

Oral History Transcript

Interviewer: Michael Milligan

Oral History Candidate: Al Owings, Class of '44

June 4, 2011, Palm Springs, Bi-Annual Reunion

[Numerous gaps throughout due to poor audio quality]

This is the recording-Brown Military Academy-at the reunion taking place in Palm Springs, June 4th, 2011.

Ok, my name is Al Owings, class of 1944 and I guess the most important thing we can start with is, how did I get to Brown?

Yes.

That's it. Well, my father was in the navy and being a little brat, I was all over the world, back and forth and I was just one of those weird kids that was interested in...and I really had quite a time...school...maintained a good grade average, when I was in my 9th grade in high school it was announced that we were going to make another move and at the time my home base was at National City just south of San Diego.

You were in National City?

National City-that was the...base for the navy. My dad...that's where we were and he was going to be transferred in the Gulf, Orange Texas and I told him, nope, I'm not going, because every time I go to a different place, I have to get reacquainted and sometimes it even set us back, because ...California...school and this was a disaster for me, you know, having to go through this; so I said, I'm not going and I talked to my best friend and his brother...I could stay with him and...National City for high school.

What were the names of those friends?

Dwight Sweringer was my best friend. And Mr. Sweringer said it was fine and so when I announced this, I moved...long story short, it finally settled in that I was really very certain I really wanted to go and my mother was a bus driver and she drove the buses from San Diego Plaza...Pacific Beach and on one of her stopovers...talking to a fellow bus driver, Jamie says, well, you know, why don't you try to get him into this military academy there at Pacific Beach? It's a fine place, it's a safe, you know, and so she went to them and talked to them and we didn't have much money and it was a little expensive school, but with my grades, she was able to get me a scholarship. So I came to Brown in June '41 on a scholarship and that meant that I'd have to work, of course. My first job was...of dinner, 3 meals...to feed 6 classrooms, now the classrooms...Brown University-Brown Military Academy, saying we were undergrads and we were on Spring Break...6...and I had to put that down for the person to give me my money...and as it turned out...a roommate...He was in junior college and he was in charge of the...he managed to get me a...and that was pretty neat because...we went homeward while I...

Oh that's great.

And as part of being on the switchboard...administration building...Brown...and over the years...so anyway...and...very seriously...one of the things that was nice about the education here is that every week...my grade...and if you weren't up to snuff, you didn't get to go on pass; you had to stay home and

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see to your grades and that was very, very good for me, and so I was able to improve my grades and we had a-first year we had an intramural team within Company-B and by this time I had changed roommates...and they called him Fernando Rodriguez. Fernando came from a family in Mexico. His father at the time was governor of Baja California, and later became president of Mexico and Fernando had the name 'fast feet'.

Is Fernando still alive?

I don't know that...at any rate, when they took him to our room...was the discipline. Fernando had never...he had been in a junior school all this time...and so they reported him to Glendale at 15 years of age...and he asked me...I had no idea; he said, well, why don't you just run with Fernando? So it got to me and lo-and-behold, 50-yard dash...wow, that was really unexpected, even on his part, and my part and everybody else's part. And the same thing...so the coach came to me and he says, you know, you can really run. Have you thought about trying out for football? I said, no, he says, well I'd like for you to come out...Well, I was not all that heavy; I was pretty light and...speed was pretty good, not having...forgot to...but the coach liked me and he says, how about being my assistant and I said, well I've got this job on the switchboard.; he said, I'll take care of that, so he took care of that...off the switchboard...assistant manager...and that's what I did until I graduated.

You were an assistant to the head coach?

Yeah, assistant to the coach. So that worked out...also...grades...my class...he says, you know, you've got a lot of credits here; if you want to skip your Junior year and go right into your Senior year, we could, we could really do that. The only thing is you'd have to stay here during the summer to...so what that means was I graduated in September of '44...go to summer school...and he said, teach, wonderful!

So you graduated a year early?

Yeah...well, while I was in the classes...he used to treat me...of course, John Brown was the most phenomenal speaker. He raised to me the question...education...and my relationship with John Brown from...switchboard continued and when it came time for me to graduate...June, he came to me and said, would you like a job when you get out...I should probably tell you that while I was in A-Company, I was a staff sergeant. That's as high as...in summer camp...platoon...and through all this experience, John Brown asked me, would I be interested in getting a job...graduating...way back at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas and there...responsibility...boarding school...9th grade and turning their life into a military-style...

So this was an elementary school that he had you at?

