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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Russell E. Johnson
Conducted by Dwight D. Daniel
August 19, 2003
Transcribed by Shannon Geach**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Dwight D. Daniel: This is an oral history interview of Russell E. Johnson, Jr., an
2 MP (military police), Spec-4, in Vietnam. The interviewer is myself, Dwight D. Daniel,
3 a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War located in Fredericksburg, Texas.
4 Today is 19 August 2003. This interview is taking place in Mr. Johnson's home 20704
5 Thurman Bend Road, Spicewood, Texas, 78766.

6 Russell E. Johnson: No. 78669.

7 DD: Whoops, 787—

8 RJ: No, 78669.

9 DD: Oh, Jesus, 669. Okay, we've got that fixed. This interview is in support of
10 the Center for Pacific War Studies, which is the Archive for the Preservation of Historical
11 Information of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife. This
12 is tape one, side A. Just say something in there so we can verify the tape is working.

13 RJ: Yes.

14 DD: Okay, Russell there's very few questions we always ask everybody because
15 we treat everybody individually. The one question is where were you born, when were
16 you born, and what did your parents do?

17 RJ: I was born in Austin.

18 DD: You're kidding. A local boy?

19 RJ: October 5, 1941, at the old Seaton Hospital on 29th Street.

1 DD: Wow.

2 RJ: My father at the time worked as a pipefitter. My mother was a housewife.

3 DD: So you really are one of these local kids?

4 RJ: I was born in Austin but there ain't enough money in the world to get me to
5 live there.

6 DD: I believe that. So did you grow up in Austin?

7 RJ: Yes. I went to Eanes School, and I think that was elementary and I graduated
8 from there. Prior to that I went to a little one-room school called Bruton Springs School.

9 DD: I don't know where Bruton Springs was.

10 RJ: It's on Bee Caves Road.

11 DD: No kidding.

12 RJ: Went there in first grade. Second grade I went to Baker Elementary. Then I
13 went to Eanes. Then after that, once I graduated from Eanes, I went to O'Henry Junior
14 High. From there I went to Austin High for about six weeks and we moved to north
15 Austin and I finished up at McCallum High School.

16 DD: Holy mackerel.

17 RJ: I didn't graduate but I did get my diploma, GED diploma, and it's just as
18 good. DD: You're eighteen that was about 1959 or so when you graduated then?

19 RJ: I was supposed to graduate in '60. But I was just seventeen when I joined the
20 49th Armored Division.

21 DD: So good old Dad signed for you then?

22 RJ: They okayed me. I only lacked about—September 21, 1959 to October 5—
23 only fifteen days.

24 DD: Ah, okay. They cut you some slack then? At the time, obviously the 49th
25 was a guard out, right?

26 RJ: Oh, yeah.

27 DD: Were they armored?

28 RJ: It was 49th Armored Division

29 DD: I didn't move down here until the early '80s so I wasn't sure what the 49th
30 was. So when you joined what did you do for them?

1 RJ: I was just a slick sleeve and doing whatever they told me to do. They told
2 me, “Well, you’re going to leave here in February and go on to Ft. Knox, Kentucky, for
3 your basic training.” I said, “Oh, great.” Eighteen years old and going to basic training.
4 DD: What was Ft. Knox like then?
5 RJ: Cold. I didn’t see the ground until the last week I was there.
6 DD: You’re kidding, that much snow? That’s unusual for Ft. Knox.
7 RJ: Ten-foot drifts up against the barrack house, man.
8 DD: What was training like? You had the six or eight week basic?
9 RJ: I had eight weeks of basic.
10 DD: Okay, you had the eight weeks, than. What was it like?
11 RJ: I’ve never had gotten up at three o’clock in the morning for reveille before.
12 Then you go to chow and then calisthenics, PT (physical training). And, well, when we
13 were firing our M-1s we didn’t drive out to the rifle range like most marksmen. We ran.
14 It was five miles. I learned real quick not to eat a big breakfast.
15 DD: Learned that.
16 RJ: Most of us were sick all the time with either the flu or a cold or something.
17 So the temperature change that went on. My best buddy, he and I worked at McCallum
18 together and we went to basic training together and he developed pneumonia. They
19 didn’t put him in the hospital. They checked him into a little room used mainly for the
20 sergeants.
21 DD: A little sergeant room at the end of the barracks.
22 RJ: Yup. I’d stop by in the morning, empty his spit can, made sure he had enough
23 GI gin, and all we could give was eight CCs. In the evening when we’d come in, I’d
24 check on him and do the same thing all over again. The last week of training he was still
25 weak from the pneumonia and wanted to come back to the rifle range, he just more or
26 less kind of collapsed. I took his rifle, I was carrying both rifles. I had my arms around
27 his waist and another guy had joined me to get him to the company area.
28 DD: I’m surprised they didn’t put him in the hospital.
29 RJ: We were, too. Not just him but a bunch of others.
30 DD: How’d he finally come out of this?

