Ivars Bemberis ‘64
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Claire Betzer ‘23

BETZER: This is Claire Betzer. Today is May 6, 2023, and I'm conducting this oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I'm recording this interview by Zoom video with Mr. Ivars Bemberis [‘64], and I'm on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. And, Mr. Bemberis is speaking to me from Chesterfield, Virginia. Mr. Bemberis, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

BEMBERIS: Appreciate it.

BETZER: Perfect. So could you please start us off by telling me when and where you were born?

BEMBERIS: I was born [laughter] a long time ago. I was born in the last century. I was born in the city of Riga, which was the capital of Latvia, in 1941.

BETZER: And what do you remember about your hometown?

BEMBERIS: Nothing. And the reason is, at age of three, we left—basically evacuating because of war.

BETZER: Do you remember anything about the evacuation?

BEMBERIS: No. The way it happened is, Latvia had been part of Soviet Union until World War One. They gained independence in 1918. In 1940, after the Second World War began, the Russians re-annexed or annexed Latvia. And then the Germans occupied it until 1944. When they went to their forces to the Motherland for the final protection there, they invited Latvian citizens to come to Germany to work in the war industry. Basically, the mantra was, “You never liked the czarists anyway, the communists are a lot worse. They're coming here, come here.” And we went there. On a boat, got off—my aunt and uncle, and my mother and I—my father was in the army, he left—he stayed behind. My uncle somehow found a cart and a horse and drove into the countryside and bartered us for labor on a farm. When the war ended, we were aliens. We were then required to go to a displaced persons camp. This was in—near Bremen, Germany. In the north of Schleswig-Holstein.

BETZER: Wow. And what were your parents like? Can you tell me a little bit about them?

BEMBERIS: My father was [laughter] in a sense a patriot. He was in the army. When the Germans came in—he was in the Latvian army. And this is classic in many places. When the Germans came in, they basically said to the Latvian army, “Okay, guys, I'll give you a choice. You know, you can go to the Stalag right now, or you can put on a German uniform.” And there was no shame in putting on a German uniform, because you're not in jail. And then the option was you’re gonna be fighting. You know, and then—uh, never mind. But anyway, he was captured after the war, sent to a coal mine in Siberia for 12 years to do his penance. He returned to Latvia in 1956. But after my mother remarried. [laughter]

And so I,—the only memories I have of him are by correspondence. We found out he was alive in ‘56. My spouse later wouldn't allow me to go to Latvia, because he was within—it was a crazy story. My father tried to come visit me, he couldn't visit me because they wouldn't allow him, he asked why. And the story was he had served his time and done well, got back in the good graces of the Latvian communists, but he could not visit me because I was an enemy of the Russian people. So he couldn't come and I wouldn't go.

BETZER: Wow.

BEMBERIS: So again, I had learned about him. And we had a relationship but only by letter. My mother was a party girl. They were married late. They're married in their 30s. My mother was an excellent seamstress. She would work the fashion houses. She would—in the spring she’d do the fall collection, in fall she’d do the spring collection, and she’d spend the summer at the beach. That was my mom.

BETZER: And you said that she remarried.

BEMBERIS: Yeah. My mother—in a displaced persons camp we met other refugees, obviously. She met a gentleman. My aunt and uncle emigrated 1948 to the US—they were sponsored by somebody on a farm down in Mississippi. So they're here. A friend, a male friend of hers, went to New York City, sponsored us through a church in New York City. So we arrived in 1950. As matter of fact, on Monday. Monday? Tuesday, the ninth. On Tuesday the ninth [of May, 2023], it’'ll be 72 years since I set foot on American soil. So they met there, we came to America. She and he married, they were both married, they both had their marriages annulled because they had no

confirmation of any contact of their spouses. And ironically, both spouses showed up after the marriage.

BETZER: Really?

BEMBERIS: At least factually.

BETZER: Wow. And, do you have any siblings?

BEMBERIS: Nope. That's why we have two children. My wife was an only child, I was an only child. We have..we have luckily one of each.

BETZER: Did you always want a sibling?

BEMBERIS: No. I never thought about it actually, for a long time. And there were other distractions. [laughter]

BETZER: And so you were in the displaced persons camps with your mother. And, what was that experience like?

BEMBERIS: It was—the picture of American army posts. When I first got here was sort of like—there were these barracks, big buildings where people were occupying. Well, same idea. We basically had large wooden structures. And the room partitions or blankets, hung off of wires. That was in the beginning over a period of time, it got a little bit better. But it was a camp of many, many nationalities. You're all hoping to go someplace. And time passes slowly. The parents, you know, the adults basically found ways to subsist. My mother as a seamstress was very fortunate…she had a sellable or tradable skill. So she could do the work. We got rations of sorts. And the classic back then is whenever somebody gave you food, they also gave you cigarettes. She was a nonsmoker. So, you know, she had extra revenue available.

BETZER: And so, how did you pass the time as a young kid in the camps?

BEMBERIS: Well, two ways. Foreign nationals of any sort—you know, the Latinos here from places, or anybody changing locations due to war—the parents want to maintain the culture, and the history, and the language. So, obviously, in the camps, they started schools. You know, you have groupings of different nationalities. So within a subgroupings, they did a diligent job of trying to continue on with life. You know, you got church services, you had schools. So their kids went to school. I don't remember really how many days, but I'm sure it was more than five days. And then of course, on Sunday, you went to Sunday school. So you had sort of, book learning and

religious learning. And I think that that was necessary for maintenance of a culture. So you spent the time that way.

In the summertime—even in wintertime—you know, kids are outdoors trying to find something. So we had the classic of, being European, kids could play soccer. We'd play soccer. And the worst scenario is using a ball of rags, so it was made up, you know, ball size. You couldn't kick it 1000 yards, but you could kick it back and forth. Other times we have good equipment—but you know, you spend your time that way. At home, at night, doing schoolwork, whatever. Fairly normal except you're in a different place with strange people.

BETZER: A different place with strange people, but did you have any friends that you remember from the camps?

BEMBERIS: No. [pause] As such, you know, the friends were basically, in my case, the kids you saw every day. So on that level, somehow, no addresses got exchanged. In later life—my mother was maybe somewhat strange, you know, she met a man, she married. We have family in Latvia that we, that over the years, we never, we never contacted. So, you know, I lost that string of familiarity with family. But there were no long, young friends that [indistinct]. The other thing that happens is, of course, you're torn apart. You start out in a displaced persons camp, and those people then get spread out all over Europe, you know—takes you all over the world. I have some distant relatives who wound up in Australia. I could have been in Australia, talking to you.

BETZER: And how do you remember making sense of all of that as a kid? Because it must be so—it must've been so difficult to experience that and…

BEMBERIS: Well. I'm sort of a pragmatist. You know, I think I make do with whatever was. My mother—though not, not the warmest person in the world—was a very good provider. She could work. She knew how to work. I learned a work ethic from her and ironically from my stepfather—a very nice individual. And, there's an irony here. My father was in the German army captured and prisoner of war, my stepfather was conscripted by the Germans into a German uniform, sent to Europe to fight. He was taken prisoner there. He spent three years as a prisoner in a British section of—well, I'm sorry, a British prison in Brussels.

BETZER: And, and so you said that your mother was kind of a harsh—harsh person, how would you describe your relationship with her and then your relationship with your stepfather?

BEMBERIS: Or no, I'm sorry—my stepfather was a very…he was a farmer when he grew up. But he, you know, he knew how to use tools. When we got to America, when he got off the boat here before us, they were building Levittown on Long Island [NY]. This was 1950. The contractors needed labor. So they would come down to the wharf. People coming off the boats, men in particular, “Can you use tools?” If you can use tools, they basically hired them right there. So you know, he learned a trade. He was a nice, you know, nurturing human being. My mother wasn't really super harsh, but she never saw me play in an athletic event in school. She never went to a guidance counselor session in school, so she made me go to church. You know, i.e., good work. But she was…she was somewhat strange. She didn't want me to marry my wife because she was not Latvian. We had some falls, but she was happy I went to Dartmouth…She and my stepfather figured out some way to pay for it. So, she wasn't cold as ice but you know, she was not the hugging [indistinct] human beings.

BETZER: And so you said that May 9, 1950 was when you arrived on U.S. soil. When did you leave the camps?

BEMBERIS: Well…I think the [indistinct] were like six days… May? Early May 1950 was a very stormy time. We were on—we traveled by—what? We went from the displaced persons camp [pause] Eckernförde which is a small town northeast of Bremen. We went to Bremen, got on a boat. The boat was a Liberty ship. The Liberty ships were small cargo vessels that were built by the hundreds to ferry goods across the Atlantic to support the war. We got—when the men and women got to the ship, you were assigned locations. Not posh cabins, not a cruise. The men were assigned mid ships, because they’d be working. The women and children were assigned to the front of the boat. And when it's very storming, the middle of the boat is sort of rocking. The front of the boat is going up and down severely. My mother was seasick for the whole six days. I wasn’t.

BETZER: [laughter] And so what was—you described a little bit about how rough the waters were. But what was that journey like? Were you exhilarated by it because you were young? Were you scared?

BEMBERIS: Well, you know, scared in a sense. You know, you're going to who knows where. You know what the destination is. Um, yeah, I don't…I don't. It's funny, I don't remember, I don't have many

memories of that. But, to go back earlier when we wound up on a farm in Germany, I can remember, as a three year old or…actually I was three going on four—I can remember riding a horse, because it was painful. It was a—not really painful—but it was a draft horse, what you know about draft horses are that they're very broad. And, and three year olds…their legs don't spread. Three year olds legs have to be horizontal by the horse, I remember some of that. [pause]

Maybe, I don't think I'm trying to hide psychologically, anything back there. But it's just that.. the days sort of seemed endless. It's the same thing over and over again. And the overriding concern or fear is, you know, where, where we ultimately wind up. We were in a camp for six years. So it's a long time to hope for some kind of a future because you know, your future is not where you are at the time.

BETZER: Do you remember what you were hoping for?

BEMBERIS: Just—well, just to go someplace, you know. To have some kind of a, a life. Because you reckon what you saw there, you recognize what wasn't really life, it was a…a holding situation. You have sustenance, but you don't really have a—have a life and you know, and you know, at some future time that's going to be changing, because either you'll move yourself, or you will be moved by others to relocate you in different camps.

BETZER: And do you remember when you were told that you were going to the U.S., or you were going to move there?

BEMBERIS: No.

BETZER: Do you remember anything about what you had heard about the U.S.?

BEMBERIS: Uh, no. [laughter] I'm not a good candidate for history. I'm sorry…you know [indistinct] failed memory. But, no, you did the appropriate things in preparation for going someplace, you basically hope—you sort of understood this, but, you'll wind up somewhere, you know. The U.S., maybe in some other places in Europe, maybe Australia.

After—and again, the time between being— I think— between knowing that you will be leaving and leaving is usually…is fairly long. So after we found out we were going to America, I took English lessons. You go to school and basically the teachers, you

know, found folks that would give you some rudimentary language training. So I don't remember how fluent I became…no, I realized I was not fluent in any sense. But I  told this one anecdote.

When we got —we, and in Europe, during the time in camp, we would get Red Cross packages—small ones. It was basically a program—there's a program at children's schools, school kids would pack a box something like a cigar box—not a cigar box, but you know, cardboard carton—and on it was the Red Cross symbol and everything else. And in those packages they sent what? They sent pencils, erasers, papers, you know, candy, you know, some of those things. So we got those regularly. And this happened, you know [indistinct] in American organizations that recognize the refugee problem in Europe and tried to help it. And [pause], the red cross again, is a familiar international symbol.

When we get to the—my one vignette, you want a childhood memory, I'll give you a childhood memory. We came in to New York. And usually, you know, the kick is if you're coming from a strange place and into another strange place, there are landmarks that people tell you about. So we heard about what? Statue of Liberty. It's a shining symbol. Well! We didn't see the Statue of Liberty, because we came in at night. But the contrast was monumental.

In Europe after the war, especially Germany, you know, places got bombed out, you had to be rebuilt. You had—you had lights, you know, dim lights. So here I am, a kid, nine years old, we're coming into the harbor. And what you see from the rail is New York City, a little bit smaller then…but bright as a Christmas tree. The number of lights, you know, was basically overwhelming. So that's the most cogent memory I have. I knew I was in a different place, I was in a sort of wondrous place.

So the next morning [laughter] my mother was sick, in harbor, you know, life got better for her. So I don't remember if we'd eaten or not. But the next morning, I look out over the rail. And on the wharf, I see tents. And young ladies in white smocks and red crosses on their heads. So I get off. I walked down a ways a little bit to the kiosks. And in my best English at the time that I could muster I think I said, “Donut, please.” I was given donuts. And then I said, “Thank you.” So those are the two phrases that—first English phrases I mentioned in America or said in America, so the school did something to prepare me for that.

BETZER: [laughter] And what did it feel like to touch down, to get acquainted, what was the process like once you reached New York City?

