ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

JEFF BRAMBLETT

An interview conducted on

April 18, 2015

Interviewer: Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

"War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War, World War I to the Present"

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WONGSRICHANALAI: Your name please.

BRAMBLETT: Jeff Bramblett

WONGSRICHANALAI: And when and where did you enter the armed forces?

BRAMBLETT: I went into the United States Coast Guard on May the 2,1966. Finished on Governors Island, which sits in San Francisco Harbor. It's the sister island to Alcatraz, really luxury place to be. Went from there to a Class-A school, gunners mate. Completed that school and was stationed on the United States Coast Guard cutter, *McCulloch*, out of Wilmington, North Carolina. Once I'd been there 6 months I started volunteering for Vietnam. Coast Guard was in Vietnam from 1965 till 1975, when it fell. It's rather frustrating at times because, we were so involved, and yet being the smallest service there were a lot of men and women that were there that didn't know we were there. And I've run into that a whole lot. I mean you get the added . . . people that say, "Well, Coast Guard what did you do? And you're a combat vet. You have a combat action ribbon. A hundred percent disabled form the war. What in the world? We've never heard of y'all being there." That gets kinda frustrating at times. Anyway, go to the next question. . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: Where are you original from?

BRAMBLETT: I'm from Sulphur Springs, Texas, Northeast Texas. Up close to East Texas State University, which is part of the A&M school.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Why the Coast Guard?

BRAMBLETT: [Chuckles] I went to . . . with a friend of mine. We didn't ever have a recruiter in town so we both turned 18 about the same time, been friends through grade school, and his family was Marine Corps back as far as he knew and I really didn't have a lot of family that had been in the military. My father was an engineer for southern aircraft in World War II, and so he couldn't be drafted because of what he was doing. I had a first cousin that went to Vietnam early on. He was there in '61, '62, and he was an Army Airborne Ranger, also a pilot. He piloted Huey . . . the first Huey helicopters, but he was also a fixed wing pilot. He flew different transport type aircraft. He had said a few things about Vietnam but we were starting to hear about it on television in 1966 but first being in boot camp, and then in a class-A school, which lasted 18 weeks . . . Its very intense. You don't have time to watch television, so you just hear a little bit here and there. When I went onboard the *McCulloch* it did what was called "ocean station duty." We went into the North Atlantic, and there were different places set up and they are alphabetized. And they are there in case an aircraft or ship gets in distress and has to go down and we need to get there for rescue. You sit in a 64-mile square grid for 30 days and you go around and you go across but you just sit inside that 64-mile area, which sounds like a lot, but it's really not. It gets real boring . . . but the North Atlantic. . . . I went on board the *McCulloch* in November of '66 and I had never been to the ocean. When I was with this friend and we were at the recruiter's station, I was . . . we were actually a line waiting to get in to see the Marine recruiters. I mean, it hadn't . . . Vietnam had not become a bad thing and there was a lot of kids was volunteering. We were leaned up against the wall being 18 totally . . . you know, invincible I

guess and this man came walking down the hall in a sailor's uniform and I guess I had a neon light that said "stupid" on my forehead. He picked me out of maybe seven or eight guys there and he said "well, going into the Marines, well, that's a great thing, yada yada yada," he said "now when you go in be sure you tell them you want a delayed enlistment so you can go down to Galveston and lay on the beach, see the pretty girls in their bikinis . . . you know, be sure you do that." My response was "oh, I've never see the ocean." "Really? Well let me get . . ." and he looked at me and said, "Would one of you hold his place line? And I'm just gonna take him and show him some photographs of what the Coast Guard does." I'm sure somewhere I'd heard about the Coast Guard but as far as I can remember, that's the first person I'd ever heard of being in the Coast Guard. He takes me down and he shows me these pictures and they were of what you call lifeboat stations. And they're really made for the recruiters and after he talked to me for a little bit, I went back to talk to my friend and I said "Man, have fun in the Marine Corps. I'm going in the Coast Guard." So, I went in joined. May 2, 1966.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was your friend's name?

BRAMBLETT: David Felkner. F-E-L-K-N-E-R.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Are you still in touch?

BRAMBLETT: Yeah, on occasion. He made it through a tour in Vietnam. He did get wounded but came out of it in pretty good shape.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Fair enough. That's a great story. Did you find any part of your service challenging? What was the most challenging part?

