

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

SARAH BROWN

An interview conducted on

March 4, 2017

Interviewer: Heather Gentles

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

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

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Sarah Brown are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 4, 2017.

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GENTLES: My name is Heather Gentles. I'm the interviewer. It is March 4, 2017 and we are in May, Texas right now.

BROWN: My name is Sarah Brown and I live in Bastrop but I come out to the ranch in May to have quiet and relax and de-stress.

GENTLES: Are you ready to start with our questions?

BROWN: Yes.

GENTLES: Okay. When and where were you born?

BROWN: Um, I was born in Crystal City, Texas, which is down by the border of Mexico between Eagle Pass and Laredo.

GENTLES: Okay. Did you grow up there?

BROWN: Yes. I grew up in Carrizo Springs, ten-miles south of Crystal City.

GENTLES: That's not West Texas, is it? That's not considered West Texas?

BROWN: No, that's considered Southeast Texas.

GENTLES: What is the name of your relative who served in the armed forces?

BROWN: Um, I have several, but the main one is my ex-husband Marvin Wade Brown. He's lieutenant colonel now.

GENTLES: How long were y'all married for?

BROWN: We were married twenty-three years, and twenty of them he was in the Coast Guard and the Marine Corps.

GENTLES: When did he enlist in the armed forces?

BROWN: He enlisted, actually, before we even got married. So, it was about 1991 in the Coast Guard, and went to boot camp and yeoman school at Napa Valley, California. And then he went into the Marine Corps . . . in 1999 he went into training.

GENTLES: In which military conflict did he take part?

BROWN: Technically, he was in Desert Storm as a coasteer, but the Coast Guard doesn't really deploy. He has awards for that. I mean, he has medals for that service. So, the main conflict he was actually present for, or went to, was Iraq . . . or the latest Iraqi war.

GENTLES: Do you know why he enlisted in the armed forces?

BROWN: Yes, actually. He always had a dream of being a leader and he couldn't fulfill that. He'd done a lot of odd jobs. He was a Culligan man. He had his own businesses several times and was doing fine but it wasn't fulfilling him. And so, someone in our Sunday school class talked to him about becoming an officer. He had his degree in world geography and Spanish, so he was a good fit for an officer.

GENTLES: Yeah, that makes sense. He did politics, too, right?

BROWN: Yes. His specialty was actually Africa and the Middle East, and that's where he spent most of his time overseas. It was kind of interesting how that worked out.

GENTLES: What were your thoughts about his decision to serve?

BROWN: Um actually, I was so totally supportive and excited at the time. Samuel was actually a little bit sickly and we didn't know what was wrong with him and so it wasn't but about . . . it was probably about four months after Wade got into the Marine Corps that I took Sam for his four-year checkup and they found a major heart defect. It was the Army that actually did open heart surgery on Sam and saved his life, so really, if Wade had not gone in the military, I'm not sure that we would have found that in time. They said he was very close to having an aneurysm.

GENTLES: Do you want to tell us about your kids?

BROWN: Yes. I have four children. Samuel is twenty-two in a couple of weeks. And then Abigail is going to be nineteen, Clara is sixteen, and Oliver is twelve.

GENTLES: Okay. Was your family member deployed overseas?

BROWN: Yes. He's been deployed seven times but not always overseas. So, sometimes it was like he did a six-month stint in New Orleans, not during Katrina or right after but within that same year. He also was sent on an emergency recruiting job. I don't know how you have emergency recruiting but, anyway, it seemed . . . to them it was an emergency. And he had to go up to South Carolina because one of the officers was diagnosed with cancer. So, he had to leave Missouri where he was recruiting and go north in the middle of the winter. And he would tell us about the ice and the snow. He had a lot of interesting experiences in the States, not just overseas. I can list all the countries he's been in, I think, if you want me to.

GENTLES: Yeah! It's interesting.

BROWN: Okay. He's been in Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Djibouti—which is a little, tiny country in Africa—and he went into Ethiopia just briefly but he had to go in in civilian clothes. I don't know what the mission there was. He did some training in Morocco for a while. He's been to Norway to do international training. A lot of the training he did, he didn't like what he was doing in those places because he doesn't like training people in other countries with our weapons to use our weapons on what he perceives will probably be their own people, like in Africa. So, he was very bothered by some of the duties he was given, but he had to obey orders. There were a few

times he disobeyed orders, actually, because of his conscience. And he took the risk of actually going to the brig for that but it was okay . . . turned out fine.