That's right, yeah. And so, when I actually got my certificate...I wasn't going to be 18 until the following November. So at 17, I'd secured this job and he said, okay, you're going to be on school staff...and we're going to pay all your expenses if you have...stipends...education...university...wow, so I went back in September and I started my job. A lady named Elsie Black was the principal of the school. She and I hit

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it off really well and between she and I, we...kids in uniforms and set up the daily routine for them and it worked out quite well and as part of that we had, well...university...what I want to do...I told them education. So as part of this, I taught two classes; I taught mathematics and I taught Grammar-English.

In the elementary school?

Yeah, the elementary school, because I was, you know, I didn't have any training, other than what I had at Brown, but I seemed to have an aptitude, so I did that. In addition I was...coach for the kids, the boys and that was pretty interesting, because you got a baseball team together, you know, the boys went through the 9th grade and it turned out that we were playing the practice team for the University. And actually we wined up beating them two out of three times in the practice. We had some phenomenal guys. We had a fellow that pitched for us; he was pretty...that is, he injured his pitching arm between the thumb and forefinger and he had a little web across it and something about that in the way he held the ball, you never, it was like throwing a screwball, you never know where it's going to go; and boy did it ever go. So that was lots of fun, but...cross country, so that went on and...John Brown seemed really satisfied and he could remember the first Pasadena Parade we had in the...he had to wear uniforms...second day...tall guys...third...shortest

Did they wear uniforms too?

Oh yes; we got uniforms, just like at Prom, West Point-style...because that's where we got them...We modeled our training just like...and it was a special place and I might add even between semesters that the summer term, there was a Camp...Springs-Sulpher Springs...

In Arkansas?

Yeah, somewhere...they had a lake...summer...so that took me 15 years and finally, I decided that I'd better...I was-by the way, in Arkansas, we couldn't teach...training for education; that's how I...and so...office...Philippines...few weeks...military academy because I was...go ahead and...draft exemption...

You went at the end of the war, right?

Yeah, towards the end and so...Robertson...overseas to Korea...1st infantry...the beach...60 days lived in the Philippines, toured Japan and...Brown and John Brown University...I survived it because, first thing...education...in addition to that, they needed somebody that could teach the kids and...finished..degree...so I did that for 3 months...office...sergeant...in a year and 2 months, it was the first time...

You know, what's interesting is I grew up in National City, and I'm a graduate of Sweetwater too.

Oh, are you? I went to Central, well actually-

You went to school, I bet you went to school with my father; you must have!

What was his name?

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Milligan. He went to-

Milligan, oh sure.

You must have had-there was a Robert, there was a James, there was an Edwin-

I knew James Milligan.

So, in fact, we're celebrating his birthday August 27th. He's the last living member of the family.

Oh, wow.

So yeah, it's interesting, that we have that tie there. So tell me about the difference between public school and going to Brown, because you definitely had got the experience where you went to a military academy in your early years, you went back to public school, so what was that transition like?

Well, what I meant to tell you...

Well, no, you said you were up in L.A., you went to public school, then you went to military academy-

...I went to school always in National City-

Oh, ok.

-Central...

Ok, so you went to all-

But...because my father was...he transferred, and we were transferred to Hawaii, we went to the west, we went to Orange, in the Gulf.

Unstable, huh?

Yeah. As I was living-we were on the island from the middle of...194-...and I wanted...so, you know, Hawaii in 1946 and I was...from...to Hawaii...so I was in Hawaii before...so I remember the first...

Oh yeah, being the surfer that I am, I wish I had been there.

...But getting back to your question, I went through-all through National City school...Sweetwater...that's...put me in school there, I went to school...

So how was the transition from public school to Brown?

Oh, it was such a...tremendous...in public school, we never knew exactly where we stood...grades...but at Brown...grades...you see that the campus professors...are interested...and in public school...if you had the desire at Brown, you could always find...

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Oh wow, did you ever have to walk the quadrangle?

Oh sure...they had the plebe system there...every bit as...that really...

What I've read is that whether you went to school as a 9th grade, 10th grade, 11th or 12th, your first year, you're a plebe, no matter what and you had to run wherever you-

...running...How's a cow? She walks, she talks, she's full of chalk. The lacteal fluid extracted from the female of the bovine species is highly prolific to the nth degree-that's from 1941.

Geez. That's amazing. I have my father's bugle notes, which states all this stuff that you have to know, in terms of that stuff.

...

Yeah, I believe you, because you guys had to know that. Was it difficult for that transition?

Yes it was, because I, I know I went back and forth my...people skills...for the first year there...friends...that was the first, first thing that...start...I got...

So it definitely developed a sense of camaraderie among you guys; we even see this today.

Yeah, it did...everybody...responsible...no excuses.

Give me an example.

Well...if your...wasn't right...no excuses...very busy at this point...hard to do...crunch time...door was open...book open, on your desk...a lot of other guys found that...

Do you think that prepared you for college better?