BEMBERIS: Well, they're all, regimentery—uh, regimented. What you're doing is crowd control. You have a lot of people on the boat. The one thing is, we didn't have, you know, 40 suitcases each. No, we had [indistinct] So it's about moving people from the ship, onto the pier, and providing them with information on disbursement to wherever they're going.

What happened to us is, again, at that time, emigrating to America, the normal procedure was that—the most normal procedure was you would go through Ellis Island, which again was a receiving station. You were provided means of the systems to get you to a train to Boston or someplace, you know, wherever you're going to be going. One of the requirements coming to America then was that you would be sponsored. Unlike the migrant problem we're seeing for similar reasons, you know, people might need to avoid things. They're just flowing in here. At that time, the immigration was programmed—was fairly regimented, so many people from other locations were allowed to come. You needed a sponsor, and really what the sponsor did was provide you with…or provide America, as an applicant, assurance that this person arriving will not become a burden to society.

So we were sponsored by my aunt and uncle in Mississippi and my future stepfather in New York. So, getting off the boat, my mother had a choice, and she opted for New York. You know, off we go. He meets us. And we took a ticket, got to the train station, took a train to Hicksville [NY]—strange name—Hicksville on Long Island. [indistinct]. Long Island in those days was known as a potato farm. Most of Nassau County was a potato farm. Hicksville is in Nassau County. By the time we get there, you know, they're starting the development of other things. But, so, that's where it started.

On the train ride, [pause] you know, hour and a half, maybe. And I do remember that my mother wanted to, at one point, to turn around and go back. She didn't want to continue on now. Why? In post-war Germany, in post-war Germany and other places, materials were scarce to find. So, you know, there were no junk piles, you know, people——whatever people could find in the streets, they'd figure out some way to use for their own sustenance. So here she is, riding on the train, and we had traveled in Germany, over the six years we were there, we had traveled to other places, you know, for business. My mother had a boyfriend in northern Germany, on the Danish border. You'd start on the Kiel Canal. We'd gone up there, so we could go by train, then walk three or four miles from the train station to wherever he lived. Track sides were

clean. In America, she's riding on the Long Island Railroad, looking at the track side, and she sees nothing but trash. So, you know, a mild revulsion suggests: "This place was not not nice. Let me go back to where it was nice." That's part of my mom's mindset. So, again, that part, I remember that she was visibly concerned by what she was seeing. Of course, you know, that passed, we got off. Whatever.

BETZER: Do you think—do you think that concern persisted for a long time? Or, was it short lived?

BEMBERIS: No, no, it did—it persisted, in a sense. An abiding faith for most people who are refugees, I think—well, at least, war refugees, it's a little different now, I mean. But the abiding faith is that if you're displaced, that you will go back. Their hope upon hopes is that they, at some point, will be able to go back to what was basic, familial, and everything else. So in that sense, to deify—and this goes back not to displaced persons, this goes back to Riga and her life there—you know, you deify that, and that's your model against everything else. So, she judgmentally, you know, she kept comparing. The first few things she saw, you know, were not like what she wanted to see.

BETZER: What was adjusting to American life like for you as a young kid?

BEMBERIS: Again, you do the necessary, and the necessary is you have to learn the language. Yeah, so we arrived in May. School was out in June, so I didn't go to school then and there. But you know, it was obvious I would go to school, because you know kids are supposed to go to school. An aid would be that if you have another——one or more other kids from Latvia there who are Latvian and also speaking English. That will be a nice, nice crutch. There were a couple of other families, and I was not put in the same schools as them. Again, it's a sort of like any other urban place. You have elementary schools all over the place, and you'll go to the one that's closest to you. So, because of transportation other kinds of things. And you didn't have buses to bus you from, you know, your place to the school buses, to special program someplace else. So it was local.

On the streets, I learned almost enough English in that summer. And, again, I struggled in school, I remember my first report card. And I was very displeased with the fact that there were grades all over the place, and when it came to spelling, I didn't have an A, B, C, or D, I got a U. Unsatisfactory. And to this day, when I think of words with the sound of letters— "knee," "knife," and all——I think

of those in that fashion, because that's the way you spell. But, I initially, you know, I failed spelling. So often…quite embarrassing. Being, you know, being a young person, kid, you know, I'm trying to find friends. Through school you probably found friends, but what I found interesting was that [pause], my worst time was my, my, my—religiously, in theory, I'm a Lutheran. I believe in God, I think. I'll go to church. Now, my—many of my friends are Catholic. They believe in God, they go to church. And they go to church Sunday morning. And I go out to the streets Sunday morning, there's nobody to play with. It turns out most of the kids were [indistinct], nobody to play with! So, that was an abiding problem for me. Saturday was fine. Sunday morning was a bust. I had to wait until later.

BETZER: You mentioned that your mother really emphasized church back at the—in the camps. But did that change once you arrived in the US?

BEMBERIS: Well. Yeah, again, there was no, locally there was no Latvian church. So the the rudimentary "I will go to church and pray every Sunday" was masked a little bit by the fact that she was—not the that that the Americans were unreligious, but it's just—you know, actually the first apartment we lived in was just down the street from a Lutheran church that we never went to. We would periodically, later—that was my stepfather who sponsored us through a Latvian church in Queens [NY], I think.

So, and again, it was not a Latvian church, it was a church that allowed Latvians to have services there. So, periodically we would go to that. So that was—it was the religious thing, but it was also much more a social gathering place. So here are the expatriates in a strange place. Now, they have an ability to gather. So church in this case, you know, did two things. It gave you the religious thing, then it also gave you the cultural component. All immigrants were dedicated to the fact that the kids will not lose their language will not lose their, you know, the history. So the church did both of those things for them. The Lutheran church down the street did nothing in that sense. Religiously, yes, but in the broader social sense that they were seeking, it didn't do anything for them.

BETZER: So how did you find the Latvian community in New York? Was it very strong as a kid? Did a lot of your friends run that circle, or was it mostly just your neighborhood?

BEMBERIS: No. There was—in my town, in my high school, I had a classmate. Similarly, we were in the same grade. And there was another young man who was a year, year ahead of me. Those were the—we were

the three Latvians in that school. I couldn't find anything for us, and there may be some efforts, but, you— my contemporaries consisted of two Latvians. And I told you earlier, my mother's hope and dream was that I would marry a Latvian girl. That's so important. The only Latvian girl I knew actually was in Milwaukee [WI], it was where my uncle lived. And whenever we went to visit them, the matchmaking was bitter. It was tough. And, she was a lovely young lady, you know, grew up to be very successful. But it—yeah. It never happened and my mother…[pause]

We were married at—I forget the name of that church—we were married in Hanover on our graduation date June 14 [1964]. Church of Christ [at Dartmouth College], whatever. My mom and my mother-in-law were walking out the door, and my mother-in-law turns to my mother and says, "Well, what do you think?" And my mother says, "It's too late now."

BETZER: [laughter] Why do you think she placed so much emphasis on marrying a Latvian girl? Just to keep it in the culture?

BEMBERIS: No it was what I mentioned before—it was that tug-and-pull of, you know, "we will go back," you know, "we will maintain." You know, war tears you apart. And a compensation for that is maintenance of whatever the status quo you had earlier. And that basically required that you would have a Latvian spouse, kids would have nice Latvian names, and speak the language, etcetera, etcetera. I mean, that's the overriding hope. Some people achieve, and other people don't. But, you know, she was sort of adamant that you know, "I'm gonna try like hell to get this thing to happen." Sorry, Mom. Didn't happen.

BETZER: [laughter]

BEMBERIS: And, I'm married now 59 years, so maybe it was the right choice.

BETZER: It worked out.

BEMBERIS: Mm-hmm!

BETZER: And you mentioned spelling was not your forté in—at all in school. What subjects were you most interested in? What did you love to learn?

BEMBERIS: Well, I didn't graduate Dartmouth with a PhD. I was a good student. Alright. I missed class valedictorian by the comparison of a music grade to a Phys. Ed grade. The valedictorian got credit for her "A"

in music, I didn't get any credit for an "A" in Phys. Ed. It makes sense, actually.

But, education was always pointed out to be an important thing. So, you know, you went to school. My biggest disappointment was, I was put into third grade, I think, age-wise, I should have been in fourth grade. But the thought of the administration at the time was, "This kid's going to struggle with English, let's make it easier for him." And I mean, they could have promoted me couple years later anyways, because I was a straight A student forever, which is neither here nor there. But they didn't. I struggled—obviously, with English, you know. The fact that you need a wheelbarrow to move the English Oxford dictionary from one place to another tells you English is not a simple language.

Math came easy. And there was a dichotomy between a European system of teaching math and the US system. In the US system, you do—you know, first you learn to add, then you learn to subtract, you know da da da da. Compound problems didn't appear until—I don't know when. I'm in third grade. They give us math problems, you know, stuff to do. And I'm—you know, it's too easy. One—you know, yeah—Where's the compound problem? You do them altogether? So I'm sort of laughing, you know, how can—you know, how can this be the…So, you know. I had—I liked history, and I've always liked history. In— actually, in history class is where we did—you know, one teacher liked to do political cartooning. So, we got to be quite good at doing cartoons. I'm not a super artist, but the caricatures worked out okay. And then I have a snide, satirical bent on life. So sometimes I could get a message in there that was [indistinct] that many people don't.

BETZER: And did you play any sports in school?

BEMBERIS: I was a three-letter athlete. In junior high school, I played football and basketball. In two years of basketball, I failed to score a point. Somebody suggested: "find another sport." So watch—while still in junior high school, I—and, it was like three blocks away, the high school was three blocks away. So, I would go after school to the high school, and in the wintertime—and wintertime I'd wrestle. As a junior high kid I was wrestling on the varsity team. Football, I played. Why? Because the friends I had—I'm short, you know, at my best I was five feet six. I'm a little shorter now because of old age compression. But my friends look at me—and I'm talking about playing soccer—and they said, "We don't play soccer, we play football!" The junior high had a football team, but my peer group

was basically, “No, we’re football players. You’re gonna play football.”

So, my biggest regret: I wish I would’ve played soccer. I got to Dartmouth thinking I might be a walk-on. I was a wide receiver, 5’6”, I’m looking at the trees above me. It doesn’t work. But, no, I played football. In the winter, I wrestled, and in the spring I ran track. [pause]

Again, I guess—I guess it was the peer groups that were scholar athletes. You know, “We do three sports. Not one, not two, you know, we do three sports. You got to do that.” So, I did.

BETZER: And what was home life like? Did your parents ever discuss politics or…

BEMBERIS: Oh, yeah.

BETZER: …what was happening?

BEMBERIS: [laughter] Alright, they—the first place my stepfather took us from the city to Hicksville, we get out at the station. And he has a car, so he drives us to—again, not very far, just like eight blocks away to a little drive where we get out of the driveway. And we're looking at it at a, you know, a Chinese laundry. The apartment was above the Chinese laundry. There was a small two bedroom, well, one bedroom apartment. I slept in the living room, my parents slept in the bedroom. My mother never liked the place. Why? She didn't really appreciate the aroma of Oriental cooking. [laughter]

BEMBERIS: Now, my mother was not a good cook. So, the Chinese folks downstairs sort of discovered that. And so every time I came up, I had to come to—the door, I entered through the stairway to go upstairs to the apartment had also a door directly into the kitchen of the laundry. So, whenever I got near the door someone there opened the door open, and I was given things to eat.

BETZER: [laughter] Do you remember you're—like a favorite dish that you were given?

BEMBERIS: No.

BETZER: Did you live in that apartment all through high school?

BEMBERIS: No, no. We got— I can't remember, in 1950 [pause] Yeah, I lived there through to the—well, you know, basically, we lived there from

1950 to 1956. In ‘56, my stepfather built a house in town, somewhat further away. So, then in ‘56, I was in eighth grade. So, for basically the elementary and junior high school time, I was—we were living in the apartment at the high school, roughly. [indistinct]

BETZER: I see. And when did you first hear about Dartmouth? I mean, you're—you were a scholar athlete, you're playing lots of sports, doing well in school. But what made you apply to Dartmouth?

BEMBERIS: [pause] I don't know, to be actually honest with you, actually. It’s—there was an anecdote. We were taking…I guess it was “College Boards.” And somebody [pause], someone I asked, you know, “Where should I send it?” Or, no, for some reason, I needed to put down schools that the exam results would be sent to. [laughter] And I said, “Dartmouth, and where’s Dartmouth?” I think my future wife at that point said it’s in Massachusetts.

BETZER: [laughter]

BEMBERIS: You know, why would somebody say that? There is a [University of Massachusetts] Dartmouth in Massachusetts. It’s east Dartmouth, you know, down on the southern end of it. Somehow it got sent to Dartmouth. And, I had—I only applied to two schools, Dartmouth and Lafayette [College] in Pennsylvania.It became a bidding war between where I could get the most money. Lafayette was ahead, and all sudden Dartmouth popped in. [pause]

I really wanted to actually go to West Point [United States Military Academy].

BETZER: Really?