BRAMBLETT: The schools were hard but like my experience in education at that point had just been high school and they really hit us . . . It was a 12-hour day and that was . . . that was pretty tough. Boot camp was a lot harder than I thought. Our company commander had been in the Marine Corps for 12 years, and had changed services, came over to the Coast Guard. He had been a DI, a Drill Instructor in the Marine Corps and when he first meet us, after discussing things about each one of us, he told us "I don't know what you came here to expect but understand this is going to the most physically challenging thing you will ever do in your life. It is second only to the Marine Corps in difficulty." And I was glad I had run cross-country track because we started out 5 miles every morning, and that's on an island, so we literally ran circles to get there, but we'll get into the most difficult part, because, obviously, the most difficult part was Vietnam.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Fair enough. What conception did you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment? What did America represent?

BRAMBLETT: It represented everything that was good. I was raised very patriotically. I was named after my mother's oldest brother. He was a Texas Ranger and had a lot of influence on my life. I grew up on a farm, on a dairy farm, and we worked. Well, I started getting up at 7 o'clock . . . When I was seven years old I started getting up at four o'clock in the morning, and working until I caught the bus and went to school, and then in the afternoons, caught the bus

back home and would work until around 7 o'clock at night, and that was just life on the farm. I mean we had work to do and we didn't have anyway of hiring people. We had to do it. I had a brother that was four years older than myself. Up until he went into high school he helped a lot but he was a very talented football player. He was the all-state football player form Sulphur Springs and he started on varsity as a freshman.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you understand why the United States was engaged in Vietnam?

BRAMBLETT: I know what I had heard. I had listened to Lyndon Johnson speak. I had listened to John F. Kennedy. His assassination had a very profound impact on us. I mean Dallas was only 60 miles away. There are actual some families from Sulphur Springs, and some of my schoolmates that were there. Two of them actual witnessed the shooting. They didn't know what it was. People were freaking out and running and they didn't realize that Kennedy had actually been shot until then. But America was involved and we were fighting to keep South Vietnam from falling to the communists, and we really believed that communism was the most hideous thing that could happen to a person so, I believed in it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, what unit were you deployed with?

BRAMBLETT: I was . . . When I went to Vietnam I was in Squadron One, Division Thirteen. There were three divisions of Coast Guard in Vietnam. We had Division Eleven in Da Nang, Division Twelve in An Thoi, which is a small island in the Gulf of Thailand, and then Division Thirteen was in a little town called Cat Lo . . . C-A-T-L-O, very close to Vũng Tàu. It was . . . They . . . They had a boat was eighty-two feet long, about thirteen feet wide. It drew three feet of water. Very heavily armed it had four fifty caliber machine guns on the stern. It had a fifty caliber mounted on top of a eighty-one millimeter mortar, which . . . that mortar was totally different from the mortar like the Army or Marine Corps use, which is a fixed tube. This one was mounted. It actually had hydraulics on it and it was mounted transversely. It could be moved horizontally, vertically. The only thing that stopped the horizontal movement was to keep it from firing back into the boat. Shoots a twelve-pound projectile up to about just a little bit over two thousand meters. Fifty caliber is . . . is a half inch round bullet, weighs . . .the bullet weighs seven hundred grains and it leaves the barrel at 2,640 feet per second and is capable of firing about 550 rounds per minute. You have to . . . You can't just latch it down and just fire continuously. It comes in hundred belts and you try to fire three to five round burst and even at that, when you get into a fight, you'll wind up . . . the barrel will actually turn cherry red and you'll burn barrels out pretty quickly if you're not careful. We would charge an inch and a half fire hose on the boat, because, one if you get hit, you've got to stop a fire. When you're on a boat, that's it. You don't have a place to hide. You can't get down. You stand up and you have to be in it. It's very personal. We had twenty-six, eight-two footers; they were all called point boats. I was on the Point Young for about six months and then I moved over to working with what was called the Mobile Rear Marine Force. And that was a combination of Navy, Army, and Coast Guard personnel. I ran the smallest boat in the Mekong Delta, a fourteen-foot Boston Whaler with a single forty harsh mercury outboard. We had three men on the boat. One man had to run the boat, so that left two of us to man weapons. And we tried to always work in at least two boats together. Sometimes we were in major operations, and there would be anywhere from thirty to fifty different types of boats. There were . . . Everything in the Mekong Delta is water. There is

