

Oral Transcript

Interviewer: Sharon Milligan

Oral History Candidate: Jim Berwanger, Class of 1961

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

*My name is Sharon Milligan and we're here at the Brown Military Academy Alumni Reunion. It's June 4, 2011 and could you tell me your name, year and your address?*

Jim Berwanger, graduated 1961. I live at 437 Leslie Avenue, Stockton, California.

*And you went to Glendora?*

Yes.

*So, Jim, could you start out by just telling me how or why you ended up at Brown Military Academy in Glendora?*

I was a student at McClain High School in Fresno, California and my priorities were football, girls and beer and my grades were really suffering, so I asked my father if he would send me to a military academy and so 'yeah, if that's what you want' and he did some checking and he found that Brown was one of the few that he could get me into mid-term, which would have been January 1960.

Consequently, I went to Brown in Glendora, California.

*So what was that like, your first year transitioning from a public school into a private military academy?*

I thought it was going to be hard, but it really wasn't. We sort of formed a brotherhood and we were all there for different reasons, but a lot of us were there to better ourselves and that's what I tried to do.

*As you progressed...?*

As I progressed, I tried to behave myself and forget about the beer and girls, but I still played football. However, I went in as a private and within a little over a year, I came to rank of Master Sergeant and I had several commandant ribbons for good behavior and that sort of thing, so you know, I was pretty proud of myself. Plus, my grades started going up. I mean, they went from C's and D's to B's and when I graduated Brown, my last semester there, I had a B-average.

*Is that just from your hard work or did you feel that you support of faculty or students? What do you think attributes to part of your grades rising?*

Part of it was from my work, but part of it was if we didn't attain passing grades, we didn't get to leave the campus, so you either work and study and learn the subjects or you're staying here pal!

*And if you needed help, were you able to find tutors or you know?*

Mainly from other students, you know. A lot of the other students were good in some subjects that I was fairly weak in. My roommate was from Columbia, so he helped me with my Spanish and I helped him with his geometry, so it was sort of a two-fold thing. I acclimated to the life of an all-boys school. It was a Christian school and we also were required to go to church. We could either go to chapel at the school or go downtown to the church of our choice and I believe that's good. Consequently, my later years, I'd become a Christian and I am a believer and attribute part of that to Brown.

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*So you said that you are good at football. Tell us about your football, how that started and what that experience was like.*

We seldom won a game. I mean, we were playing against schools like Cervite, which is one of the top schools in southern California; it had probably 1000-1500 students and I know our graduating class was 44 students, so we got beat up pretty bad, but we didn't lose spirit; we kept right after it. We kept getting beat, but we kept going on.

*And other sports? Football was your main thing?*

Football and baseball. The rest of them I didn't really care for.

*How about the military aspect of it, like the ROTC? How did that fit with you?*

Oh, I loved it.

*What did you love about it?*

I guess part of it was the regimentation-being able to follow and give commands and act when you're supposed to as far as marching and that sort of thing and I appreciated the structure of the military presence in the school.

*[Michael Milligan joins the group]*

*[Michael] I'm coming over to join you.*

*[Sharon] You know my husband Michael.*

Yeah, Michael, I'm sorry.

*[Michael] Yeah, sorry it's taken me so long to get to you.*

*[Sharon] Well he was out, hanging out, enjoying the city.*

Playing at the casino until five o'clock.

*[Sharon] So we're good. He was just telling us about, sharing about his, he went through his football experience and he was just sharing about what ROTC meant to him, his experience with...*

Yeah, I enjoyed it. Right after school, I went in the naval reserve and went through basic training in San Diego and because of my Brown experience, they made me the recruit chief petty officer of my company. So I was the leader of the company, because when the actual naval chief petty officer who was in charge of us, found out about it, he spent every day at the waste track.

*[Michael] Del Mar or Callete?*

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Del Mar. He says, you know where I'll be. I say yes sir, yes chief. So anyway, we got along just fine and they offered me another company when mine was done to go through it again and I declined that generous offer.