BEMBERIS: And I didn’t, I didn’t quite—I didn’t really proceed—pursue that very strongly. But it's part of the [pause] the pseudo military tradition I grew into. I told you earlier, that you know, my three fathers—my father, my stepfather, and my future father-in-law—they were all military. Two of them were prisoners-of-war. My father-in-law served in Korea[n War], and then—I'm sorry, served in World War Two and then got tapped to serve in Korea also. So part of, part of that, you know, sort of suggested that I had an instinct to do something military. In a sense, I felt duty bound. You know, it's, you know, it's my country, you know, I'll defend my country, that kind of thing. So, it wasn't out of bounds, that I should seek that. That didn't quite materialize. Dartmouth turned out to be Spartan enough as an all-male school.

BETZER: Do you regret not trying to go to West Point?

BEMBERIS: I'll tell you a story. My son—my son, in high school, was a great athlete. Very good tennis player, nationally ranked. The Naval Academy tried to get him. And very diligently, they tried to get him. And so finally, when it came time to make a choice. Scott's saying, "No, I can't." I said, "Scott. On graduation day, there''ll be an [indistinct] Carrera. Red. Sitting at the front gate for you." So, he looks at me, he said, "I can't do it." I said—I said, "Why?" Okay, he said, "The problem is, if they tell me to do something, I will not say 'Aye, aye, sir,' I will say 'Why, sir?' And it's—I mean, he's like, [indistinct]. Anyway.

BETZER: Do you see yourself in your son in that…in the same kind of age? Do you think you were that way as well?

BEMBERIS: No. [pause] My son—well, you know, my son is, you know, fairly clear-headed. But, he is not regimented. You know, I'm much more regimented. So for me, it was more natural. Again, but he was honest about the fact that he does question. It's—there's nothing wrong with that.

BETZER: Yeah.

BEMBERIS: That was more his inclination. And of course, Dartmouth didn't take him. That was even worse.

BETZER: Oh no.

BEMBERIS: He applied early decision, he was rejected into the April pool. April pool, they put him on waitlist. My version of baseball, if I ever played, is two strikes and you're out.

BETZER: And so, you decide to go to Dartmouth. You said much earlier that your mother was proud that you went to Dartmouth. What did—what did it feel like to step on Dartmouth's campus for the first time?

BEMBERIS: No, I didn't—well, yeah. Yeah, for me, it's the sense of a fairyland. You take this picture of 1950. I'm living in a better situation. But then I go to six years above a Chinese restaurant, then going four years in to a nice, sturdy brick house. Then you arrive in Hanover. You know, today campus is reasonably larger, but—you know, the [Dartmouth] Green, the Quad, and the rest of that, you know. All of that is still the original footprint. It was still, you know, fairly large.

And, I knew it was an Ivy League school, I knew I wasn't of the upper classes. You know, I'm there as a scholarship student.

And, it was awesome, really. I like tradition. So, you all don't have this anymore. We used to wear little beanies on our head to identify us. They identified us not as—they identified us not as freshmen people. I can't say, “men,” you know, “fresh people.” But they identified us as a labor source. You had to reach one year of service for three years dividends. So you would help people move back into their rooms freshman year, and then you have people helping you for the next three years. It was, it was part of that, and they got to learn to the Dartmouth songs. We had in the fall the bonfire, you know all sorts of bonding things. The only thing I regret is I didn't appreciate it enough and go to the [pause] Moosilauke [Ravine] Lodge, the freshman trip, I never—I didn’t participate on that one. But that is, actually, a wonderfully bonding experience.

BETZER: Did you feel connected to Dartmouth? To the people?

BEMBERIS: With time, you know. But it’s sort of ironic. I have—the fraternity brother of mine. He was a year behind me. Steve Hudak [Steven J. Hudak], he was Class of ‘65. He died…September, I guess. And he—he was a great football player. But he went to the Thayer School like I did. Diligent worker, you know. Nice, nice human being. And for years, even ‘till recently, he always said that he felt out of place. Again, the blue collar, truly a blue collar guy in [indistinct]. And for many, you know, who come from other kinds of backgrounds—there is, there is a hint of that. I mean, I'm not rueful about it. But, you knew that you were there by some other means.

BETZER: [indistinct]

BEMBERIS: I became president of my own company. It was a one man company. But, Myron [T.] Tribus, who was Dean of Thayer School, back when I was there, he said, you know, “You owe to yourself to form a business and be a president.” So I did that. My classmates became CEOs of multi-billion dollar companies. And, I'm not saying I didn't get there because of that, but, you know, I don't know what I'm saying.

But you were [pause] well, I mean, you know, there’re clear signals. The clothes you wear are different. The friendships you make are different. Going through fraternity rush is interesting. Because again, like any other organization with multiple elements to it, there is a ranking system whether it's real or imagined. You go through

those things and then you respected—you know, Dartmouth did well for me. At least for that time. And I'd do it again.

BETZER: What was—you mentioned the rush process. What was that like for you? And you said that it might have been different for you than other people, or like you might have felt that it was different?

BEMBERIS: Well, I'm a strange kid with a strange name. So, when I rushed Beta [Theta Pi], it was different than when I was rushing Alpha Chi [Alpha] or other places. I had friends—you know, throughout my—I was at Dartmouth for six years. Four as undergraduate, two graduate. I had friendships all up and down fraternity row. I was not—I was not offered a placement in Beta, I was offered placement in Alpha Chi. And, it's a minor, normative thing.

BETZER: Did you find that there were other students at Dartmouth who you could connect with about your background at all? Like in any way? Or—

BEMBERIS: Well, you know, one of my [pause] classmates? No, I can't remember. No, it—in the entry draw, I got lucky. Or maybe not. As a freshman, I was in the Choate Road dorms. I was in Bissell Hall. At the time, they were quite modern compared to the Mass[achusetts] Row or anything else. And one of my—another student on my floor was Lithuanian. So, we connected that way. And what's interesting about the fact that Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania are three small countries. They have different languages. Latvian and Lithuanian [indistinct] make strong base commonality. So, he and I could talk about in Lithuanian and Latvian about family, you know, elemental things, and understand each other. We got into esoteric things with the [indistinct] exchange student. I could connect with them. I joined the German club, simply because, you know, I could speak German. So that—and I took some German courses, too. So that gave me another form of bonding. Familiarity with language and the like, any number of ways to get to meet people.

Science and engineering, in my opinion, was that they tend to be a little more demanding scholastically maybe than other things. I hope I don't embarrass anybody by saying that, but it made me, it gave me maybe less time to—bookwork, fewer opportunities to make some other interactions. But between that, between sports. I was an officer in a fraternity of Green Key society, so I found ways to find people and find things to do and contribute on the whole.

BETZER: What sports did you play?

BEMBERIS: Wrestling. Boring! Now the—Dartmouth— wrestling is not a sport. It was not a sport at Dartmouth, it was a club. But it was a school-supported club. So, they gave us coaching, they gave us uniforms and stuff like that. And the good thing was, it qualified as a sport therefore, you could earn your freshman numerals. You could get a varsity D, which I did. So, it made me almost a true Dartmouth athlete.

BETZER: I actually saw in—when I was doing research at the Rauner Special Collections [Library], and I was looking in the yearbook, and The Dartmouth that you received a wrestling award. I can't remember what year, off the top of my head. But it –

BEMBERIS: It was senior year. It was called the Corey Ford Wrestling Trophy. My classmate Karl [Frederick G. (Ric)] Dupuy, [pause] he died very recently, too. He was a professor at [The University of] Wisconsin or someplace. But, of the wrestlers, you know, he was the most likely to receive the award. And, [laughter], why I got it, I don't know. But, it was a nice thing. Yeah, I think they gave us one, you know, one award a year. It was presented amongst other awards on the Green [indistinct] spring one year. Yeah. Oh Corey Ford was a—I can't remember if he was Dartmouth grad or—he might very well have been—but he was somewhat of an influence, influential sports guy. He had a gym or something. [indistinct] But, he would provide facilities. And, he also provided some, I think monetary supplements to the program. So they named the award after him.

BETZER: Hmm. And you mentioned earlier that your family talked a little bit about politics and what was going on in the world. Did you find that at Dartmouth, you were clued in to the political climate at all?

BEMBERIS: If I told you I read the "Daily D" [The Dartmouth] that would tell me I knew nothing, right.

BETZER: [laughter]

BEMBERIS: Yeah, no, it's—the news was always on. You know, I've always been aware of what's going on in the world. My political—my most intriguing political moment at Dartmouth, I think lasted three days. I'm going to think November 23, to the 26th of 1963. And the campus came to a screeching halt for three days. Why? Well, JFK [John F. Kennedy] had been assassinated. So, I went to Dartmouth with credits, with Advanced Placement credits. So, I had some latitude in what I took my senior year. I started taking a Russian literature course. And I took my book, went up to the top of the

Hop[kins Center for the Arts], laid there for, you know, like two and a half days when I read “War and Peace.”

BETZER: Why “War and Peace”?

BEMBERIS: It was one of my assigned readings. [both laugh] But, you know, and again, it's not a book, it's a tome. You need the extra time, it's got a lot more pages. Nothing was happening, so it was a way, in a sense, to hide from what was happening. Assassination is never a good thing. In my mind, it brought back, you know, memories of things that happened in European history or—any power plays start from something bad, and it may have been one of those.

BETZER: Did you see the assassination as a turning point?

BEMBERIS: No. It’s this—how do I say this? With all the violence that's going on in the world, you know, we— [pause]. I was—I have a group at Starbucks. You know, we meet every morning. This has been going on for 16 years starting at five and going on ‘til I have to leave for golf. But we're talking about the fact that we're sort of becoming…I can't find the word. The fact that there's a headline that somebody was shooting, you know, we regret the shooting but it's just crazy. It's happening every day. And I don't know whether [indistinct]. I've been in war. I know what it comes to. I see what they do to people. And, I don't like it, you know, I just don't like to the gun mentality. So, Kennedy’s assassination was like that. This should not be happening. You shouldn't push and make it easy for people to express negative thoughts about somebody.

BETZER: Do you remember talking about or feeling anything about the Vietnam War in its early days?

BEMBERIS: Oh, well. The dilemma in my life is that communism is bad. What communists do? Communism took my country from me. So, Vietnam War, you know, the political [pause] spin of the day was that we're living in a domino theory. So, if Vietnam becomes communist all of South—Southeast Asia may become communist. So, if the dominoes are standing straight up, it's fine. It's if the one domino fails, it all gets [indistinct].

So, in that sense, I felt that, you know, it's not a good thing simply because of what I remember from my youth when the Russians came in. They weren't—they weren't good people. Hold on, [indistinct] they were not good people, and they were not good to people. But my reaction was that, you know, something has to be done. I realized, you know, I knew the fact that—I don’t know. The

wars in Vietnam had lasted forever. The French went through it—war was sort of endemic to that area. Now it's the communists trying to do it, maybe do something.

So I joined ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corp], because I was a scholarship student. You know, I could get—it was another source of revenue. And as such, you know, I became, you know, I'm in tune with the military. My function in life, my freshman—I think it was four, it was a four year commitment. After two years, you have to basically commit to service. So fine, and I think you also got a pay boost at that point. My job as a junior and senior was to recruit, help recruit students to ROTC. So, I felt sort of obliged to do it. And I felt some comfort in it, because you know, hey, I'm saying, "Hey, you know, this is something we can do, because something is happening over there." It's a double edged sword, in a sense, and any intelligent student I'd be talking to would sort of understand, well, if they're going to be in the military, they're going to be there and get shot at. On some level, you have to basically understand that it's gonna happen. And I had my—you know, I talked to a lot of students. I did my best to indicate, you know, the value of the program, as opposed to where you're gonna be ultimately serving.

And, what my conclusion of the whole Vietnam War era, as relates to education, is sort of [pause] disappointing. Because in the timeframe of when I was in school, and then, just thereafter, the administration came out with wonderful things— [pause].

In trying to get folks into the service, they indicated that, you know, it's important to serve, but we will not take you if you're a teacher. Teachers will be exempt from service. It's important to continue to teach folks, you know, educate the population. And then they also said, and if you have—if you're new father, we won't take you. So, my conclusion really is that there are many ill effects of the Vietnam War, besides the homeless and everything else. But the Vietnam War basically did damage to education. Because, people who never should have entered education became teachers. And they ruined family life, because people who never should have gotten married, got married. It's a negative view of the world. But literally, basically, subsidized for teaching and for relationships to keep people out of the military. And at that point in time, they didn't want to go in the military. But, you're going to Vietnam, and it's not a good place to be.

BETZER: And what did it mean to be in ROTC for you at Dartmouth? Like what did—did that stand for anything for your identity?