1 RJ: Okay. We all graduated from basic. He and I went to the same fort
2 afterwards for AIT (advanced infantry training).
3 DD: Where did you go?
4 RJ: Ft. Gordon, Georgia.
5 DD: Ft. Gordon? What did you do at Ft. Gordon?
6 RJ: That's where I learned to become an MP.
7 DD: So that was the MP school then?
8 RJ: Yes, he went to signal school there.
9 DD: How come you picked MP, or was this an option?
10 RJ: The guy that lived behind me when I was going to school, I knew his brother.
11 He was our unit guard. I said, "Well, let me ask Charles over here about joining the
12 guard." Well, no problem. That's how I learned about that.
13 DD: Okay. Why MP, why not signal?
14 RJ: I thought the MPs would have it good, but I was wrong. I was wrong.
15 (Laughter)
16 DD: Got into that snappy uniform and forgot about all the other good stuff.
17 RJ: No, it got really tough and complex there, to have us going from general
18 school because we had learned military law and some civilian law. What we could do,
19 could not do as far as the civilian went. We had to take tests on that and pass them. If
20 you didn't graduate you didn't get the brassard on your left shoulder or you didn't get
21 your certificate. I've got mine. I still have it. That was from 1960. It's forty-three years
22 old.
23 DD: How did you like Gordon at the time?
24 RJ: It was just like Ft. Knox, except it wasn't cold. It was the same old World
25 War II barracks.
26 DD: Two story barracks?
27 RJ: Yes, no air conditioning. Coal-fired water heater.
28 DD: Yup. Know them well.
29 RJ: Sawdust pits for judo training. Nowadays they do all that in a gymnasium
30 with mats on the floor. Back then we took our fatigue shirts off, got up there and did
31 judo and fell in that sawdust and stuff from all those pine trees down there. Itch and

1 scratch all that day until you got back to where you could take a shower. Finally
2 convinced them to let us do that as the last thing of the evening.

3 DD: That was a good move then. What did you think about the drills, the DIs
4 (drill instructors) at the time? Were they good, bad, or were they gods so you just don't
5 talk to them?

6 RJ: At military police school everything is pretty subdued.

7 DD: Ah, okay.

8 RJ: At basic training if you didn't look the right way or whatever you'd have a
9 cadre on your rear end real quick. I had one come up and kick me in the back.
10 Somebody reported him to the inspector general. I didn't know what it was all about.
11 Said, "Sergeant you need to go in and see the inspector general." I said, "For what?" I
12 didn't know what was going on. Then I found out and I said, "Yes, sir, he did kick me in
13 the back." But I didn't think anything of it, you know, at the time

14 RJ: "I probably deserved it."

15 DD: He said, "Well, coach now down on the rifle range." I was supposed to be a
16 coach to the guy firing it.

17 DD: He wanted you really close to the kid that was firing.

18 RJ: He wasn't even in charge of me. He was from another platoon. Our platoon
19 sergeant he stood up for me.

20 DD: So whatever happened to the guy, do you remember?

21 RJ: I don't know. I don't think anything happened to him.

22 DD: Probably not. Did they wear Smokey the Bear hats then?

23 RJ: Hell no.

24 DD: What did they wear?

25 RJ: Regular fatigue cap, the block kind.

26 DD: The Korean War block kind. At Reese I used to run drill companies and by
27 the time I ran them they had Smokey the Bear hats. Big campaign hats.

28 RJ: Yeah, I know. I'm familiar. I loved those, maybe I might not ought to say
29 this. But that's what we called them over in Korea.