GENTLES: If your family member participated in a military conflict, what was your understanding of the conflict?

BROWN: The understanding came actually when 9/11 happened. Because that day, I remember I was standing in the kitchen and a major's wife called me—and Wade was a captain at the time—and she said, “Sarah, do you know what happened?” And I said “no,” because at the time, I had decided to go without television for a while for the kids. I felt like they needed to concentrate on relationships and not be watching cartoons and stuff all the time. I did that off and on throughout the military time. I thought it was healthy for the kids. Anyway, that day, we all knew that our husbands were leaving and I can remember going outside and the silence. Usually you could hear kids playing on the playground in the mornings and the silence was absolutely numbing that day. So, I went to a neighbor's and we watched the rest of the horrible events in New York City. The guys were all . . . Before it happened, they all got to work about seven or eight. It's not nine to five in the military. So, if they're on a base they're there early and no phones rang—nothing—because we all knew, everybody knew . . . We knew we were going to war. When you're in the military, you just kind of know when something happens. That's a statement of war.

GENTLES: What was your understanding of the conflict?

BROWN: It was very clear that the focus for our military from what I understood was more on Bin Laden, not on Iraq. But there are a lot of top secret things that we don't understand. One of the top secret things that I understood . . . Well, I can't say its top secret because that's not true. It was in magazines but it wasn't immediately announced. I'll just say it that way. In Iraq, they were cutting out the tongues of children, there were daddies disappearing, and they all lived together in one house a lot. And so, there were uncles, dads . . . The men were disappearing. They would go to work and never come back. And so, when that started happening and the children started being horrendously treated is when we decided to go into Iraq. And a lot of people don't realize . . . They think it was just about the weapons of mass destruction but it was actually about the horrible things done. They were actually writing to us, telling us to please come. I'd found that out too.

GENTLES: Really? That's not something I've ever heard.

BROWN: Yes. There are things that haven't been heard. I do know that for a fact that we've been asked by many top-ranking officials and even just common citizens that have citizens here.

GENTLES: What were your most vivid memories of your family member's time in service?

BROWN: One of my most vivid memories is the time that he came back from Iraq. Because I remember I would pray every month that he wouldn't die. In January . . . that's the month we got married. In February was the time they were close to going in. They were in Kuwait. I prayed that he wouldn't die in the same month as my grandfather. Then in March, I prayed that he

wouldn't die in the same month as the birthdays of my two children. In April, I prayed he wouldn't die in the same month my dad died. In May, he came home. That's kind of how I got through it. But my most vivid visual memory is watching the plane pull in and all their faces on their plane and knowing that even though my husband's unit was the only unit that didn't lose anybody, the other units lost someone. And I was thinking of the wives that didn't get to meet their husband and those faces that were missing from the windows that I was looking in. Then the feeling of excitement but guilt also, because I had all the kids with me. We were really excited to see him, but there was a little sadness with it too.

GENTLES: He was in active combat, right?

BROWN: He was a supply officer but, yes, he was with a combat unit. He actually went in without a weapon. He made the decision himself, as a personal decision, to go in without a weapon. He didn't tell anyone or talk about it a lot. He also . . . As they were going in, the army got split up and went on the wrong road, and some people were taken and held hostage. By radio . . . the marines were behind the army, and by radio, his group found out about it and Wade made the sergeant or whoever was driving the humvee he was in . . . made him drop him off. He said, "No, sir. I can't." And he said, "Well, you're going to obey orders. You need to drop me off right here. This is where they're missing turns." You take the wrong road in Iraq, it's so sandy and a dust storm could come in at any time. He got out and he actually directed all night. He didn't want anyone to know about this. He kind of kept it to himself for almost three years. He directed those marines all night long to make sure they turned right instead of left and took the right road because the roads weren't marked. He got a ride with the last humvee even though his sergeant argued and argued with him. He wasn't supposed to argue with an officer, but he did. He hitched a ride with the last humvee of his unit.

GENTLES: What were your fears about your family member's return home?