no highway that transverses that. The Mekong Delta in Vietnam, prior to the war, had fed most of Asia: Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, any part of Indochina. During the war, their ability to produce rice dropped off. Rice is the staple. It's what keeps people alive. I mean it's . . . You can't conceive how vital it is unless you've been there. We worked in an operation called "Market Time." It was . . . at the . . . After the war, when they had time to look at what had worked and what hadn't, "Market Time" was considered the most . . . or no . . . It was considered the best functioning operation. It was made to stop the flow of men, weapons, and food from going out of the Mekong Delta into the rest of Vietnam. We literally cut off their food supply from there. They had to start putting pressure on the local farmers to produce rice for them. We stopped the flow of arms from coming in. They were coming in by hundred and ten foot gun boat that was made for a one way trip from Haiphong into Vietnam. They would carry about 250 tons of weapons and supplies. One of the most critical supplies was medical supplies. The NVA, North Vietnamese Army, and the Viet Cong, which were the people that were trained by the NVA in fighting against the South Vietnamese government, therefore they fought against us, were the most experienced soldiers we fought against ever in America's history. Their NCOs . . . Their sergeants had an average of combat experience of thirteen years. They knew what they were doing. They were very, very good soldiers. They were as tough as it got.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Were you ever wounded?

BRAMBLETT: Only slightly. I never had to be hospitalized. I received a small piece of shrapnel over my right eye. A corpsman removed it and stitched it up . . . tried to put me on a helicopter to send me back. We were so shorthanded that I refused to be evacuated. I wasn't incapacitated. I wasn't in a lot of pain. I stepped on a punji stake and it went up my right calf and went in and out. It pierced my calf about six inches right up the side of it. Before it came out and they . . . it broke off. They had to pull it out. The worst part of that was they had to debride the wound every two days. That's they take a . . . like a long Q-Tip about sixteen-inches long with a cotton swab on the end of it. And they literally go into the hole and clean it out to keep it from . . . because they would take human excrement and put it on their punji stakes to cause infection. But that was really the only two things that I . . . I was lucky. I don't know. One of our main jobs was to stop and search junk boats. There aren't any trucks or anything like that. Everything moves by boat and we would sometimes board and search fifty to sixty boats in a day. It entailed literally getting in the bottom of them. Their junk boats are usually . . . They're made out of wood that they build with hand tools and it may be three-feet wide, four-feet wide, twenty feet, twenty-five feet long, and they would put boards across so that there would be a . . . between where they walked, and sat, and their . . . all of their . . . They literally lived onboard. It kept them from being down into what we called the bilge area and you would have to get down there and crawl that out, which meant you were crawling around in the water. The water in the Mekong Delta . . .We call it . . . what we said about it was "it was too thick to drink and too thin to plow." But it's very dirty. In the bottom of those boats, there would be fuel mixed with the water. There would be rats, cockroaches. I did capture a couple of NVA that were hiding underneath them. Got real lucky once. Grabbed a man's foot and I was so shocked that I . . . I mean I had done this a lot and all of the sudden. . . I mean I had a flashlight but it was not wanting to work. It was a little military flashlight. It's called a crooked-neck flashlight. The . . . The bulb sits at a ninety-degree angle to the rest of it. And it was blinking on and off and I had a forty-five pistol in my right hand and when I . . . I had the flashlight clipped to my web gear and I hadn't seen him. He was

laying very still. When I touched his foot, I just grabbed him. And I grabbed him right at the ankle, and I couldn't think of what to do with him. I just jerked him and stood up. Well, I only weighed about a hundred thirty-five . . . forty pounds. He started literally doing a sit up almost. He had an AK-47. It's . . . AK-47 is a fantastic weapon. It will shoot. You can literally open the bolt, and pour mud into it, shake it out, close the bolt on a round, and it will work. Somehow or another he had jammed it and . . . it . . . the . . . when he . . . I heard . . . I heard him pull the trigger. I saw the barrel come around and I hear this *click* and it sounded like two people slapping pans together. It was so loud sounding . . . and actually it's not very loud. I turn loose of his leg and grabbed him by his shirt and was so scared I just jerked him towards me and I hit him upside the head with that pistol. There was a new guy standing on the deck of the *Point Young* . . . and he had picked up a weapon he wasn't even qualified to use, which is an M-60 machine gun. He was very new and he had misfed the belt into it and I heard the bolt go home and I just could see the barrel. It was right at my head and he pulled the trigger and it didn't go off because he had misfed the bolt or the . . . the belt. Our Chief Boatswain Mate, Chief Sykes, great man, literally leaned over him and grabbed the weapon and jerked it out of his hands and was saying all manner of things to him [chuckles] at the time. We got the guy onboard, got him handcuffed. We had an interpreter his name was Boi Minh Houng. And Hong was a very close friend of mine. He had been there from the day I got on board the *Point Young*. He was intelligent. He spoke five languages. He had gone to the University of . . . I don't know if it was the University of France or the University of Paris. His family had relatives that lived in France. They had sent him from Vietnam to the university when he was fourteen. There's where he learned the languages. He spoke, obviously, Vietnamese, American or English, however you want to call it, French, one dialect of Chinese, and another dialect of the Cambodian language, which is kind of like the Vietnamese language but it is totally different at the same time. We had become very close. I give him a lot of credit for me being alive.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Can you spell his name for us?