30 DD: What's that?

1 RJ: Pussy caps, okay, with the flaps on the sides. You let down and warm your
2 ears up. I need one of those. I've been trying to find one.

3 DD: Those are hard to find. I have one but they're hard to find. Okay, you got
4 out of Ft. Gordon and then where did you go?

5 RJ: I got out of Ft. Gordon, come back home, started making drills. As soon as I
6 got back there I was given a PFC (private first class) stripe. The next year in October we
7 were activated and we went to Ft. Polk.

8 DD: I didn't realize the 49th was activated.

9 RJ: Yes.

10 DD: What year was that?

11 RJ: Nineteen sixty-one.

12 DD: That's right. October of '61 you guys were activated and you went to the
13 garden spot of America.

14 RJ: I wouldn't say the garden spot. Johnson grass was growing about six feet tall
15 around our barracks when we pulled up. Cows were sleeping in the barracks.

16 DD: Are you serious?

17 RJ: I'm serious. That was their shed from rain or cold because the door was open.
18 They just walked right on in. It took us a while to get the smell out of there.

19 DD: I can believe that.

20 RJ: I'd already made Spec-4 by that time. We had already had a summer camp
21 before October in '61. Went to North Ft. Hood for it.

22 DD: Another garden spot.

23 RJ: Yes, a real lovely place up there.

24 DD: I hope this transcriber appreciates the fact that I've also gone to North Ft.
25 Hood, many a moon.

26 RJ: We went sometime in July, I believe. On the way back it rained on us. We
27 didn't have no top up or anything. We got soaked. It was a cold rain and I developed
28 pneumonia after that from it. After we got released from Ft. Polk I came back home and
29 I had to spend—somewhere in '63 I was deactivated from active service. I don't know
30 exactly when. But I've got all the 214s and discharges. I've got three or four discharges.
31 I was on inactive duty and I got in a little trouble in town. I was advised to get the hell

1 out of Dodge by my lawyer. "I can get these charges dropped if you can make sure you
2 are going to re-enlist and get on active duty."

3 DD: Where was this? Here in Austin?

4 RJ: Yes.

5 DD: Ah, okay. So you were one of those boys, join the Army or else type deals
6 then?

7 RJ: I was looking at a five-hundred dollar fine for two offenses. Disturbing the
8 peace and I had an old Saturday night special I bought a Louisiana underneath the seat of
9 my car and the sheriff got that. Anyhow one thing led to another. I went down to the old
10 Federal Building, which is now O'Henry Hall down on Colorado and 6th. I went in and
11 talked to the recruiting sergeant and he said, "I can't give you any forward stripes
12 because you've been inactive so long." Can't even get a PFC stripe. Well, I took all the
13 tests and they sent me to San Antonio. I can't remember for what—oh, physical I
14 believe.

15 DD: Probably, yeah.

16 RJ: When I came back I signed the papers and said, "Okay you've got a flight
17 leaving San Antonio tonight headed for—" LA or Frisco, one of the two. I think it was
18 LA. Then we went to Frisco from there. Caught a Northwest Airline from Frisco to
19 Anchorage. It was cold.

20 DD: So you were stationed in Anchorage?

21 RJ: No. It was a stopover for refueling.

22 DD: Anchorage is a cold place.

23 RJ: It was especially when they left the door open and I was sitting right next to
24 it. Anyhow got to Japan, Kadena Air Force Base.

25 DD: Probably, yeah.

26 RJ: They sent us to a barracks because I had to report to my company the next
27 day.

28 DD: Wow.

29 RJ: In Korea.

30 DD: In Korea. (Laughs)

1 RJ: So the next morning they woke us all up, ate breakfast right quick and rushed
2 me out to the airport and I caught a C-130. Boy, those things were no fun to ride in.

3 DD: Right.

4 RJ: Gave a box lunch and you tried to eat the sandwich and you start to put it in
5 your mouth and you stick it to your forehead because of the turbulence. Milk, you
6 poured that all over yourself. Then I got to Kempo and they sent a deuce-and-a-half
7 down for everybody going north. I ended up in Uijongbu, Korea.