BROWN: At the time, we didn't know if there were going to be chemical weapons, and so I was really nervous about that, about damage, about nerve agents like they had in Vietnam. That's what I was mostly concerned about. I remember praying that the hands of the guys that might be using something like that would be tied. I didn't want them to die or anything, I just prayed they would be tied. As every day went by and we heard no weapons . . . no attacks of weapons of mass destruction, I just kept thinking, "Thank you, Lord that they're not being bombarded with chemicals of any kind." Wade is the one that actually . . . For 3-1, it's actually a huge unit. It's 3,000 guys. He had to check out every gas mask. They were short one and he went straight up to the general to get that one. That's what he told me. And he wasn't supposed to do that. You're not supposed to jump rank. He did because they were leaving that week on the ship.

GENTLES: Did your family member face any difficulties or challenges as they re-integrated into civilian life?

BROWN: Yes, actually, he did. Wade is very strong mentally. And they warned us about this, that they were going to do something very American. Each of them does something very American to sort of heal the pain and get over stuff and to feel normal. So, I kept that in my mind and didn't say anything. Because they trained the wives. They take you into meetings and stuff

before the guys come home. Wade went and bought a brand-new Honda, a red one. So, yeah, there were some things. Some of them do positive things like that and then others have anger. Wade never actually had to shoot anyone—he didn't take his weapon in—but he just didn't want to have to kill anyone. He never had to shoot at anyone. I think the worst injury was someone got shot in the butt in his unit because of celebratory . . . It went up in the air and came down on somebody's butt. That was the worst injury that they had. So, we were really thankful that nobody got hurt in his unit.

GENTLES: Did your family member's time in the military change your conception of Texas in any way?

BROWN: Yes. I had times when, because of the stress . . . I actually came home one time and I had forgot my dad had died. You get in this mode with dealing with stress every day, and you're on your own . . . a single mom kind of. And my perception of home, I would say—not necessarily Texas—my perception of home would get a little off. You don't get to see your family much when you're living in another state. We were living in California and North Carolina, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Virginia. Texans are very supportive of the military in general, so that's one thing about Texas. You feel support. You feel support from the people here, whereas in California, if you go north of Los Angeles you may get something thrown at your car if they can tell. We never put bumper stickers on our cars out there. That was something we learned. We commonly had our cars scanned for bombs with a big mirror they scan underneath cars, especially after 9/11. For three years after 9/11, every time we went on base, there was a sign that said you must stop. "If you do not stop, we will open fire." We also had to deal with that. So, what if your brakes go out and you have these three kids in the car? Then he had to check for bombs on top of that. It was just crazy. They happen.

GENTLES: Has your conception of the United States changed?

BROWN: Well, my perception is that people aren't grateful enough to the wives, in particular. Not because I need attention or thanks or anything but, a lot of times, the hardest thing for me is when I apply for something that says, "Were you a member of the armed forces?" I have to say no, yet I was by his side the whole time. There's an ignorance there. But when you talk to almost any military person—this is Wade too—they don't want people to experience or have to deal with what it's like to be in the military. They'd rather people stay ignorant, whereas some of us wives would rather people understand because the whole family goes through it. It's not just . . . we're not shot at but we're worried about the person being shot at. There's a lot of stress.

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

BROWN: When they call, and they say, "I need you," you need to understand that they waited until they just can't stand it anymore, especially moms. If they have a baby or they have children, go. Send someone. It's kind of like taking a police family and the wife says, "I need your support" and nobody goes over to her house. It's the same thing, it's just a little more distance. There were times when I needed my family and they weren't hearing me. I'm not a griper, so I wasn't going to argue with them but they didn't really get it. They didn't know how much I was

breaking down. I ended up taking anti-depressants and anti-anxiety and still have to take both of those. It's been fifteen years now. It's disappointing because I didn't plan my life this way but I wouldn't change serving the country in the way that I've had to or the way he had to either.

GENTLES: Anything else?

BROWN: Just don't feel sorry for military families. Just put your feelings into action and show them that you care. We, as a group, do not like people feeling sorry for us or even making a real big day on holidays and Veterans Day. It's kind of like charity. That's not what's important to us. What's important to us is the everyday basis and support. A lack of criticism would be nice . . . a lack of criticism. Agreeing to disagree politically. Military isn't supposed to be politically involved. They only get to vote. They can't even wear t-shirts that say, "Vote for so and so." It's very strict about political involvement. If a man wants to run for office, he has to get in the reserves before he can do that and not be active at the time. I'm just saying show your support, don't just talk about it, and don't wait for a holiday.