[Michael] *How long were you in the navy?*

Naval reserve and the regular navy about a year. Because of my football injuries, they discharged me, convenience of the government, but an honorable discharge.

[Michael] *Too much of that Brown football, huh?*

Yeah.

[Michael] *Or lack of it.*

[Sharon] *You played hard.*

Yeah, I played hard. At Brown, we played Iron Man football. We played defense and offense. I was an offensive center and a defensive tackle. And when you gave up the ball to the other side, I would switch to the other side and go the other way.

[Sharon] *Tell me what your equipment was that was protecting you. I mean, I can look at NFL now but for people who maybe aren't familiar.*

Well, we weren't quite as sophisticated then, but we had shoulder pads, knee pads, the usual things.

[Michael] *Did you have a face mask on the helmet?*

Yeah, we did. We had two or three bars across the face. We didn't have that single bar, which is a suicide helmet.

[Michael] *My father had a leather helmet.*

So did my father's cousin, whose name was Jay Berwanger. He played for university of Chicago and was the first Heisman trophy winner.

[Michael] *No kidding! Wow. So you were at Brown and at Glendora?*

At Glendora from January of 1960 through June of '61.

[Michael] *Okay, so anytime you were at Brown, were you in San Diego also?*

No, just Glendora.

[Michael] *Where did you transfer from?*

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I was at McClain High School in Fresno. And I decided I wanted to go to a military school to clean up my act.

[Michael] *That's amazing.*

[Sharon] *So, any other stand-out experiences in terms of maybe good faculty or friendships or any significant events that occurred on campus?*

There were some good faculty and there were some bad faculty. I won't go into the bad faculty, but the good faculty tried to help us. The headmaster, his name escapes me, he died recently. I think it was Lindsay, Mr. Lindsay. Anyway, he was great. We could always go to him with a problem. Most of the army sergeants that were assigned there to teach us ROTC we could go to. Major Knight, the head of the whole thing was a prince-great guy, great guy. And all the staff there was really good. There was, as I say, just small percentage of the people that should not have been there.

[Sharon] *I'm going back to a previous answer. You talked about being a Christian and the Christian environment there. What was the fellowship like for you with other believers?*

I was Protestant. Once in a while the Catholics would get upset and during our non-denominational chapel service, they would kneel on the floor of the chapel, which was different, but anyway, they just wanted to have it so they could relate to it as well as the Protestants.

[Sharon] *So it wasn't a problem, it was just a little bit, differences in tradition...*

No, (not a problem), after chapel, we all got together and had a coke and no problem.

[Sharon] *So you said that when you left public school, a lot of girls and then you got to academy and it's all males, but I know they had a lot of dances and things like that. What was that like for you? Did you look forward to it?*

Well, it was sort of the boys on one side and the girls on the other, but most of the girls we encountered at the dances were young ladies, they were young ladies.

[Michael] *They're predominantly from the girl's school, weren't they?*

No. A lot of them were from town, Glendora High School. A lot of them were from there. I had a couple of friendly relationships with a couple of them. I'd go to their houses for dinner and that type of thing. But the girls were very sophisticated compared to some of the other girls and we enjoyed their company.

[Sharon] *How often did they have dances in Glendora? Formals or balls or whatever?*

We'd have a Christmas dance and a Prom and probably a Spring Dance and Fall Dance and something like that. Probably about four a year.

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[Sharon] *Pretty regular, pretty fancy affairs.*

Oh yeah.

[Michael] *When you went to the girls' houses, did you wear your uniform or did you...?*

Yeah, we didn't have any civilian clothes, so we had to.

[Sharon] *At all? Nothing that you owned on the campus.*

No

[Michael] *That must have impressed the parents.*

I guess, but it certainly impressed the hoodlums in town when we would go to a movie and we were always getting challenged to fights and that type of thing.

[Michael] *I've heard that from; yeah I've heard that before. One guy I talked about there was a gang that came and would drive up the back of the school with their hot rods or something or challenge things or.*

I don't remember them every getting that close, but when we went to town, we were pretty much always confronted by somebody, because we had to wear our uniforms.