BEMBERIS: Well, yeah, in a sense, it identifies you as military. And you know, we had our—as part of ROTC, you're taking military history courses, but yeah, because it's helpful, you know, in the military. So it was—there were course credits available, and the courses were not that difficult. Sorry. It was, it was sort of like, Psych 001 was an easy "A." Well, [indistinct] you get that out of it. But, in some scheduled sequence we would drill on the Green. People would see you out there. And, Army ROTC, Naval, Air Force, they were all over there. Dartmouth did a very big training job in World War Two. Folks came to Dartmouth to, you know, be trained. And so, there was some of that then. And, what it meant to me is, a source of revenue. By having joined that I already committed to the fact, you know, that I will serve active duty time. ROTC requires a six-year contract, we sign two years active duty, two years Ready Reserve, and then two years standby. My Ready Reserve was credited for me while I was still at Dartmouth and we were at school. So, I'm on active duty, and then I had two years standby. And, I had to do nothing for that.

BETZER: And so, you graduated from undergrad June 14, 1964?

BEMBERIS: Alright, the sequence goes—it's more important than that. I was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Army on June 13. We didn't want to add any other stuff to the graduation, it was bad enough already. So that was—so I'm commissioned, so I swear to defend my country. And then Sunday morning…or afternoon, graduation ceremony. And then, three in the afternoon at the Church of Christ right next to Baker [Library], we're married. So, in the space of about 36 hours, my whole life was determined. I would be in the military, I would have a [indistinct] at home, and in between I got a very nice degree.

BETZER: What did that feel like? To have your life determined?

BEMBERIS: Hmm?

BETZER: To have your life determined, what did that feel like?

BEMBERIS: It seemed like nothing at the time, you only get the perspective in going back and thinking about it. It was a busy time, we went to White River [Junction, VT] and found a motel owner into renting us a motel a year in advance. Nobody wants to do that. You know, that's revenue source, it'd be terrible. But we did that a year in advance. My wife did [indistinct] stuff. Why is this in such a strange place far, far away from it? So, it was a busy day, and we had planned it, we took up stride and…gone.

BETZER: How did you meet your wife?

BEMBERIS: Hmm?

BETZER: Oh, go ahead.

BEMBERIS: Well, I just want to close the door. [pause]

I'm back. My spouse just came back from a TJ Maxx membership thing. And they do a three-day special sale for steady customers, or like big donors sometime.

BETZER: [laughter] Well, perfect timing! Because, I was just about to ask how you met your wife. Because if you're getting married the day of graduation you must have known her for at least some time.

BEMBERIS: The day we got married, well, basically we got married eight years after our first date. The kicker was, I had known her two years before the date. You know, we were junior high school sweethearts.

BETZER: Wow.

BEMBERIS: I was old, she was a year younger. I had dated, sort of, her two best friends. So, in a satirical sense, she got sloppy thirds.

BETZER: [laughter]

BEMBERIS: It was also junior high school. We thought, at one point, we might even get married [indistinct]

Long story now. I told you my story about the Chinese, giving me food. During our long courtship, my—Jeanette [Bemberis] and her parents actually found out that my mother's not a very good cook. She could cook, but just, you go in there and you start to wonder, you know, what kind of meat we had. But you couldn't tell because it was old.

Her mother, for four years during junior high school and then in high school—because high school was only three years or five years. Jean couldn't ride a bus to school, she was the closest to either middle school or high school. I was further away. I could ride a bus. I walked to her house picked her up [indistinct]. Her mom, she was cooking something in the kitchen, and her favorite catchphrase became: there's food available, she sees Ivars in between the garbage [indistinct]

BETZER: Can you repeat that?

BEMBERIS: She'd say to me, "Okay, Ivars, it's between you and the garbage." She just did that as a preamble, knowing that I would not say no. And she was a good cook.

BETZER: So, you're commissioned, you're graduated, you're married. What happened next?

BEMBERIS: Well, I had sort of hoped to maybe try to get a PhD. The best deal I could finagle out of the army was two years. So, there was no doubt I was going to Thayer, fifth-year, because the engineering program classically has been a five-year program. Four years to get a Bachelor's of Arts in Engineering Sciences, and a fifth-year would be—at that time—professionally mechanical, civil, or electrical. I was a civil engineer.

So, I was going to Thayer [School of Engineering]. And, in the machinations of senior year, I got sponsored for [indistinct], so you know, we go to that. And we're gonna live—Jeanette got a job, she was a teacher. Was a teacher—taught for a long, long time. She got a job in Lebanon, New Hampshire at an elementary school. Why? She didn't want to be teaching professors' [indistinct]. Too much under the microscope, perhaps. Anyway, another thought. So, she was already teaching. And, I went to Thayer. That was the plan. And then I stayed for a second, you know, second year, got a second engineering degree. But, why? Because that could count as two years of my contractual duty time. And that was fine until [pause] the second year, when, for some unbeknownst reason, a child appeared. My son was born December 22, 1966. Now, the problem is I'm going to service, and I'm gonna be leaving a wife and child behind.

BETZER: Yeah. How did that feel?

BEMBERIS: I came home from school one day. School [laughter]. And, my wife wasn't—we lived in a verdant motel on the other side of Connecticut River and Norwich [VT]. You know, very scenic place. We could see the blue out there in the mornings and evenings, you know, it's very nice. But she's out there someplace on a little hilltop. Now, the child was not expected. But, you know, that too shall pass. We adapt and adopt and adapt.

It was stressful, you know, you're thinking about what's going to happen. And she had suffered through her father being gone for

two wars. She was fairly young the first time, but you know, during Korea. He luckily—he got stationed in Groton, Connecticut in the suburbs. So, that was commutable. They could visit him every so often. But, she knew the dislocation and separation of that. So I saw she's looking at what's going to happen. Again, you know, you, you have these things in the back of your mind someplace, but other kinds, other forces are playing your cards, not just you yourself.

BETZER: And so, you graduated from Thayer in 1966?

BEMBERIS: 1965, no, I graduated Dartmouth ‘64, Thayer from ‘65 and Thayer in ‘66.

BETZER: And so, where—what did you do after graduation from Thayer?

BEMBERIS: I went to the military. It was a given, I had to go. No, the—what we did is June of ‘66, I defend my thesis, you know, not a PhD but did my [M.A.] thesis, and go home to Long Island. And, we proceeded then to take a eight-week trip across country. Spouse is now pregnant. We went from the East Coast across the northern tier to Seattle [WA], down California, came across through southern U.S. until we got to Texas. And, when we got to Texas, we drove north to avoid Texas. Why did we do that? We did that because there was a encephalitis outbreak. The lady didn't want to get pregnant. [both laugh] I mean, she may not want to get pregnant either, but that's neither here nor there.

We—her version of camping is basically a black-and-white television and a hotel. Although, back in those days black-and-white was—I mean color wasn't ubiquitous either. But, no, we planned weeks ahead. Did a grand tour, you know. [indistinct] I had a fraternity brother in Seattle [WA], so we got there, spent the—being young and foolish, we went up on top of the [Seattle Space] Needle. Of course, she's got vertigo, but she did it anyway.

BETZER: [laughter]

BEMBERIS: It was a sad trip in a sense, because, you know, this is the grand tour. And we know what’s coming out of all of it: I'm going to the service. And the service—I reported in December to Fort Belvoir, Virginia. It’s part of the normal indoctrination in Engineer [Basic] Officer [Leaders] Course, you go to it. You finish that one. And I finished in December 17th and Scott was born the 22nd.

BETZER: Wow.

BEMBERIS: And, then, I went out—we were stationed at Fort Gordon, Georgia. Fort Gordon is in Augusta [GA], which is—of course—now as a golfer, I appreciate Augusta an awful lot. But, you know, stationed there for my first duty station. My father-in-law and I drove the van down with our belongings, and my wife and daughter—uh, wife and son flew down three weeks later. So five-week-old, you know, first flight.

BETZER: Wow. And, what was officer's basic like?

BEMBERIS: Well, again, you've all been conditioned. You're all new. And basic military elements. You do weapons training. But, we had an escape, an escape and evasion course, i.e. you're taken prisoner, figure out some way to get out, and go out into the woods, you know, find the North, find the direction of a compass. [indistinct] Those kind of things.

And then it was all preparation for your duty station. I was assigned, in my class, with an Officer's Basic in the class of—whatever it was, sixty odd people. I was, you know, the only officer with an advanced degree not assigned to some kind of research operation. I really couldn't figure that one out.

I have a civil affairs background. And, the specialty for what it was worth was sanitary engineering, i.e. wastewater treatment, whatever that means. But, in the military, there—they have a table, a table of organization that requires people of that background to be in medical services—civil affairs medical services—for the obvious reason of body parts and other kinds of things.

Civil affairs is an outgrowth of military government. After World War Two, they formed special small units with abilities, basically, to run municipalities, take care of services, you know, run the government, that sort of thing. Civil affairs sort of modeled on that. Civil affairs, in truth, is more like doing Peace Corps work in a military uniform. Peace Corps just goes to impoverished certain areas, civil affairs does the same thing where they're shooting at you. So, I report to civil affairs school, and she flew down, and this was January. I got orders for Vietnam in February, to be shipped out on August 9. The wait sucked. It would have been better to be the next week or whatever. So, now we had as a family unit seven months—no it was five months—to worry about what all of this is going to mean, ultimately.

BETZER: How did getting your orders feel? I mean, you had –

BEMBERIS: For me, it was anticlimactic, obviously. I knew where I was going. I knew that I was probably—I didn't know actually, but what probably was going to happen, at Dartmouth still, even before I graduated. The reality actually came in when I got orders for my first duty station. I had orders for Fort Belvoir for engineering basic—engineering officer's basic. Then to Fort Gordon, and civil affairs was any orders. Civil affairs—I knew from that, if I'm going through the Civil Affairs school, [indistinct] my duty station after will be Vietnam. I was maybe mildly in denial about that, but I didn't [indistinct].

BETZER: And when you were in civil affairs school, you said that you had to work with the local populations. Did you receive—

BEMBERIS: No, that was in Vietnam. At Civil Affairs school, I went through that. And so, that's whatever, six weeks. Not that it meant anything, I graduated number two in my class. But, my—I was assigned to a Civil Affairs company, which then is made up of whole slew of smaller units. And my function there became, I was tasked with building a training village. So the civil affairs officers would be schooled, and the design at anytime was that there would be a mock Vietnamese village. So, do an exercise of whatever else you wanted. So I did that for the whole period of time between graduating from school and leaving. I completed the village, so I mean…

BETZER: Oh, what—how did you design the village? Like what –

BEMBERIS: Well, the village was already designed by—yeah, it's a classic. You want it to look like a Vietnamese village. So what do you have? You have a photograph. Basically, the layout of the area was determined, just so you'd have certain number of buildings.

My best anecdote really is that the mission of those groups basically is to provide interaction with the civilian population to give them means of survival. You know, we had medics who could do medical treatment. I as an engineering officer in that unit would be tasked with building things. You know, build a marketplace. What's a marketplace? It's just a concrete slab of the roof, spillways intercept water, divert water into the holding pond with a concrete wall with pipes through. Now you have, instead of dipping a pail into the stream, we have running water. You can wash your clothes, as opposed to [indistinct]. So that's what that village had to show and hint at.

My Group CEO [Commanding Officer] decided he wanted a well—that all villagers have wells. So, how do you draw a well? Well, Peace Corps and clever people saw a long time ago, that if you take a pipe and get a sawtooth edge, they could pull on it, drill the pipe into the ground, pull up dirt, and take it a long distance. The training camp was somewhat elevated by combat engineers who had Vietnam duty with me. They drilled three wells. So, that's about a total of 210 feet of drilling. They never struck water. We were sitting on top of rocks. My CEO [CO] comes out and says, "How's the well?" We said, "Sir, we're not gonna have a well." He says, "Are you telling me that you're disobeying my order?" I said, "No, sir, I'm just telling you, you're not gonna have a well. We proved the ability to do that three times. This is not the place to have a well."

So, I feared that he was gonna write me up for insubordination. Being military has a program of "hail and farewells." When you join a unit, they welcome you in in a meeting. When you leave the unit, they say goodbye to you in a social meeting. When the colonel was on the general's list, and the worst person in the army is a colonel on the general's list because he thinks he's just wonderful now. He's going to get a star. He's leaving, I get commendated for the work I did, which is [indistinct]. And then, at the end, he says, he's singled me out because of the well incident. And he said, you know, that I was somewhat unique, because I was the only one who had dared to [indistinct] him. And I had fun with that one. I said no to a general. I figured that I'd say something a lot worse than that.

BETZER: [laughter] Going back to civil affairs school briefly. Were—so, you're in civil affairs school learning how to conduct civil affairs in Vietnam. And –

BEMBERIS: Well actually, anywhere—

BETZER: Just anywhere?

BEMBERIS: Because you know, you have a core capability. It doesn't matter if the war's in Vietnam, in Ukraine. It's basically, the intent is to provide some kind of a civilian structure within a war zone.

BETZER: So did you ever receive specific ethnographic training for Vietnam?

BEMBERIS: No.

BETZER: …kind of what to expect?