8 DD: No kidding.

9 RJ: Three days after I signed the papers.

10 DD: Are you serious?

11 RJ: Three days.

12 DD: Good Lord.

13 RJ: I had no idea what to expect. I got a rude awakening, believe me.

14 DD: Did you go in as an MP?

15 RJ: Yeah, I was an MP. Wished I had done what the guy questioned me about.
16 “Are you sure you want to go in as an MP? How about artillery or armor?” I should
17 have went artillery because I saw corporals and sergeants that didn’t have eighteen
18 months in the service walking around with corporal and sergeant stripes on their sleeves.
19 Anyhow, I was there as an MP. I had to take the international driving test.

20 DD: What did you do there? What rank were you there? Were you still a slick
21 sleeve?

22 RJ: Shortly after I got there I made PFC.

23 DD: You went there as the low of the low.

24 RJ: The CO (commanding officer) he was from Austin.

25 DD: That’s unusual.

26 RJ: He went to school at UT. I guess he looked at my records and saw that I
27 already had four or something years of prior service. One day I got this order to go down
28 to this room somewhere or a building someplace to take a test. So I did and I was the
29 only enlisted person below the rank of E-5 in the room. I was a PFC. What it was it was
30 a proficiency test. I took the test and I passed it, some of them guys didn’t make it. They
31 sent me up to Camp Santa Barbara, which was up above the 38th parallel about three

1 miles from the DMZ (demilitarized zone) for a while. Then I got in a little skirmish up
2 there and about that time I should have been an E-4. He didn't bust me but he gave me
3 an Article 15. I fulfilled that.

4 DD: Do you want to tell what you did?

5 RJ: Well, no, I don't want to tell you what I did. It was a spur of the moment
6 thing. Well, I'll tell you what happened. One of the guys was on duty on the gate and he
7 had somebody inside the gate shack who was questioning their pass and he turned around
8 to use the telephone to call the desk sergeant to send somebody down in a jeep. I was off
9 duty at the time. Get somebody down in a jeep and get him taken back up to the desk.
10 He was a C-2 and in the artillery, to ascertain whether or not he had a correct pass. Well,
11 the guy looked like he was fixing to hit the guy using the phone. Instead of grabbing
12 him, I just hit him upside the head, like an idiot. That's what happened.

13 DD: What rank was this guy?

14 RJ: E-4 or -5 PFC, I think.

15 DD: He wasn't an officer?

16 RJ: No, as a matter of fact he was about 5'3" or 5'4".

17 DD: What were your duties like up there as an MP? Were you doing mostly
18 traffic control?

19 RJ: No we did a lot of patrolling.

20 DD: So you guys did patrol then?

21 RJ: Oh, yeah. We maintained the main gate, twenty-four hours a day and on
22 patrol. We just had two patrols. We were in the process of arresting trespassers on the
23 compound. They'd go and cut wood on the mountains. Would you believe one of those
24 suckers was about sixty-five or seventy years old, could run up the side of a hill? I call
25 them hills, but they were so big they were mountains. Faster than I could with just a .45
26 on my hip. They'd leave me in the dust. Even my KATUSA (Korean Augmentation to
27 the United States Army) partner couldn't catch them. You know what a KATUSA is
28 don't you?

29 DD: No.

1 RJ: That's a Korean soldier that's attached to the United States Army. As a
2 matter of fact, I got a picture with me and seven of them out in front of the desk at Camp
3 Santa Barbara. I doubt if it's there now. That's where it was when I was there.

4 DD: When you patrolled did you actually patrol into the DMZ?

5 RJ: No, no, no.

6 DD: So you just patrolled around.

7 RJ: We didn't get much away from the compound area.

8 DD: I asked because I had friends that actually ran combat patrols into our side of
9 the DMZ. They set up ambushes and everything else.

10 RJ: Oh no, we didn't do any of that.

11 DD: That's when you were giving out CIBs (combat infantry badge). A guy
12 comes in with a CIB and I thought he's come back from Korea. Just don't ask. So the
13 North Koreans were trying to push something. So they were actually running during the
14 Vietnam War. People don't realize that we were actually shooting each other on the
15 DMZ. Both sides were running patrols out there. He saved our side, but his job was to
16 set up ambushes at night. He said he got lots of contact.

17 RJ: Well, let me tell you something. I was privy to the information on the daily
18 military police logs. There were people over there getting killed left and right. You
19 might read one instance about somebody getting killed in the *Stars and Stripes*. The rest
20 of it was hushed up.

