got an actual bunk, that's high livin'. But there were times you didn't get that. What you had back home was a piece of plywood with a mattress

on it stuck on the skids in the torpedo room and that's it. And you're still sharing it with somebody.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Well, we- ok. Here's how blasé you can get with it. We were bunking in the torpedo room, ok? And they had these little film bags that about that big, and you wore them on your belt and it was a little piece of film inside and it had a number on it and it was assigned to each person, by number, and the first of every month you turn one in and got a new one, and that way the doc, or the corpsman could keep track of how much radiation each person had gotten exposed to. Ok?

DAISY: So it's a nuclear submarine.

BROENE: Right.

DAISY: It's carrying nuclear armament.

BROENE: Right, so one of my teammates, one month his was, his was off the scale. And I mean there is major, thi - th- there was- they're so fussy about it that you could not have a radium dial watch.

HUNT: Wow.

BROENE: If you had a radium dial watch they confiscated it and put it in a lead box because this put out more radiation than the reactor did.

HUNT: Really?

BROENE: Yeah they're very safe, and so when they find this guy being exposed to this much radiation in just a month, and it's like, "Holy Crap." So they're trying to figure out how it happened and they go to where he worked in radio, and we had to cover everything up in radio so they could come in and do geiger counter tests. Well, they check where he eat in the mess hall, but everybody does so. Sleep in the torpedo room, torpedo room has tons of devices to monitor that and everything was fine there. They couldn't figure out what in the world was causing this. Finally they said to him, "Well do you sleep in your uniform?" He said, "No, I'll take it off before I go to sleep." They said, "What do you do with it?" He said, "I hang it here". He was hanging it on a nuclear warhead of the SUBROC missile. He was using a nuclear warhead for a clothes hanger.

[Laughter]

DAISY: Wonder if he ever got cancer or anything later on in life.

BROENE: No cause I mean he wasn't exposed to it, just his badge, he wasn't hangin' himself on the warhead.

HUNT: That wouldn't carry? It doesn't-

BROENE: No, it was you know the radiation would only go that far.

HUNT: Oh.

BROENE: But it was in direct contact with it, so. Yeah there are some, really gruesome stories about those. What- did yall wanna hear a really gruesome?

DAISY: Sure.

HUNTLEY: You only live once.

BROENE: You can't have regular toilets on a submarine. A lot to clean up. So what they do now- see in World War Two they actually- you could sink a submarine by flushing the toilet wrong. The Germans did, we almost did. So they they-they've improved them and now they've got something called a sanitary tank, and it's a fairly good size. It's gotta take the waste from a hundred men and you want it to at least take a day and a half, two days to fill up, so it's pretty good size. So you got this sanitary tank, and all of the "water", that you wanna get rid of, or waste, goes down into that tank and at the base of each commode urinal uh, sink, shower, everything, there's a ball valve. So what they do is it builds up and they make an announcement, "Now hear this, now hear this. The ship will be blowing sanitariums. Do not use the heads." And they put signs on all the heads, and they put signs on every door in the area around the head "blowing sanitariums" and then a guy goes and checks to make sure all the ball valves are shut and then they put compressed air, pressure, pressurize the tank with compressed air until the pressure inside the tank is greater than the sea pressure outside the tank, and then they open a valve in the pressure hull and expel it all. And when it's empty they close that valve and release the pressure somewhere else, and then they can- you can- but it's about an hour but you better not go. And th- and you want as few openings in the pressure hull as possible. and you want them as small as possible. Ok, that's the background. So this guy comes to the doc and says, "Doc, I need a new film badge." He says, "Why?" "I lost mine." "What do you mean you lost it, you're on a frickin submarine, how can you lose it? Do you have any idea where you might've lost it? 'Cause it's

accountable, it's by number to you." "Yeah it fell in the commode, fell in the- well the shitter." He said, "Well get it out!" "Well I can't. I flushed it."

[Laughter]

BROENE: "You what?" He said, "I flushed it." He said, "Come with me, we're going to see the XO." So he went to see XO, that's the number two guy on a submarine right below the captain these guys- and the XO hears the story and looks at the guy and says, "Ok. This is not a punishment. If I- if I knew- if I knew, that that film badge would go through the hull valve into the ocean and be gone, I'd punish you for doing it, but I don't know that and if it gets stuck in the valve, and jams the valve, nobody can shit again for the rest- and we gotta turn around immediately and go back to port and pull into a dry dock because it's not only unpleasant, it's also gonna be dangerous, because of very precious- you're going to have to go in there and find it." And he did.

HUNTLEY: He found it?

HUNT: Oh, oh...

BROENE: He went in there and found it. And they did tell him, as he came- when he came out with it, "Ok, take a shower, and take as much water as you want."

[Laughter]

BROENE: Use all the water you want.

HUNTLEY: Surprised they didn't like super glue it to his forehead after that or something.

[Laughter]

BROENE: Oh boy I tell ya.

DAISY: Maybe throw him in the sea for a little bit.

BROENE: It's the kinda thing you don't forget.

[Pause]

HUNT: Ok well, thank you again Mr. Broene.

DAISY: Thank you.

BROENE: Sure.

HUNT: Great interview, thank you for your service, thank you for coming in.

DAISY: Um is there any-