BEMBERIS: Actually, Vietnam is an interesting country. It's got sixty-odd ethnic groups. In America, ethnicity is—it was sort of simple in America. You're white, black, yellow, and yellow, including Native Americans. It's sort of about all. In Vietnam, you've got—of course, Asia is a lot larger. You have disparate populations I think arrived from lots and lots of different places. So ethnicity doesn't work. I worked a lot with Highland nomadic tribes. They speak—they don't speak Vietnamese. So, if I had gotten schooling in the Vietnamese language, it would not have helped me very much with them. I could speak with the Vietnamese, but not with them. So, anyways, you still find people can translate one to the other.

So, we were taught, obviously, stuff about Vietnam. Two things, I sort of remember. They teach you about things that live in a jungle, a lot of things that live in the jungle, especially little green snakes hanging from trees. So, you know, now you got a nightmare on there. They also taught us about a super caterpillar. Not just any little caterpillar, but sort of like the size of a frankfurter. Maybe that's an exaggeration. But, they're known to excrete very caustic residues. So, I'm lying in bed one night in a brand new townhouse. I chose not to live on on base. So we're living someplace other than a base. And, I wake up in the middle night, something's crawling across me, because—I overreacted simply because of what I had heard earlier. So I was already worried about going to Vietnam, I guess.

BETZER: Yeah, I mean, what feelings were you experiencing in the run up to August when you were to be deployed?

BEMBERIS: I have a number of negative characteristics, and one of the worst is I can bury myself in work. And, I did. I mean, Jeanette's home with our son, you know, thinking what was gonna happen the whole time. I'm out there playing in the [indistinct], not thinking about what's gonna happen. So, and I think it's true, you know—I base—I'm very pragmatic. I had orders, I accepted the orders, I knew where I was going. And I didn't appreciate and help her very much about what she was doing. Wasn't a good thing, but [pause]

BETZER: And so, when you left for Vietnam what were you feeling? Where were you?

BEMBERIS: Well, one of our favorite places was San Francisco [CA], when we had done the earlier travel a year before. So, I get orders to go from Fort Gordon, Georgia to Fort Lewis, Washington. A lot—that was one of the disembarkation places for going to Vietnam. Some

people went by boat. Slew of charter flights flying from there to Cam Ranh Bay. So, I get the orders, I'm shipping out the ninth of August. So, we fly to San Francisco [CA], spend a few days there. We say goodbye in San Francisco. And I go north. It's welling up on me a little bit, but it felt like the classic, "I left my wife in San Francisco." And I did. And at that point in time, you know, I'm sure I'm coming back in one piece, and she's sure I'm not. It's a classic nature of mindset. She goes home [indistinct]

BETZER: So, would you say that—I mean, obviously the war, there's so many unknowns. But, were you confident that you would come home?

BEMBERIS: I'm both a pragmatist and a dreamer. The pragmatic says, "I'm going to Vietnam to [indistinct]" In my essay, I said, it's a nothing statement. I basically said, yeah. What's good about the war for me was it was a zero-sum game. I shot no one, and no one shot me. Not sure I should be proud of either one of those. But now at the end, I did my time. You know, physically, I came out unscratched.

BETZER: And so you said goodbye to your wife in San Francisco. And then you went to Fort Lewis in Washington. What was the wait like before –?

BEMBERIS: I got there, I shipped out the next day. So, the schedule was fairly rigorous. And then, you get on a plane with, you know, about two hundred others. You sit there, plane takes off. You know, we land in—from Seattle [WA] to SeaTac [Seattle-Tacoma International Airport] to Tokyo for refueling because it's a long flight. So, we refuel. Then, we don't have passports or whatever, so we can't deplane. So enjoyably—so this is August. And it's the hot weather. And Tokyo gets hot in the summertime like anyplace else. So we land, they taxi up to the fuel depot. It's gonna take a few hours to refuel. They open the doors. Go over to the door, take a look. Get one breath of fresh air, go back to your seat.

Get that and then people get tired of sitting. so lots of tired sleeping going to Tokyo. Lots of you know—it's ironically very quiet. I don't remember—I can't remember if they served booze or not. In either case, it would have been 3.2 beer, which is by some militaries' opinions, just mouthwash. But, neither here nor there.

It was quiet simply because of the obvious. You know, everybody's sort of wondering, it goes back to your own thoughts wandering, and they can go anywhere. My—the only fear I basically had was being taken prisoner. And that of course, you know, I had the experience of my father being prisoner. And, I really didn't know

what he faced except, you know, working in a coal mine. There's no pleasure even if he's getting paid for that. And, my stepfather wrote a journal about his time in prison. And the vignettes were not kind. So, you know, why am I here? This is ridiculous. You know, why don't I get enough to eat? Why do I have to sleep in a big warehouse with no windows in the middle of winter? So, some of that comes back. And, there are any number of movies about being taken prisoner by the Japanese in World War Two—and how they mistreated prisoners. Vietnam couldn't have been different.

BETZER: How much did that fear weigh on you? Or, how much did you try to compartmentalize that when –?

BEMBERIS: I do that very well. I can push it away. Not that it's healthy or anything. But, I mentioned earlier, at night, you know, I worried about it. Falling asleep and what happens when you're trying to fall asleep. Once I'm asleep, once I'm awake, it's not there. I dizzy myself with whatever's…

BETZER: And, what was arrival in Vietnam like?

BEMBERIS: Well, I decided—well, it took me 48—I say to people, it took me 48 hours, probably might have been less than that. You get off the plane, it's hot. You get your stuff. I discovered that I was reassigned. I was going to go to the 42nd Civil Affairs company on my orders. And, I got off the plane, they gave me new orders: you're going to the 42nd. What happened, I guess, someplace that they discovered that they needed one more body in Place X instead of Place Y. So, you get the orders from—not really sure what to expect. Wait around for transportation.

A brilliant picture—not really worth publicizing—but I go into the restroom. And, I look over at one of the stalls. And there's a Vietnamese worker-soldier standing on the rim of the toilet, there's the toilet. But, it's a classic Asian-Indian, you know, you squat to the ground, and he's on the toilet doing that. And I'm saying, this is sort of strange. And, then shortly thereafter, I decided that the—guys who were decided, who were one of the—I'm sorry, the folks who decided to go to Canada instead of serving in Vietnam, I think they were probably right. Just, it was out of place. Why are we all here? You know, we can't—you know, it's offensive, that if you have modern plumbing, and then—the connection makes no sense. But modern plumbing, you know, why can't these people…Can we do anything to help them? And, it's not fair to the Vietnamese, and we should not require them to have lifelong habits. And, so like the contrast of the modern and the old. Sort of strange.

BETZER: And were you talking to anybody around you, when you were waiting for transportation?

BEMBERIS: Yeah, you have idle conversation with everybody. And that involves, you know, “Where you from? Where’re you going?” At that point, it's an air of—everything you look at is very strange. You know, you’re, in this case, at a large Air Force Base. It's a warehouse and distribution depot. Everything—lots of things going on. You see piles of things piled up. You know it's a big place. And maybe it's the first time you get a sense for really how massive this whole thing might be. You're one individual in a plane coming down. Now, you get out, and the vista is quite overpowering with the largeness of the number of planes and number of things going on.

BETZER: Was it overwhelming?

BEMBERIS: Not really, it just becomes very real and physical at that point. You thought it was big, now you know it’s big.

BETZER: And so then you're assigned to Edap Enang Resettlement Camp in Pleiku, right?

BEMBERIS: Well, no, not quite. I'm assigned to the 42nd Civil Affairs Company in Nha Trang. You don’t go—it’s not like hotel reservations. Like, you know, you won the lottery, but you gotta go claim your prize someplace. So, the headquarters was in Nha Trang. And Nha Trang is a very picturesque city that has—Vietnam has gorgeous white beaches all up along the coasts. But, when the tsunami hit Tunisia—not Tunisia, Indonesia, sorry [laughter]. When the tsunami hit Indonesia, all those resorts were gone, and very quickly, people move up to Vietnam because there was white beaches and affluence.

But, no, so the military has been in Vietnam for a while. ‘66 is about, ‘67-’68 is the peak of U.S. military involvement in the sense of number of serving soldiers over there, 540,000. The norm is finding—folk can't be on the front lines all the time. The dilemma in war is that for every person fighting in the front lines, [indistinct] providing munitions, clothing, and whatever. So, Vietnam, 50,000 are getting shot at on a daily basis. The other 50,000, no, 500,000 are getting shot at randomly. One’s fighting, and one's supporting. So, we get orders and then I'm given whatever my assignment is. A few days, there's something being told about how the units work. And, the way this works, the company has 16 teams. These [teams] are all about five individuals. And, those 16 teams were

dispersed from—Vietnam was divided into four corps, one and four. So I Corps, II, III Corps. I Corps' up near the hotspot, and the most contested, boundary to Saigon, same idea. So, they're scattered, you know, certain places, and I get the resettlement camp, which is out in the middle of nowhere providing services. So, anyway, I basically have two men, two medics that are providing medical assistance to 5,000 a day. You know, at some level, you're all needed—something. But, you know, the dangerous things, the life threatening or agonizing things, you didn't need to take care of. That's what they would take care of.

BETZER: And, what was it like to be assigned to a resettlement camp when you yourself had experience in a displaced persons camp?

BEMBERIS: Well, you know, I sort of understood it. Before I got there, it was—it brings back certain memories. I mean, the commonalities are the obvious. You know, we had wooden barracks, and here the Montagnard tribes are nomadic, so they're basically nomadic farmers. They will clear land, they will deplete it, and they will move on. Every time they do that, they build their new house. And the houses are platforms on stilts, and sidewalls, and roof made of native grasses or whatever. And some of them—very large, very intricate—but like, common houses and others are smaller. So yeah, those are the barracks. Those are the people in the barracks.

And, we provided some kind of support. By the time I got there, they had built a school that was being occupied by Vietnamese army as quarters—no teachers. A small dispensary that wasn't really being used. Somebody had done these things for them. So, they have physical structure, but they have no staff for the structure. In lots of places in Vietnam there was a saying: "You can build things, but you need institutions that people in the thing have done or whatever." We were good at providing hard stuff, you know. But, the hard to people that needed to provide services were more important to them. And then this camp was the obvious problem of good communication between Vietnamese and the Montagnards. The Montagnards, again, intuitive, clever people, you know, they learn both languages, so they were able to find the bridges.

I've had a lot of dealings with translators, I spent a lot of time with Japanese. Always wondering about how accurate my words are translated into Japanese. Because I know what I'm trying to say. The translator's saying something that I'm not getting [indistinct]. But, not that I'd think they were duplicitous. Some probably were, but it's hard in the Western mind, you know, to get into the Eastern mind accurately.

BETZER: So how receptive do you think a lot of the Highlanders were to the American troops being there and also the South Vietnamese?

BEMBERIS: Well, in this case, the American troops are finite. We basically have five people there. In addition to that, the Montagnards were something in the range of 4,000. There were Vietnamese popular army forces, these were more like National Guardsmen than lead fighters. So they were there to do two things: to provide protection from potential attack—Viet Cong—to also acting as a guard force to stop people from leaving. Troops are not sufficient to keep them from leaving. Every so often, they find something, off they go. You'd have to find some other means to drag them back.

My recollection of being a displaced person, post World War Two, there were enough relief agencies to provide necessary things for the refugees. In Vietnam, that village was created because they needed a free-fire zone near the tri-border of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. A lot of munitions were coming through from Laos, they needed a free-fire zone to bomb [indistinct], and lift the tribesmen out of there.

So that objective was accomplished. The tribespeople now had to learn to live. It took away their farmland, they indicated they would in fact provide clear land for farming—versatile in doing that. They have an allocation for food, which they were missing on—not enough bags of salted fish or rice or whatever were coming. In my case, we found that we had a sufficient support that the Montagnards never did. Sorry. We [indistinct] somehow we worked with the Vietnamese, the military and then also the province [indistinct] people, "you know you got to do these things." You know, two days later, nothing's happening. So that's, you know, I could then identify with their frustration with the Montagnards. Because, I didn't [indistinct] that one, but I know what they're feeling.

BETZER: So, different conditions.

BEMBERIS: Oh, yeah. And the worst case scenario for that was the Vietnamese government decided that this was a good story to tell. So we had any number of dignitaries come visit that location, both Vietnamese and then also American. I think we might've seen Charlton Heston, Teddy [Edward Moore] Kennedy, "Schultzy" [Ann B. Davis] from "The Brady Bunch." They were making goodwill tours. And so somebody put this in their itinerary. Not that they could do anything, but sort of the Vietnamese were saying, "We're doing this, and it's good for us. So you Americans appreciate that you're helping our

minorities." The worst part was, they would [indistinct] out Montagnards, and they would stand ceremoniously in the field waiting for [indistinct] to arrive and then leaving. It's sort of maltreatment of—they're getting very little. Anyway, but they'd stand in the sun for hours just to be a showpiece. It was sort of hideous in a [indistinct].

BETZER: What effect do you think that had on the outlook of the Highlanders on your presence, the South Vietnamese government?