21 DD: People on the Stateside, if you weren't in the military, didn't realize how hot
22 that DMZ was. For a couple of years it was seriously hot.

23 RJ: Porkchop Hill was about four or five miles as the crow flies from where we
24 were.

25 DD: So you stayed basically at the compound. Were you actually at was it
26 Panmunjon whatever it was?

27 RJ: No, I never got there. I would have probably freaked out if I had to go up
28 there. That's what I can't understand about these MPs over in Iraq getting killed. Don't
29 let the son of a bitches get too close to you. That's what I keep saying, but people are
30 getting killed.

1 DD: So you were at the compound, what other kind of duties did you have? Just
2 basically MP duties like traffic control, patrol the compound, things like that?

3 RJ: That was basically it. There wasn't too much traffic control going on
4 because there wasn't that many convoys running. Everybody was where they were
5 supposed to be. There wasn't that much going on.

6 DD: So you were there at the quiet time then, if you call it quiet.

7 RJ: Yeah after they sent me back down to the company, I think it was in October.
8 When was the Gulf of Tonkin Incident? October? September?

9 DD: October or September of '64, I think.

10 RJ: We were put on stand by alert. We wondered what the hell it was all for
11 because they issued us warm weather gear. This was October but it had already snowed
12 through here. After about twelve or fourteen hours they said to stand down from the
13 alert. They were fixing to ship us to 'Nam.

14 DD: How are you armed? Did you have the M-14 yet or did you still have the
15 Garand while you were in Korea?

16 RJ: I think about that time they changed. There were M-1s there and all of a
17 sudden they issued us a new rifle. I loved that M-14. I wish I had the thirteen-hundred
18 dollars to go buy one.

19 DD: They're nice. Okay, you were still in Korea. You finally stood down after
20 about thirty-six hours, then what happened?

21 RJ: That was about it.

22 DD: Back to the same old routine then?

23 RJ: We went back out—we had a bivouac out Jackson Rear, which was Jackson
24 Circle was down there on Highway 1. Jackson Rear was where "M*A*S*H" was
25 supposed to have been taped, okay? But anyhow we went up there for a week, first time
26 I've ever slept in the snow. Temperature was down about zero and you're walking out
27 there on guard duty and you get back in the squad tent and somebody thumped you on the
28 ear, you looked down to see if your ear fell off. Saw some Korean shrines that looked
29 like they had been peppered with buckshot over and over again. Had all kinds of holes in
30 them, in the walls. The thing about it is those people are a little weird. They always bury
31 somebody looking East, except the prostitutes. They bury them in the riverbed.

1 DD: Didn't know that.

2 RJ: All the business girls. Believe me one day I was on patrol and I came
3 through main gate and the guy who was on main gate called me over and said, "Look
4 what I've got." I said, "What?" He said, "Look down back of the building here." There
5 was an unexploded grenade. He said, "Yeah some kid pulled up here and pitched it and
6 said, 'Here, GI. Catch.'" This was still Santa Barbara. Back then it was (indecipherable).
7 Yeah, they called the cops on them and went down the road and pulled in five huge land
8 mines tied behind an ox. He dug them up while he was turning (the soil).

9 DD: This is an oral history interview of Russell E. Johnson Jr. an MP, Spec-4, in
10 Vietnam. The interviewer is myself, Dwight D. Daniel, a volunteer at the National
11 Museum of the Pacific War located in Fredericksburg, Texas. Today is 19 August 2003.
12 This interview is taking place at Mr. Johnson's home 20704 Thurman Bend Road,
13 Spicewood, Texas, 78669. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War
14 Studies, which is the Archive for the Preservation of Historical Information of the
15 National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife. This is Tape Two, Side
16 A. You were kicking out these poor lieutenants that didn't enlist. (Editor's note: Tape
17 One, Side B is missing and is not included in this interview)

18 RJ: I wasn't kicking them out. I just wasn't letting them in. One of them said he
19 was going to go in. I said, "Sir, if you go in there and you're not on this list I'm going to
20 go next door to the general's office and I'm going to knock on his door and—"

21 DD: Have a little talk.

22 RJ: Yeah, "Somebody's going to talk with you." Well, he stopped. After being
23 out there at Long Binh when I was leaving, they had just completed an amphitheatre for
24 the Bob Hope show that was going to come.