BRAMBLETT: Oh, wow.

WONGSRICHANALAI: To the best . . .

BRAMBLETT: Boi, Boi, Boi. I'm trying to think how you spell Boi. Minh is M-I-N-H. Houng is H-O-U-N-G. I don't really remember how to spell Boi. He went by . . . We called him Houng. You address him by his last name. He was a . . . Like a . . . like an E-7, like a chief in the Vietnamese Navy. He was a good soldier. He was a . . . He knew what he was doing. He'd been at it . . . His whole family had been killed by the Viet Cong, trying to get to him. I worry about what happened to him at the fall of Vietnam. I do. I've tried to find him and I've never been able to. I've gone to the Vietnamese communities and I've talked with them. They're very closed on telling any American about . . . when you're asking for somebody you served with. So many American troops have a bad impression of the South Vietnamese. They don't understand them. We come from America. We think that we have all the answers, that we know so much more than anybody else. We look at their society. I was amazed. I could go into a little bitty village and we would search it for weapons people and so forth but you walk into their . . . into their hooch, which is their home, and their floors would be dirt but they would be spotless. I mean they pack it down, they sweep it every day. Everything . . . They don't have much. We are so . . .

We have so much in America. We threw away things the Viet Cong would pick up and use against us. C-ration cans. We'd open the lid on it with what's called a P-38 can opener. I'll bring one the next time I come so you can see it. We'd fold the lid back, we'd eat the food out of it, and until we learned to crush them, we'd just throw it away. They would take it and put gunpowder in it, close the . . . close the lid back down, pack it with . . . with mud, put a blasting cap into it, a fuse, and make a small landmine out of it. That's just one of the things. We seem to think everybody should speak English and you know they don't. That doesn't mean that they're not intelligent. It just means that they are from a different place. I thought I grew up fairly poor. I had so much growing up. And yet, in reality, I didn't have a lot to a lot of my friends. Houng taught me about the Vietnamese. He taught me about their culture, that their religion was just as important to them as our religion is to us. It may be totally different, but that's okay. It's still about God in its own way. It . . . They didn't have . . . A lot of their people didn't have the chance to go to schools. Women are . . . They're secondary to men. When a man gets married . . . a Vietnamese man gets married, if he was to have nothing but girls, he would think he was cursed. They don't give the women, the girls the opportunity. There's only one or two kids are going to get an education, it's going to be the boys for the most part. We're so used to the medical quality we have here in America, and they had none. But . . . Anyway.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Those are great observations. Did you ever engage any of the local inhabitants? [Did you] ever get into a conversation about what the United States meant or what the United States was trying to do?

BRAMBLETT: Yes. [Pause] The hamlet . . . The . . . The town our division was based at, Cat Low . . . When we would go back to division to resupply . . . We would usually work ten days out and either one to one-and-a-half days back, and we would have liberty, and go into the town up until ten-o'clock at night. And we got where we talked with some of the local people there in different shops . . . There was a couple of bars . . . For the most part they liked the money we brought in. They thought that we were rude for the most part, that we were loud. We . . . We just didn't take the time to learn anything. They didn't . . . Before I went to Vietnam I had like two days of . . . to teach me something about the Vietnamese. You learn how to tell them to "stop," "come here," just basic commands, and we expect to be able to say, you know, "la day," which means "come here" and we want to do it like this "la day, la day, la day." [Gestures aggressively with hands.] If they were going to say it to one of their own . . . If a Vietnamese was speaking to a Vietnamese, they would do their hand like this. [Gestures in a calmer manner.] They are very . . . very, very gentle about it. We always expected everybody to immediately obey and yet, who in the heck are we? We're in their country. Yeah, we're fighting and dying to help them, but I never really felt like that they . . . they thought much of us in the most part. A lot of people did. Houng . . . I gave him all sorts of information that if he had the chance to get out to come to me and I would do everything I could to help him and he just looked at me and said, "This is my country. I will fight and die here or I will fight and win here." And I . . . I don't know. It does bother me that I don't know what happened to him. And I had other interpreters but none of them were as close to me as Houng.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How old was he?