BEMBERIS: We had no problem communicating with the Montagnards. I was not the initiating team that had come a couple of years earlier. So there were folks there who had already worked, you know, supporting us. Now, they took a risk, ultimately. There may or may not have been VC [Viet Cong] sympathizers amongst the Montagnards. You know that the VC could sneak in at night, do this and that. We were not shunned, we know that team was, well—you know, we could provide assistance and medical always was the most important. But again, we built, some of it—we built some [indistinct] that intercepted the lake and the river and provided running water, those kind of things. And in that sense, you know, they're appreciative that the Vietnamese weren't doing it. I alluded to my one, sort of dismay that we had assigned to our team, also a military assistant—military intelligence officer. His job was of course, in essence to go out and break kneecaps and find out from the population, who's working for the VC, "he's doing good work," "he's doing bad work" and whatever gloominess in the compound. Whatever they thought about us was muted a little bit by the "I" guy.

BETZER: Did you share meals often with—I mean, how often…

BEMBERIS: No, well, we didn't—we were living on sustenance by ourselves, so we really couldn't share food. Although, there was interaction at ceremonies. Ceremonially, [indistinct]. We couldn't impact on their food needs, but we could impact otherwise. We had meetings—whenever you visit somebody, they will feed you in the manner to which they are accustomed to. So the Montagnards, you know, cook whatever, you know, whatever they cook. Liquor is worldwide [indistinct], so their version is rice wine, or wine that they know how to do in a system at home for millenia, so there's that available. And, brought progress of some sort, and [indistinct] exposure to foods and other kinds of things.

And, this is disrespectful, I guess, but in Southeast Asia—anyways, if it moves, it's protein. Well, it doesn't matter if it's a rat or a dog, It was not uncommon for us, with a meeting with the village elders, to

share a meal with them and they provide a meal. And, what you're eating is the dog that was killed, that was thrown on the fire, that burned. Then now it's stripped…My wife says she would have died…

BETZER: [laughter]

BEMBERIS: …eating that way. I don't care. It's food. I appreciate it as food, and I don't care where you come from.

BETZER: So, you said earlier that your team—or when you arrived at the camp, the team had already been there for about two years before?

BEMBERIS: Yeah.

BETZER: And so did you feel like you were entering a system that was working? Or, did you feel like there were still major cracks and kinks that had to be worked out?

BEMBERIS: The system was functioning and we were doing things. Two things: you can't have a schedule, because schedules are predictable. And, it was while we were not active [indistinct], you still had snipers that could fire every so often, so that was there. But within the camp itself, we knew how far we could go. We knew there was a leper village not far away. So we provided medical attention, because nobody else would do it. [pause]

Things went wrong. I mentioned in my essay [Mr. Bemberis wrote a reflection essay about his service experience. The citation for his essay is: Ivars Bemberis, "Winning Hearts and Minds" in Dartmouth Veterans: Vietnam Perspectives, ed. Phillip Schaefer (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014), 203-212.] that one of the villagers had an elephant. It's a prized possession that often is basically like, in a sense, like a bulldozer. It can do a lot of stuff. We tried—in the Highlands, in the fall it gets cold at night. So, warm in the day, cold at night. In the fall, it's not uncommon that they often times suffered pneumonia, but it died. We took a chance to try to save it. But, we couldn't save it. So, did we lose face in doing that? Maybe. We could've gained something, at least for the effort. Because whatever we did was a means of assistance to them, but was some means that they didn't have, so.

The thing was, there was a shortage of food, as I mentioned. The rations came sporadically. And, it's like the classic: there's a warehouse someplace in Pleiku full of [indistinct] rice that should be sitting at [indistinct]. To get that there, we could change the actual

schedule. When we knew there was a shortage, we did—we had to, the simple happenstance of one day a truck shows up full of piglets, cute little things. And, it was sent there as a food source. That was pork chops, the Vietnamese were ready for pork chops. These are meant to be killed and eaten. And my senior NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer], a pig farmer from Cummings, Georgia, walks over, picks a couple up, spreads the legs, to discover that the males are still males. Usually what they did was they neutered the males because they don't want to breed, this is gonna be food. So, we talked—negotiated with the villagers that we could try to start a pig farm. And we did.

It's foolish in a way. It's a lot of logistics, to get enough food for pigs. When it's not available in the village itself. But, we managed to get waste food from our army base locally, within reasonable driving distance, and started to pig farming. And, by the time I left, you know the pigs were starting to get to be a reasonable size. We denied them early food, they waited, the pigs grew up—a big proportion of them.

And there was some continuation of that—I'm not sure how long it lasted. But the difference was the—native to Vietnam are fat belly pigs. Why? Because they're bellies basically drag on the ground. They're foragers. The pigs that they were offering to sacrifice were—the villagers were not pig farmers, so they wouldn't forage for themselves, they needed a maintenance organization of some sort on a regular basis. But we tried, I think there was some appreciation on some level for that. But, maybe did I think of it more romantically, saying, "I did good," but I realize I did nothing? I don't know. I wasn't there long enough. My biggest dilemma with the whole organizational thing was that, I spent little time in Nha Trang picked for the assignment, where I'm starting to basically, four months later, was starting to feel my oats and understand my duty. Two days later, [indistinct] got me.

The deal with any new group, you need to build some kind of rapport. And, I sort of was hoping I got, you kind of realize, they kicked me out, they're bringing someone else in. I think that's a step backwards, but that's my own personal version. But, the army had it—the headquarters had their mantras how they're…And, the other side of the coin is, by changing personnel, you change schedules. And maybe life-saving and ultimately—so it's good for that. But, person-to-person wise, you know, it's been mentioned—I tried on some level to build person-to-person bridges between us, and the Montagnards were trying to help but, who knows.

BETZER: Do you remember a particular connection or relationship you had with a Highlander? Or, does any one stick out to you?

BEMBERIS: Other members, other team leaders in different areas had some. I think the relationship here was different because this camp was basically an internment camp. People were forced to be there, they weren't being catered to. And, they would come in suddenly and also all the time—at one point, before I got there, the population was over 6,000. And the next day it was [indistinct]—half of them walked out back into the fields trying to figure out some way to survive because it wasn't good in the camp. So on that basis, it was hard.

I could have relationships with the Vietnamese who were running it. They meant nothing, all the Vietnamese wanted to do was wait for somebody else to do it. I mentioned once, there was a—one of the ethnic groups are the Chams. They came from India into Vietnam. And, like my mom, the refugee—" I want you to marry this Latvian girl"—well, the Chams, the way they maintain their [indistinct] in the larger population, they maintain integrity in their cultures. They were very self-sufficient, because the Vietnamese would do nothing for them. So, they were easy to work with. They had means—I naively was working a game that said, "Tell me what you need, I'll figure out how to help you." But, the way that most of the military units were working was, "I'll build this for you. I think you need this built for you." Like I said, the hospital and then [indistinct]. You need it, but you can't operate it. So, I tried on a slightly different level to find something that we can agree to use the resources we had, and they would then be used [indistinct]. The Chams, again, I never developed personal relationships with the elders, but they were refreshing to work with because they were driven by their own needs.

BEMBERIS: What projects would you say that, in talking with some of the native populations, they wanted or needed, as opposed to the top-down, "here's-what-you-need" projects?

BETZER: Well, they weren't necessarily that different. It's just, in one case, providing materials to the Chams would—they would then take them and use them. As opposed to providing to the Vietnamese, is they will take them and wait for you to build it for them. In a sense, it's a minor thing. But again, they were dependent on whatever that they could get to continue their—repair the damage of the war, and whatever. It was, there's still—water, transportation, anything of that nature. Of course, all the military can do is provide ox and concrete and stuff I had an ability to measure, cut, and those kinds of things.

BETZER: Do you think you won any hearts and minds?

BEMBERIS: No.

BETZER: Why?

BEMBERIS: The mission was—you know, on some level, yes. But, it was too transitory. We were all there—we were the variable, and location was the fixed thing. So, the variable kept walking in and out. It's like a rock, trying to move the rock up the hill. It's so hard.

In a sense, your question provokes the obvious. Why wasn't I more involved with these people on some kind of a nurturing basis? And, I don't know the answer. Language was of course the worst one. I take to language easily. I was somewhat upset that I couldn't con the army into sending me to language school for Vietnamese. But then in hindsight, the Vietnamese wouldn't have helped me that much, because I didn't deal with them much, mostly with other ethnicities.

BETZER: Do you think if there had been fewer language barriers, it might have seemed less transitory?

BEMBERIS: Maybe. The thing—well again, you can use some of those heavy translators, and that worked. My other duty station was in southern Vietnam, and it's where we worked with local Vietnamese government, it was [indistinct] City. I was with a military assistance team in their compound. So they had all the contacts, we were just providing quote-unquote assistance. In essence, we got—we were removed from dealing with officials. We were then dealing with local Vietnamese who don't work as construction of other kinds of things. But a totally different environment. Number one: language-wise, that might've helped, if I had spoken Vietnamese. I still had, hands-off relationships with actual people who were running things.

BETZER: How or—what—if you had to put your experience at the Edap Enang Resettlement Camp into a few adjectives, what do you think it would be?

BEMBERIS: [pause] I'm not good at that. It was nurturing, in a sense. The—what I learned most about Edap Enang was that I learned more about who I am, about how to relate to other people, about how not to get people killed.

There was the group of 4,000, which were the Montagnards. But then there was like the group of five. So, we learned a lot about each other. We were not in the trenches fighting. We were based [indistinct], off-time was during the daylight hours. At night, you want to be out, mucking about, of course [indistinct] things out there in the evenings. So, you find out about people. You find out how they interact, how you can motivate them, how they can motivate you. And that was the whole thing.

There's a lot of, you know, if you're fighting, you can't talk about idle time, because you know you're just trying to get some sleep, you know, nurture yourself. In my case, I read almost everything [indistinct] had written [indistinct].

BETZER: Can you tell me a little bit about your other team members?

BEMBERIS: Well, the guy who I replaced was [pause].

Well, actually, the truth is I can't tell you that much about them, so that's the unfortunate thing. It's the nature of the conversation—he was a youngish captain. Understood the drill. Taught me how to do things.

My medic was the smartest, what do you call it, [pause]. The smartest medic—the doctor has this, just lost the word. You know, doctors need a practical? No. Pedia–? No. Well, you know, you have a low-level of a nurse, but that isn't the right description. No, but he—as a medic, he was more clever than—he was as good as any doctor. He was better than any medic because he was that much more schooled and affluent in infection and disease. He was good at that, and regrettably, he should've been somebody who actually could've gone to medical school to become a doctor. Because, he had a good temperment, he could invade your privacy and answer the kinds of questions—diagnose things.

His biggest dilemma was the Vietnamese people are small to begin with, the Montagnards included. The blood vessels are small, they're petite. Hypodermics don't—are invasive. And blood vessels—we couldn't get—we needed pediatric needles for injections and infusions. He could fight that battle. He diagnosed one of my junior officers with meningitis—probably saved his life. And, it's not an easy diagnosis.

I guess it was—we had a [indistinct] in Vietnam, enlisted man who got a care package from home that had sausage or salami in it. So, he had dinner that night, goes to sleep on his cot, had his fingers

hanging out, and a rat came and bit him. So, we didn't—I didn't have the rabies vaccine, so we took him to an aid station, and I watched him being injected with the rabies vaccine. If you've never seen that, it's no fun. It's injected under the skin of the stomach, and I'm watching his toes wiggle because he's feeling strain. But, you know, we save him too, or himself, in a sense.

But, the senior NCO I had was [indistinct] [Glen L. Mizer]. He was a pig farmer. This time, it was pig farmer, there were pig farmers from Cummings, Georgia. He's the guy that made sure we started our pig farm proud. Whenever he cooked anything, it wasn't cooked unless there was at least a quarter Tabasco sauce someplace in the pot. It wasn't just hot, it was hot, very hot. He was a career—carving out, he was a ranger, which was elite forces in Korea. He went to language school, learned Vietnamese, and he was our Vietnamese translator. He taught me to play cribbage, which is a simple card game and if you got a lot of time at night, you could play it with two. Poker takes more, bridge takes more four, cribbage is a two-person game. It was quite effective in small groups.

BETZER: And so, how did it feel to leave your team once you were reassigned to Saigon in 1967?

BEMBERIS: I told you, I was pissed! Because like, you know, it's two things—I didn't think much of my replacement, but that's neither here nor there, but back to, you know, the obvious rigors. If you got two days being ranked on somebody, you're their superior. You are their superior and that's not going to change. And, I went to another place I had mildly heard about. That environment was highly bizarre. The French had fought in Vietnam for a long time, and the classic French model of fighting was that they had a villa or some kind of structure they lived in. They would walk out the front gate, do their fighting stuff, come back at night, party, and go out the next day. So I get down to Song Mao, and I'm looking at a French villa, and I'm looking at it with the RCA [Ranger Infantry Company (Airborne)] team, plus back to the advisory team—and those teams are basically, they're on every level real soldiers. They're there supporting fighting troops of locality, who have gone on patrol with them. And if they're worried about them, they train them.