[Sharon] *But you were, you had to restrain obviously from fighting or something, because it could have got back to the school?*

Some of us did. Some of us wouldn't.

[Sharon] *Okay, so everyone handled it individually.*

And some came back with battle scars, too.

[Sharon] *What would the school do if they knew?*

I don't really know. I never heard. I mean, you have to defend yourself, obviously, but they didn't want anyone going out, looking for trouble. I think most, pretty much the guys tried to stay out of trouble, but if there's no way out of it, then they had to meet it on, head on.

[Sharon] *So would you say that this was an experience that changed you and if so, can you describe that?*

Yes, it set me in a different direction. Something that I wanted to, I appreciated the experience, I appreciated the education and this is what I needed to sort of steer me in the right direction, to make something of myself and by the time I was 30, I had a bachelor's degree in criminology and a masters degree in criminology and I was very proud. I was the first one in my family to ever had a college degree.

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[Michael] *Where did you do your criminology degree?*

Undergraduate was at Southern Oregon University in Ashland and graduate degree was from Fresno State.

[Michael] *And what'd you do with that?*

I've been a private investigator for 32 years. Prior to that-all my adult life, I've been in the criminal justice system-prior to that, I was 10 years as a law enforcement officer.

[Michael] *Where was that at?*

Last place that I left, I had a couple of jobs, but I left the Oregon State Police as a trooper to go to Fresno State for my graduate degree with the understanding that the superintendent of the Oregon State Police, I'd come back in training division. In the meantime, he was assassinated in Salem, Oregon on the steps of the capital building and when I went to his successor, he says, well we don't have anything in writing; we don't take re-treads, so we can't hire you back. So that was the end of my law enforcement career. It worked out fine. No regrets.

[Michael] *yeah, cause I saw you wearing a New York Police Department t-shirt. I thought you might be a part of that.*

My son's a Santa Anna policeman and it was given to him and he gave it to me. My younger son, now he went to the naval academy and is also an instructor through top gun, he went through top gun and he teaches combat tactics at Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia.

[Michael] *What was it like for your son to go to Adapliith?*

Unreal.

[Michael] *I bet it was really just....*

Blew me away. Excuse me. I mean, my son going to a naval academy and going through top gun, my little bitty Masters from Fresno State doesn't compare to what he's done.

[Sharon] *But I think you can relate in some way there. You definitely...*

[Michael] *...yeah, going to a military academy. What I'm finding interesting with the guys at Brown, it you went to the West Point of the west and it was and still is the top military academy that was on the west coast according to everything I've studied so far. They modeled themselves after West Point in every point they could.*

Well we certainly had their uniforms.

[Michael] *I was talking to another gentleman who said that he went on a cruise with his wife; they stopped off in New York and he went to West Point. He got up early at about 4:00 in the morning,*

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*walked up the hill and heard rubber roll. He saw those cadets come out in their uniforms and it affected him tremendously because he saw himself because those were the exact same uniforms. And he realized that he did the exact same stuff they did. He later took his sons and put them in the military academy, so I think you passed on a legacy.*

Oh, in my yearbook, it said what do you achieve to be? And I said, I want to go-I forget the wording-to the United States Naval Academy, but my grades, like I said were no better than Bs, so I couldn't do it, but my son did.

[Michael] *See?! Legacy, it's a legacy. Congratulations on that!*

[Sharon] *So who do you root for when it's army versus navy?*

[Michael] *He's navy man all the way, come on!*

[Sharon] *But isn't...*

Remember, I was in the navy too.

[Sharon] *it was an army and military academy, so.*

[Michael] *no, Brown was an army academy.*

Yeah, it wasn't Army Navy like San Diego.

[Michael] *West Point, it's called West Point of the west.*

[Sharon] *So if you're-in closing-just what would you say would be something that is an ideal or a value that's really stood out the most to you, that kind of guided you and helped you maintain...?*

I would say that any young man-or nowadays woman-that had the opportunity to go to a school like this should take it, because it will develop character, guidance to what they want to do later on in their life and it's just a...[cuts out]