BRAMBLETT: He was thirty-four whenever I met him and he had a birthday . . . Best I remember, it was in October. My . . . My conception of time . . . I know when I got there. I remember a couple of dates: December the fifth was a horrible day. The Coast Guard was . . . was lucky. We didn't lose a lot of people there and yet we . . . We had . . . For us it seemed like we had a lot of people there but we were so . . . such a small service. We had twenty-six boats. There were thirteen men to each boat. Our division's headquarters . . . the three different headquarters . . . probably had thirty people at each one of those and we only had like eight or nine officers in Saigon that dealt with MACV (Military Arm Command, Vietnam). So when you consider that the Army and Marine Corps at times had a quarter of a million people there. Our numbers were small.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was your specific mission as a service . . . as a branch of the armed forces?

BRAMBLETT: Our specific mission in Vietnam was to stop the flow of personnel, weapons, and supplies from . . . leaving South . . . Mekong Delta and going towards Saigon, and being . . . being dispersed into the rest of Vietnam to supply the NVA and the Viet Cong people. That was our . . . That's what we were set up and . . . and . . . and trained to do. The small boat operations . . . When I was on the small boat, we did a lot of reconnaissance for the Mobile Riverine Force . . . Get it off . . . It'll come off . . . Be the first time it's ever been off. [*Chuckles*] [Mr. Bramblett took the pin on his cap off to show to the interviewer.] That was our insignia for the Mobile Riverine Force. It's . . . What you're looking is obviously an anchor, the two things that cross it are actually matchlock muskets and the reason for them being matchlocks was that was some of the first armed rifles that we had in . . . in the world. People didn't know much about them and we were learning as we went. We didn't . . . We didn't know how to go about doing what we were doing but we did a dagum fine job of it and so that's how that came about. And the Mobile Riverine Force Association is . . . I'm part of . . . But this was actually the patch that we wore when we wore a patch. Most of the time none of us carried any type of identification on us. If we were captured, we were going to try to refrain from giving out any information for at least three days because for . . . They figure if you can hold out for three days under interrogation, that you will . . . nothing you can tell them after that will be very vital. We went through a training program called SERE before we went. That's S-E-R-E (Survival Evasion Resistance and Escape). And part of that, you go through a POW . . . a week of it . . . You go through a POW camp where you're brought in, you're literally stripped down, all your clothes are thrown into a pile and after they search you . . . and they're pretty brutal. You actually sign a paper before you start the training that says you relinquish all your rights as an American citizen, that you have no rights just like you will have no rights if you're a prisoner of war. They're not going to hurt you to the point that you're not going to be able to go to Vietnam but they did things like put us in very small boxes. They stood me in water one time because I wouldn't give them any information and I literally had to stand on my tiptoes to keep my mouth out of the water. And it was cold. It was in the mountains of Southern California, a place called Warner Hot Springs. It was a Marine Corps owned . . . Camp Pendleton is . . . It's part of that base. They wore uniforms of the . . . of the North Vietnamese. Quite a few of them could speak Vietnamese and so when they were around you, they didn't speak English to each other. They spoke in Vietnamese. It was a pretty tough week. You really start to think that . . . Your mind starts telling you that this is never going to end. And that's what they're trying to do to you and they're good at it. When it's

over with, you . . . you really wonder. I saw one man break. He actually stood in front of us and had been put in a uniform of the Vietnamese . . . the North Vietnamese and he was standing there cutting up an American flag. He snapped, literally snapped, and they used that. They say it doesn't happen very often but I don't know. You only know what the week that you're there. But . . . It was that tough. It was real. It seemed real.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So if you didn't pass they probably didn't send you to Vietnam.