And, we had a situation, sort of comical in a sense. The Vietnamese or—the Viet Cong had decided that they're going to be nasty to us. They decided that, being American, we want our weekends to ourselves. You know, work hard all five days a week, and then party on the weekends. Well, they decided to create war

on weekends. So come Friday, Saturday, Sunday, they're doing something malicious. It was sort of interesting.

But in that particular environment, the town had running water, which was sort of nice. Running water means you had a water source, you have a pump, and you have a tank. So, the tank is sittin' high up. Well, the tank is usually [indistinct] sitting high up. The pipes run from the tank down to distribution points within the town. And, the town was proud of their ability to provide water. So, the Viet Cong would come out at night and damage the pipes. So, we would send out a pair of troops to repair the pipes. Last time there was sniping, so this was a different kind of environment. You had to repair the pipe, keep the water running, keep the townspeople happy. And you had to worry about not getting shot by someone who's trying to be mean to you.

BETZER: Wow. And so, that was in Song Mao?

BEMBERIS: Song Mao. S-O-N-G, M-A-O.

BETZER: And, when was that?

BEMBERIS: It was on the South China Sea, well not that town, directly. But it was a budding town. But it can—that a classic—I think, on the cover of the "Vietnam Veterans"—it was my 53 reunion. My picture's on the front cover that shows a headless human being. My blouse is showing, you know, from the chest down, and my dirty boots and my C-pants. And, the C-pants are sort of interesting because they seem to have this straight line—i.e. creased—down the middle. Fatigue is [indistinct], dress and prep you. But, because we were in the [indistinct], the local folks provide [indistinct] and laundry services. We sort of inherited that. But it's totally out of place, i.e. war. Well, the truth is, it wasn't really war. We're part of a support structure. Shot at, but still not totally threatened on a minute-by-minute basis during the day.

BETZER: Also, in your chapter, in Song Mao, you tell a little vignette about how you filled in for a lieutenant.

BEMBERIS: Yeah, well, yeah, that was one of my periods of rampant stupidity, I think. I alluded to this earlier, that Nha Trang was a location on a beach in—a great beach—Vietnam, and that was one of the—the fighting forces need to be brought back out of whatever environments that are in to have a little R&R—i.e. rest and relaxation. So, Nha Trang was in-country doing that.

And, I sinned this way too. I left Vietnam twice while I was there. Once to go to Hawaii to meet Jeanette and Scott in February, I guess it was. So, that was my R&R, she came to see me, to watch me go away again. But it was nice, very nice to have family time together.

So, one of the lieutenants had made a similar arrangement to meet his wife. And so, I indicated the—we started having weekend wars. The VC, you know, messing with us. And the nature of the tactical situation says that the major can't spare anybody. And, I got to have a chat with a major saying you know, “Look, you know, but they gotta go. You need somebody to fill in, I can fill in.” Not that I was an infantry officer or anything else of that nature.

But, I have to say this major actually was relieved of duty while I was there. But, because he was incompetent, he let me fill in for the lieutenant. So that part of his incompetence, I totally applaud. So the lieutenant gets to go, and then the only thing I had to do was to go on patrol with forces. I don't provide any tactical assistance to them. They know where they're going to patrol with the rest of them, I'm basically available to try to call back and what, if something happens. So, I did that.

And the good news is, you know, I survived that. The strange thing was—I wear hearing aids now. But, back then I didn't. And, I think my hearing was fairly acute, that I know what guns and bullets sound like. And while I'm on patrol, they keep telling me to stay low because the bullets are flying. I could never understand what the word was. Either they want me to do nothing and hide someplace, or I can't hear bullets anymore. It was disconcerting that they’re firing at us. But, it was sort of reassuring that I couldn't hear that they were firing at us. The only—the third version was something hit me, but never got to that one. So, sort of okay.

But, I mentioned earlier that I was somewhat happy that the Vietnamese support forces, the small company that was in Edap Enang, sent patrols out at night. Because you got to touch your borders to see if anybody's trying to get in there. And, that was reassuring. The worst thing was, I could hear their radios playing while they're on patrol. So, they were patrolling, but they were sort of saying to the VC, “We’re here. You don’t bother us, we won’t bother you, you won’t bother us. We both know what we are.” The Song Mao situation was different, there were no radios.

But it—war displaces everything. You're in a different place, you have a family and you're trying to make some kind of connection.

And R&R was fairly well-prized by the military. In a year, if you can get a week or so away someplace nice, it may be a reassuring—the whole sequence of fighting over the years has changed. World War Two, what was for duration. You go in, you'll be out when the war ends. Korea, they started doing rotations at about 18 months. The winter in particular—cold, inhospitable and get troops in and out. They go to Vietnam, they do that on a one-year basis. Anyway. The war end, and there's a [indistinct] You're in there for six months, you have repeatedly six months in, all have sick men. It damages you actually to be in war and then go home again, come back again.

BETZER: Yeah, I want to ask you about that. Because after you went to Hawaii, you were then—when you returned, you were reassigned to Nha Trang as a special projects officer, is that correct?

BEMBERIS: Mm-hmm.

BETZER: And so what was that experience like for you when, seeing your wife and then Scott, but then knowing that you had to leave them to go back to Vietnam?

BEMBERIS: Yeah, it made—you think, sort of, you think back to the fact that, "Okay. I've been okay to this point. You were there to do what you did. You got to come to Hawaii. Now, you gotta go back again." And the thing is, at some level, you wish you wouldn't have to go back. The pragmatism and duty guy in me says, "No, you got no choice, you gotta go back. Being AWOL is no good, you're gonna go to jail if they find you. That's not gonna help your family either." And I think, in your mind's eye, you may fool yourself a little bit by saying, "Well, I survived this far, I know, the ropes to survive further." And there's this certain reassurance in that. And the other side of that coin is a lot of people sort of become overconfident and blasé about the fact that, "Hey, this has been nothing so far. Nothing had touched me." And that's in a sense more dangerous. If you should think that, but staying safe and caring for yourself—but that plays on your mind the whole time. And you know that, for nice as a visit is, the next one's gonna be a long time coming after that.

BETZER: Did you feel any guilt leaving?

BEMBERIS: Not really. [laughter] I mean it taught—Jeanette basically didn't whimper or cry or bemoan about how difficult it was going to be separated for the rest of that. You know that I miss her. She misses me. And that doesn't go away. And some people have an easier time of dealing with it, or in a sense, not dealing with it by just ignoring it. It's easier for me to let the event fill my day, as opposed

to thinking about what I'd be doing if I wasn't there. It helped me, it didn't help her at all. She's the other way. She worried about getting a notification of my demise. That was her struggle on a daily basis. I didn't worry about dying on a daily basis. She worried about me dying on a daily basis.

BETZER: What was it like to see your son again?

BEMBERIS: [laughter] It was—he was a little bit older than the last time. No, he—We had agreed, over a series of letters, we sort of agreed that she would not bring him to Hawaii. Because, you know, it's a long trip and a little kid can tie you down [laughter]. But, when I—when she greeted me at the airport, he was there. [laughter] So, that was shocking. And, in many senses, you know, it was nice to be reunited again. I mean, my son didn't know who I was. There's no doubt she showed him pictures and everything else, but his best buddy became my father-in-law, which is fine. That was home, he needed a male role model of some sort, and I couldn't think of a better one. You prize the moment, and then you know that next time you're gonna see him he's going to be another stranger, because time will have passed, and he will have changed too.

BETZER: And how did that make you feel? Kind of the impending knowledge that he would be a stranger, and you would be a stranger to him again.

BEMBERIS: Well, you can't do anything about it. It was inevitable. In the sense of joy, all you can do is hope that you can pick up the pieces again. I don't know. And, I've never really asked my wife on what level it was, but she basically said that the Ivars who went to Vietnam didn't come back. And that Ivars sort of reemerged again about eight years after I came back. But, I did not PSTD. I didn't think I carried any scars that are obvious, but something in the nature of interaction or whatever that was different. Maybe more distant or whatever [indistinct] to mellow out. I can't serve myself to understand what it was. I think I returned normal, but who knows. I wasn't—I didn't need to be institutionalized. I didn't need to be medicated. I wasn't outwardly aggressive in any fashion, so. Interesting.

BETZER: What do you think contributed to, sort of your different experience after the war as opposed to some others who maybe more, not openly struggled, but like, showed and demonstrated that they were suffering?

BEMBERIS: The thing is, if I was in fact in the infantry, fighting, I would have seen much more—different environment. I've seen dead people, but I haven't seen anybody die. I don't know if the difference—the difference I'm sure is dramatic, but—the act of fighting, they're sacrificing and dying for it. It's got to leave something on you. And, what happens is, in any of those units, the people who are dying are your friends. Whether they were your friends before you met—doesn't matter. The only way you survive war is by providing for each other. And then when, it's sort of, when he dies, a piece of me dies. That can leave—create all sorts of reactions. In my case, it was more [pause] visual or geographic. I was in one place, I went to some other place. What it can be is, I deny myself the fact that I rue these things in my mind I keep in the back. [indistinct] kept in the back to me are [indistinct]. At some point, I stopped sort of bringing it out, I don't know.

BETZER: What was returning home like for you? What day did you return officially back to the U.S. after your service?

BEMBERIS: Again, it was August 9th. That made me in-country 366 days—thank you leap year, thank you! Thank you—a presidential election, actually. They only occur on leap years.

Yeah. I—through her and through other means, I had— It had not been lost on me that there was no overt love for the Vietnam War. I mean, nobody should love a war. But, there were all sorts of demonstrations for a long period of time, of disfavor with the war. And people couldn't see why we were fighting in them. Like I said, 48 hours in-country, I sort of decided that this was not the best thing. it was not a war that was going to be won. It can't be won. The only way you can win wars is to take territory. There was no overtaking a territory. They were trying to just end subversion. So [pause] what was the question again?

BETZER: Do you remember returning home?

BEMBERIS: Oh, right, yeah. The—I had learned the background of disfavor. And, Vietnam veterans were trying to avoid [indistinct] abuse. So, I decided not to be a patriot, not to wear my uniform, [indistinct] actually. But, I got off the plane at SeaTac and went and bought a first-class ticket to New York. Why first-class? Because, that way I knew I was [indistinct]. [indistinct] military stand, I knew I had a flight.

On the way up, I change my uniform. Why? Because, bad things were purported to happen when you walk into an airport in the

uniform. So, I wanted to sort of disappear into the woodwork, get on the plane, take off. I'm not sure it was a rational thought of sorts, but I guess it was. I just—I was, in a sense, overwhelmed and happy. Any interruption [indistinct]

BETZER: How did –

BEMBERIS: I'll go back one step before that. The—I indicated that the flight to Vietnam was quiet. I was particularly struck by the fact that the flight back from Vietnam to the States was equally quiet. Now, it should have been a drunken brawl, like all [indistinct]. What are men—when men do, in a sense, the only way they know how to celebrate is to drink too much and shout a lot. But, very little of that. And part of it, it's a long flight. It's fatigue. The clock is working against you. And the flight is much longer by the time—[indistinct] the timezone. So, it was somewhat slower back.

BETZER: Was it an unsettling quiet?

BEMBERIS: No, it's just a physical relief. You know, it's a chapter that played out in your mind for a long time, and somehow it's now closing. On many levels, you want to totally forget what you went through. But it all comes back again. You're just in the moment happy that, you know, there's in a sense something more finite going forward. Of course, the other side of the coin is, you come back and the question is, "I'm out of the military now. So what do I do for the rest of my life?" [laughter] Maybe that's the other ponderable. That's over. But now I'm worried about what's coming.

BETZER: Yeah, I want to ask you about that. And so, you come home, you're back in New York. How do you, or how did you go about readjusting to daily life? Because there seems to be no transition. Or, no…

BEMBERIS: Actually, the plan was that I would get a temporary job someplace. The overall plan was I knew the company I wanted to work for, I had a relationship with the company. So, I was going to come back, and at some point in time create a resume, and send it out, and get employed. But in the meantime, Jeanette decided that I would not be any fun at home, because I had been gone a long time. So she wanted me [indistinct] about doing something. And maybe in her scheme of things, it was to actually create a transitional environment of some kind of right by her that's different from what I had just gone through for a year. So, two weeks home, she goes, "Why don't you send the resume to Dorr-Oliver?" a company in Connecticut.

BETZER: To what company?

BEMBERIS: Dorr-Oliver. D-O-R-R Oliver. It was—the two guys are sort of famous in engineering. That company, ironically, had made the Fortune 500 in 1967. And, they made the Fortune 500 with the tremendous sales figure of $107 million a year. Now, our company's—$107 billion is about right, but a billion dollars won't get you on the Fortune 500. Well, they did. So, I sent a resume to them, and my plan was, probably a year from returning from Vietnam, I would go to work for them.

BETZER: Did you put your military experience on your resume?

BEMBERIS: Well, you know, that's a given because I was 25 years old. That's not right. I'm sorry, I don't know my age anymore. I was 27 years old when I got back from Vietnam. Twenty-six going out.