Oh yes...no matter where I went...and all my education...discipline, self-starter, responsibility...-5 years and all that time...details...strictly...

It's sad that we've lost-

It is. I truly believe our country's far better off...

Yes. I have to agree with you...and listening to you men, I am envious of your leadership training that you've got. The camaraderie thing, yeah, I've got that with my friends, but I don't have the military leadership training, which I think that's what you need.

Yeah, you really do, and...first sighting of infantry...good job.

Yeah, I'm finding that once again, what's surprising to me is that you were an officer.

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Well, I'll come back to that; it started out in basic training. When I was in basic training, we were a part of this...about...amphitheater...I was...telling us about the aluminum rifle, which you're supposed to...and I fell asleep.

Oh no.

And my buddy looks to me...as I talking to him...better answer, oh my, but he says, go up there and...big story about fighting...going to be my best friend...and he said to me...and I went through the whole speal and there was silence and he says, now...all...tell my...assume responsibility for...and he made me the platoon sergeant for 30...the vision was that I would fill out paper for...I did, so I was...staff sergeant...wow...went off and did that and it turned out that...and somehow I knew that the company...and so when we got back...officer...and I flagged down...bad experiences and was trying to get...inspect...no I don't think so. I'll take my chances...value of...watched out for this...my friend and I said look, there's a bulletin board and guys who want to be a paratrooper should go and sign up and so we went...out of the people's army and into the regular army, so I was discharged from the people's army...we're all there, getting ready to fight and we have our physical, all on the line and I was next and shut the door; they said, we don't need anybody...not taking anyone else...no, in the regular army...from then on, all the inspectors...so that...administrator...I got there and I resigned...National City...she sent me...check up...report back down there...draft...two days...so I went down there...all these guys...this...lady came out on the porch and says, if I call your name, get on the bus. She calls my name when she came to me and she says, I don't want you to go on the bus, I want you to go in the office and wait for me...military...I took orders...ok. When I got in there, she says, are you...regular army...draft...she says, no...why did you leave John Brown University? You should be back there, teaching school. Well she had turned out to be an alumni of John Brown University. When she saw that, she called the school, called and talked to Dr. Brown and I said yeah, he was doing a job for us and then he needed to go into the service...between...on the training...get yourself back there...finish out the...

Oh man!

Just like that I went back there...So there was one semester of...one summer school before I was finally...

That is amazing. That is truly amazing!

And I might say...San Diego school, is...

That's just, that too great.

Yeah...the lord...

And it's amazing how that works, isn't it? You know, my wife and I were talking about, at what point are we really in charge?

...Absolutely...great source. But other than that...opportunity...

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And Brown really instilled that in you, didn't it?

Oh yeah. That's where it came from. If it hadn't been for my experience...I would say...

Well if you could say, what would be the most important thing that you could take away from Brown?

My experience with training.

Your experience with training? You know, it's still ranked as one of the top universities in the country for a liberal arts education.

Yeah, I went back there and John Brown University with my wife 6 years ago and we toured the school and there was the chapel...book...when I was there, it was just the foundation...foundation...see it all finished...

You know, he lived in Senidus-John Brown did. He died in Senidus.

I didn't know. I, of course...he was...

Oh yeah? Is he still alive?

...he lives down...Fall Brook

I think you're right. At least on my list, there's this Fall Brook. I'll have to get in touch with him.

...

Yeah, because I really would-his family, he's really-

...

He's not here today.

He's not here...he's a good computer...if you contacted him, I'm sure...John Brown University...on staff.

Oh wow. Yeah, I'm in awe, I mean, I'm just sad to say that it's gone. I wish that it had continued on. They could have moved maybe East County where it's more populated, kept it going, I think it'd still be running today.

...I'm sad. Well, he gave it a shot...very happy...

Yeah. I feel it's different in talking to guys from Glendora, it's different.

Oh, I can tell you that...I don't know, I wasn't at Glendora...get the feeling that...disappointing...I've had a number of people...what we experienced in San Diego..tough, it was rigorous...

I wish there were some films of you guys in the field and parade. I know...

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...

Well, I'm going to go this next week, I'm going to San Diego historical society in their archives and see what I can find, all right? I wish I could, I'd love to find that, I really would. I'd put it on so you could see.

I'll just share one thing...when I was fighting out...we used to have to and change the...

...Island? 32nd Street?

Excuse me...and there were guys there...and we...our own...

Well, you know, my father played in for Brown and they did pretty good, but they never won. It's hard for you guys to compete against these public schools with a thousand, two-thousands kids and you've only got a couple, a hundred, two-hundred.

We would practice...we weren't even...

I think you held your own at track and you definitely held your own at baseball.

Oh yeah. Baseball...

Well, I'm glad you shared that. Thank you Al, I have just one more thing-