BRAMBLETT: Right, right. Yeah, but they wanted you to pass. You were expected to go. That man, from what I heard, I don't know for a fact, but I heard that he was actually discharged under medical discharging because he did break down.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How did your service influence or affect your family at home?

BRAMBLETT: I was the first in my family. I had four brothers and I was the first one . . . I was the youngest one and I was also the first one to go to war. It was extremely hard on my parents. My mother and father, when I came back . . . I will never forget my father saying something to me. We . . . I was having a very hard time assimilating back into what was going on. I . . . When I landed in San Francisco when I was coming back most of the people on my aircraft were one Army unit and there was only five of us that went to San Francisco International Airport and that was at about two o'clock in the morning. I was . . . I'd gotten my ticket and had like forty-five minutes to wait and I went to a bar. I just . . . I just wanted to have a drink and just sit there. I didn't want to talk to anybody. I had my uniform on. My sea bag, same thing as a duffle bag, that had all my uniforms and some civilian clothes in it had been stored in a . . . what's called a Conex Box, a big metal box. Well during a mortar attack, it had gotten some holes in it, and the rain . . . because the monsoon . . . it seemed like it never stopped raining . . . It had rotted and I didn't have anything except my jungle fatigues that I had on. And I had saved one pair to have to take to take back with me because I knew from talking to the other guys that once you got back to the States, if you had a set of jungle fatigues, you'd never be issued another pair because they didn't wear the same type of fatigue in the United States. I had earned a black beret and I had my beret. I had six ribbons, a bar that they had just handed to me and said "Here, this is part of the ribbons and medals that you've earned. You will receive the rest of them when you get to your next base." I had those on and a man and his wife, girlfriend, whatever had started calling me a baby killer and a lot of other things and they wound up . . . She spit on me first and I just pushed her away. She'd gotten almost up in her face and I just pushed her away and her boyfriend, husband, whatever . . . He then spit on me and swung at me and I proceeded to hurt him a little bit. There was a policeman showed up. He told me to go down and told me where my gate was. He said, "You go down there. There's a bar down there." He said, "I'll radio another guy to tell him that you're down there." There wasn't hardly anyone in the airport. It was two, two-thirty in the morning and he then arrested these two people but it was like you were a leper the way you were . . . People would look at you when they . . . I mean I came back to a little small town in Northeast Texas and yet people I had known my whole life wouldn't speak to me. They . . . I went to a VFW and I had a couple of guys that had been in Korea tell me I wasn't . . . I couldn't be there because I hadn't actually been at war because Vietnam was never a declared war. They didn't have the right to tell me that. The bartender, one of the people that was actually a member of the VFW, were nice to me but I had already reached the point of I wanted nothing to do with

anybody at that time. At that time, they still didn't know about post-traumatic stress disorder and that's part of my hundred percent disability is caused by being . . . Post-traumatic . . . PTSD. Also, got a lot of Agent Orange, which is an herbicide that's 2,4-D. Our water supply, the filtration system, didn't have any way of taking that herbicide out of the water and they were processing and so not only were we sprayed with it and came into contact physically with it, we were drinking it. I . . . It causes you to be a diabetic. Nobody in my family is diabetic but I have diabetes. I have peripheral neuropathy that is extreme and accelerating. I'm on such a heavy level of medication that . . . It's unbelievable what it takes to stop the pain that I'm in but at the same time I'm pretty lucky I have my hands and my arms and my legs and my feet. I got both eyes. Pretty fortunate.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did your . . . or . . . After your time of service, has your conception of the United States and the world changed?

BRAMBLETT: I really quit thinking about that. I didn't care. I . . . I literally lost four jobs in the year after I got out of the service because they found out I was a Vietnam veteran. One of the aircraft carriers—and I had a friend onboard who was from Sulphur Springs—was coming underneath the San Francisco bridge and they dumped two fifty-five gallon drums of pigs blood onto the deck of it as it came underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. They were standing . . . When a ship comes in, they line up in their dress uniforms and he literally got covered with it. And he's never been the same. It really . . . It really messed him up. I've been married several times. I had . . . I don't have them as much, but I had nightmares and flashbacks. At first I thought maybe I was going crazy. Didn't know how to . . . You couldn't get any help. I went to the VA and all they wanted to do with you was give you Thorazine. And I realized that that wasn't what I wanted. And my mother and my first wife had taken me there saying, "You need help. You've got to have some help." My mother and my father had both said that they didn't understand what had happened to me or who I was anymore. I heard . . . If I heard it once, I heard it a thousand times, "You need to just put it behind you and go on. Just forget about it and go on." You can't see and be involved in life and death on that personal of a level and ever put it behind you. It's going to be with you the rest of your life. And it's not just Vietnam, that's any war. I am so worried about the kids coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq. They have the same problem we had: you can't tell the good guys from the bad guys. You know, if they don't have a gun in their hand they look just like . . . well, they look like somebody from Afghanistan or Iraq, you know? They were Vietnamese, you know? We had no way of knowing who was good and who was bad.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Is there any advice you would give to young men and women who are just entering the service?