So there's this gap you have to fill. Two year's military— Yeah, I had to fill the gap of the two years. The question's always going to be asked anyways. No, and, it's not problem with that. But I sent in a resume, and they answered back quickly saying "Come in for an interview." So, we set that up. I returned from Vietnam August 9th. [pause] By date-of-hire, it had to be September 9th. One month back, I was hired for a job for which I would get credit for 35 years. My date-of-hire survived me through six merges. It's not bad, I left as a 35-year employee having only worked for him for six years. Why? The first one getting grandfathered. It's like out of the fire and into whatever—or out of the bathtub and into the fire, at least intellectually.

BETZER: Did you embrace your service when you first returned to the country?

BEMBERIS: I always—I never denied my service. I now—I mentioned in my little note to you, I wear my Vietnam Veterans cap, and that's only for about the last 10 years or so. There was an act of antagonism on many levels about the Vietnam War and vets and everything else. They basically came home disrespected. Now, if you see a Vietnam vet, or whether he's wearing anything or not, but if you know, when you greet them—the mantra usually for people, servicemen, works for service members, is "thank you for your service." I mean, it's genuine, it's fine. But, Vietnam vets in particular, both greet each other by "welcome home." Because, in the timeframe of the war, no one welcomed them home. They did other things. But, in [Operation] Desert Storm, those folks came back, and people applauded them—as they rightly should, but that didn't happen.

Everybody knew I was a veteran. It was easy, in one sense, because I was almost bald. I didn't really got it that short, but even when I was in Vietnam, I risked my life on a regular basis to go to a Vietnamese barber who'd cut my hair and take out the straight razor and take care of my sideburns. Let me know they weren't Viet Cong, thank God. About every Sunday, I'd get my haircut.

So I'm back there—my contemporaries are mostly conservative engineering types with regular haircuts, and my hair's short, so "What's wrong with you, buddy?" I had a technician years—they would comment about long hair and stuff and then esoteric things. He looks at the folks who are talking to him, and he says, "Ivars is okay, he wears his long hair inside." Which was sort of cute. I wasn't—apparently I wasn't that far, I just stuck with whatever. Within our organization, I got credit for military, not for saying, money-wise. But that was actually was a very stakeholder company. The average age of employees was fairly senior, so a lot of those folks have seen military service or their family. Anyone walking near a flag—they didn't wave a flag at me, but there was no disrespect of any sort that I had served.

BETZER: And, I want to ask you how your general opinion towards the war has changed over time, if at all?

BEMBERIS: It really hasn't. I mean, as I said, it was a boondoggle to begin with. I felt, I mean, I was obliged—I'll take it back. I felt it necessary for me to do military service. Vietnam was coincidental, it just happened to be the war of the period.

In '75, when Vietnam fell, it finally became all one under Communist rule. That bothered me, it saddened me. It didn't really change the status quo in the world or anything. But it wa—as we said earlier, the domino now had fallen. Now, well, others fall after that. But, it hasn't happened in almost 50 years now. So it might make us okay—but no, it was sort of, it would have been nicer to have another outcome that didn't happen. I think it was a tremendous waste of people's lives. 50,000 plus is a very large number of fathers and sons and grandfathers who aren't here.

BETZER: Do you have any inclination to return to Vietnam?

BEMBERIS: No. Many of—I attended a couple of reunions of my company. And, I'm sort of happy I went and I'm glad I no longer go. Many of them are—like reliving their experiences. And it's bittersweet, sort of. We didn't lose very many casualties out of the company, that

actually—from Vietnam, from Dartmouth in the Vietnam era. Fortunately, we have a very limited number of casualties. And, when I went back, a number of people were in contemporary service with me, so that was sort of nice. But a lot of these folks want to relive the war.

We had—one the first meeting, basically everybody was assigned a task of “Come in and be prepared to tell us about your particular part in the war.” And, I was listening to some of these other guys—regular Army folk, fine. Get to me, I'm getting ready to go through my nice slide presentation. And we decided, it wasn't enough time for me. So, that sort of made me sour. Not that I’m—you know, have the best graphics or anything else. But, I was sort of hoping to at least be able to finish the words that we’re saying. So, I went back one other time. It was—I was not insulted, in a sense, I was just slightly disappointed because the intent was, “This is how we get to know each other. We find out what we did, and where we did it.” And a lot of them, and a lot of vets, have in fact gone back. And many of them enjoyed it. Some have moved back. I read one vignette where the guy was having trouble stateside, and he's moved to Vietnam [indistinct]. He’s functioning there, very happy.

BETZER: Wow.

BEMBERIS: It's something in him that will only be nurtured or cured by going back again. And the hard thing is, you can't go back, because the physical ground that you stood on is no longer—It doesn't resemble anything that you did. You can remember. But, maybe 50 years, everything has changed—55 years.

BETZER: One of the last things I want to ask you about is, you mentioned to me in your note that you were wearing your Vietnam Veterans hat at a—your granddaughters’ UVA [University of Virginia] soccer game. Can you describe that experience and what happened?

BEMBERIS: Yeah. Well, as I indicated, I started wearing that a while back simply as a means of communication. I have no reticence in talking about my experience. Now, that's a double edged sword in a sense, I wasn't a combat person. I mean, I risked my life in the sense that I was in a place where I could die, but the combat people were still out there every day in that same place. So there is a pecking order here. But I wouldn't coincidentally mention Vietnam for some reason in social situations I was in and get some responses, you know, so people shirk away, and other people sort of open up a little bit.

So I started wearing the hat. And I've continued to do it, and I get any number of interesting conversations coming to that. People want to share—the most common question is, “Where did you serve?” When you get to that one, then you find some other commonality. I play golf just about every day, except this morning—darn it. But that's not a smack at you—you’re okay. But so, now I have ongoing conversations with people. There's a large group that plays every Wednesday—105 or so quote, unquote “seniors.” So these are people, 50, 60, 70, 80 years old. And I walk down to the group and they greet me as “Colonel,” as “General,” whatever. It’s got nothing to do with my rank. And every so often, one of the new guys stops me, and we have a chat. So, yeah, it works out.

And since it's a public place—and my granddaughter was playing soccer since very young, old age, I've been wearing it to her games ever since. Why? Because, it’s the summer, you need something to cover your head. And, so make a choice.

And I'm wearing that, and I go to UVA, where she's playing. And, I'm idly standing by—it's not a very, very good crowd. And, I actually even hadn't noticed the fact that there were two girls on her team who are Vietnamese. But a gentleman walks up to me, and looks at me and he says—it says “Vietnam Veteran” on my hat, not that he could have read it necessarily. But the hat is somewhat emblematic, you've seen it before. So, anyway, you might recognize it. So he asked me if I served in Vietnam, and I said, “Yes,” at which point he decides to, actually quite heartfully, thank me for service to Vietnam. And it’s sort of general. But why? He's not living here. His family made a transition from Vietnam to America. Again, when the final curtain fell on Vietnam, or even before that, you have a choice to stay there or go someplace. So, his family had chosen, as with me, they wound up in America. So, there he is, on a sunny day, in spring in Charlottesville, Virginia. And he decides to say, “Hey, thanks. Listen, I appreciate not what you necessarily did, but at least what everyone tried to do.”

But you know, I've lost my country, he’s lost his country. But now we're someplace else where we have a new beginning. And, I think we got to say that. And now, intermittently, we'll have other conversations. And we're there because we have a starting point. Without that hat it wouldn’t have happened.

BETZER: Do you think conversations like those help the healing process and revisiting…?

BEMBERIS: Oh, yeah, no, it's self-serving, in a sense for—I'm gonna say this, but it does in fact help me. I spent—I gained the United States an extra—ROTC is a six-year commitment, like I said. Two active, two standby, and two ready reserve. Active and ready reserve I got credit for between grad school and Vietnam. And, I'm happy with that. I wanted to do it, it was part of my life, and the fact that somebody could say "thank you" about it and we can reminisce about it. It's a good thing. I've moved on, we've all moved on. But it makes you remember that, that point in time, maybe, in a better light than you might have by yourself. Most people react to "Attaboys." That's all this is—an "Attaboy."

BETZER: And so, that brings me to a place where—I know, you couldn't play golf today, but what have you been up to? How have you been keeping yourself busy in the recent years?

BEMBERIS: I don't! No, it's a very regimented process. I got laid off years ago, and I got a job with a Japanese consulting company, and they offered me more free—three days a week. and I said "Three days a week is not a business week. A business week is five days a week." So I said to them, "I'll tell you what, what [indistinct], I'm gonna give you every afternoon, working from one to six. That's 25 hours. That's one more hour than you're paying for. But don't call me in the morning, because I'm gonna play golf."

So, I started playing golf. For me, it's a form of exercise. And that's fine. The other side of the coin, is that gives you another half a day to do something. And, the involvement is fairly simple. We moved to Virginia in 2003. I was on a homeowner's association board for the community that I moved into. We recently downsized to where I'm living now, just to go—now, which is two miles from the other house. And, I'm on a board here.

So you know, in a sense, I'm serving my—the nature of service—the board membership is nothing, you know, it doesn't really take an awful lot of your time. But I've always been hands-on. The military teachers do one thing, they teach you if something's broken, you fix it. You don't tell somebody else about it. I mean, you need to tell someone. But the point is: it's broken. It's not gonna get fixed unless somebody fixes it. For my community, I turned out to be the consummate handy person. Somebody's got a leak, I go fix the leaks. The uplight on the entry to our community got knocked over. So, an electrician's gonna charge $350 to fix it. I fix it for $6. That occupies a fair amount of time.

We—my wife and I have always loved theater. So, we usher in the local theaters as volunteers.

BETZER: That's lovely.

BEMBERIS: What we get for that is some abuse by patrons. We get a wonderful snack at the intermission—it's worth about two bucks. And we get to see whatever is being presented. You get some interruptions, but I watched "Hamilton" eight times just this last month.

BETZER: Wow.

BEMBERIS: And with "Hamilton," unless—you should never go see "Hamilton" unless you've listened to the soundtrack several times. Because it is a different music genre. You need to get yourself up to speed listening to very quick repartee. And if you don't do that, a lot of people leave at intermission saying, "I don't get it." If they stayed in the second half, the first half training would have made the second half. So that helps.

And, I don't do much else than that. I'm retired. I do a lot of crosswords, read a lot.

BETZER: Are your kids nearby?

BEMBERIS: Hmm?

BETZER: Are your kids nearby?

BEMBERIS: My son lives in town. One of the reasons we moved here is Kim—Dartmouth, Scott came down, he went to UR [University of Richmond] and went to law school here. So he's he's permanent pardon. My daughter left Dartmouth, went to work for Waterford [Wedgwood Royal Doulton] in Kittery, Maine. They wanted to move her to Chicago, and she couldn't afford Chicago. So, Scott said, "Come down here." So his girlfriend was a temp agency hit and she found her work. And she's worked for a nonprofit ever since. So they're local.

And, in 2003, when—actually Jeanette had said years in advance of that, saying "I want to go someplace where the winters are shorter." Now, we had condos in Florida, but that was not the message. The message: "I want to go where the grandbabies are coming." And the grandbabies came in Richmond town, near my son. So we get to see them. And my son's family—between the two families, the immediate family consists of nine people.

BETZER: Wow.

BEMBERIS: Well, I'm sorry, 10 people. Nine of whom live in Richmond [VA]. There's a lot of that going on.

BETZER: That's fun. That's a lot of fun. Well—

BEMBERIS: Well, the other thing is, I try to go back to Dartmouth every five years. Whatever.

BETZER: When's your next visit?

BEMBERIS: Well, you should be able to do the math.

BETZER: Oh, gosh. I'm no math major. [laughter] Two!

BEMBERIS: No! I graduated 1964.

BETZER: Oh, yes.

BEMBERIS: Give me a five or 10 year increment. on ‘64.

BETZER: [laughter] You’re right.

BEMBERIS: Let me give you my one interesting, hysterical point. I came to Dartmouth and I was offered a scholarship, and it was named the class of 2014—I'm sorry, that’s the 1914 scholarship. Because, the 50th year class scholarship—they were there back for their—I'm sorry, the 50th, no. The 1960s, I got the 2014 scholarship. So that ties me to 1914. I graduate in 1964. So, that's now 50 years. And I go back to my 50th reunion in 2014. So, I'm sitting at the commencement, watching the Class of 2014 commence. And I carry with me the lineage from 1914, from my scholarship. So, I was representing a century at that commencement.

BETZER: Wow.

BEMBERIS: It took a while to get up, but I figured the numbers out fine.

BETZER: [laughter] Wow, that's amazing.

BEMBERIS: Mhmm.

BETZER: Well, Mr. Bemberis, is there anything else that you would like to add?

BEMBERIS: I hope you can do something with that. No.

BETZER: And I want to say because earlier, you said that you were no candidate for history. And I would like to disagree, because I've thoroughly enjoyed listening to all of your stories.

BEMBERIS: I listen to NPR [National Public Radio] a lot. And, they actively do a program of capturing oral histories. So it's sort of interesting.

BETZER: Yeah, it is. Mr. Bemberis, thank you so much for joining me.

BEMBERIS: You've been very nice, and I'm happy I did this.