BRAMBLETT: Listen to what you are being taught. Whatever your job is, you learn it to the point you can do it in your sleep because you may have to do it in the middle of the night and you never know when it's going to get to be bad. I salute them. They're, I think, the best Americans we have. And every war, every war, takes away some of the best. I've worn this bracelet since 1970. It's Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier. He was a helicopter pilot in the Coast Guard. It's very . . . Not many people know the Jolly Green Giants, which were used to pick up pilots that were shot down . . . that a third of all those pilots were Coast Guard. It was Air Force helicopter but because we had search and rescue experience, they used Coast Guard pilots a lot.

And he . . . There was an F-4 Phantom went down in the corner of South Vietnam and Cambodia-Laos. It was late in the day. It was during the monsoon. He raked together a crew because nobody was wanting to take it. They thought well . . . There was . . . There was radio traffic that they were on the ground and alive, the pilots were. It was a set up. Their emergency radio beacon had been turned on by the NVA. When they went in, they were telling them to pop a certain color of smoke and they popped that smoke. There was a gun ship with them and it had made two or three ground passes and had not received any fire. They were very disciplined and they waited until that big helicopter came in to pick them up and blew it out of the sky. And he was listed as a POW for about five years before they did turn it out that he had died in the . . . in the helicopter when it went down. But they used that against us, that they had our men. There was . . . The Vietnamese are, in my opinion, as far as I'm concerned, very cruel people. They had . . . You know, they had defeated the French. They released six men that they had kept since 1954 in 1969 and the only reason they kept them was just prove they could. They wouldn't do what they wanted, so they just kept them. They finally decided they had all the Americans they wanted so they released the French.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How do you spell his name?

BRAMBLETT: Let me see. R-I-T-T-I-C-H-I-E-R. His first name was Jack, middle initial "C." He was shot down June 9, 1968.

WONGSRICHANALAI: One more question, I should have ask much earlier. You said that you had never seen the ocean before

BRAMBLETT: Right.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was your reaction when you first saw all that blue?

BRAMBLETT: I was stunned. I mean, it . . . it never stops and it just keeps coming. I firmly believe in God and that he built this world and I looked at that and realized that . . . the awesomeness of it. When I've sailed on it . . . You can stand on the deck of a boat or a ship when you're on the ocean and you can see twelve miles if it's a clear day. That's what the horizon, that's how far you can see, the horizon. And you can sail on it day after day after day, and it's just there. It never stops. I rode out four hurricanes and one typhoon while I was in the Coast Guard and . . . It . . . The power of a hurricane . . . A tornado is like . . . I mean, y'all know what a tornado is like here in West Texas. A hurricane covers hundreds of miles. I . . . I was there, and I was based in Mobile when I came back. Hurricane Camille came ashore at Biloxi Mississippi at 212 mile per hour. Pass Christian, Mississippi is exactly where it hit. The eye came in and it destroyed the entire town. It was all under water the next day. I was on a rescue helicopter. We went there and there was nothing. We diverted back to Biloxi because there was nothing left of Pass Christian. The movie *Forrest Gump* . . . that movie. It's got Forrest Gump in it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Tom Hanks?

BRAMBLETT: Yeah, Tom Hanks. I can't think the name of it all of a sudden.

WONGSRICHANALAI: It's about? What is it about?

BRAMBLETT: It's about the guy Forrest Gump. He's . . . He has problems with his legs. He's in braces . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: *Forrest Gump*.

BRAMBLETT: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Yes.

BRAMBLETT: OK, that is the title. I'm sorry. Just wasn't . . . I was just thinking that it should have been something else. Anyway . . . in there with the Lieutenant there in that storm and there's one shrimp boat left, that's Pass Christian Mississippi, and that is pretty accurate. So, anyway.