25 DD: Ah, okay.

26 RJ: I never did get to see him. But there was kind of a little gulley that they made
27 into an amphitheatre with sandbags. They sent me over to Bien Hoa to the (Camp)
28 Friendship II. I stayed over there about a month. They had an open mess over there. I
29 was eating a New York strip steak one afternoon. Oh, man. You could get that for two
30 bucks. Some guy came in and wanted to know if anybody here had operated an M-60
31 before. I said, "Yeah, I have." "Well," he said, "Would you like to ride shotgun on the

1 chopper out here?" I said, "I just can't truly hop in it and go. I'll have to clear it with my
2 platoon sergeant." Well, he said no. I'm glad he said no because the next day I saw that
3 chopper looked like Swiss cheese.

4 DD: Wow.

5 RJ: Anyhow I left—but there was one instance there, this general there was at
6 Long Binh. We guarded his chateau, also. One of the guys he was from New York. I
7 recognized the general, it was General Crittenden. He came out and I said, "How are you
8 doing tonight?" He said, "No problem." He had pet geese. (Laughter) They would
9 come around and peck at your legs. The guy that was on duty in front of the chateau he
10 asked him, "How do you like my geese?" He said, "Well, hell they would look a lot
11 better if they were on the dinner table." He didn't know it was the general. (Laughter)

12 DD: They do make good early warnings. So, maybe that's why he had them.

13 RJ: They were good watchdogs if you could put up with all that honking all the
14 time.

15 DD: Otherwise, it would be a little weird to have pet geese.

16 RJ: Well, the thing was anytime the wind blows, they're going to honk. I left
17 there and they sent me back down to the company. At the company we had an
18 appreciation dinner by the CO and all the other lieutenants, first sergeant and everything.
19 They took us out someplace and we had steak, barbequed steak, and somebody said,
20 "Let's go swimming." We were right next to the river. Well, I jumped in. Hell, I swam
21 real good. One of the first sergeants or somebody comes running up and says, "Get out
22 of that water. Charlie might have it mined." So we got up out of the water. Next thing
23 you know, I'm on boat patrol in the Saigon Harbor.

24 DD: These were Army boats or Navy boats?

25 RJ: They were Navy boats but they were given to the Army. We operated in
26 Saigon Harbor, the main harbor. Then there was what you call Newport, it was an
27 addition of what you call PA&E, the Pacific Architects Engineers, Civilian. We had to
28 patrol up and down all the way up there and back. Being out on the water like that you
29 see some weird things out on these Charlies. I call them Charlies. They were loading
30 flour into this big sampan. Well, they got too much in it, made it top heavy. It just
31 swapped ends.

1 DD: Wow.

2 RJ: So that livened the color. That's where I got shot at was down at the moor,
3 the old harbor. We would get on sampans and usually had a QC and a White Mice with
4 you.

5 DD: What's a QC?

6 RJ: Quan Canh, same thing as an MP.

7 DD: That's what I thought, the White Mice is the policeman right?

8 RJ: Yes, Vietnamese police. They all wore white uniforms, that was why we
9 called them White Mice. We'd go on sampan and I'd stay on the ship and let them look.
10 Had my 14 with me and if it looked like we were going to get into any trouble I was
11 going to open up on them. Didn't really do anything like that except for that night that
12 we got fired on and they shot out the search light on top of the boat. A fifty-foot steel
13 hulled boat. It wasn't one of those Higgins boats.

14 DD: Like you see on TV all the time.

15 RJ: PBRs (Patrol Boat River), no it wasn't like that. This was twin diesels and it
16 made a draft larger than what the PBRs did. I got real good at driving it.

17 DD: No kidding?

18 RJ: You want to pull in and parallel park to the dock, you've got twin engines.
19 You play with that and you just move yourself right on in there.

20 DD: Not bad for a Texas boy.

21 RJ: Not the first time I'd seen a boat, either. While I was still there with the
22 company they said, "Well, we're going to take y'all out to the rifle range. Familiarize
23 yourself with the weapons that you got." I said, "Isn't it a little bit too late to try to zero
24 this rifle in when I'd had it for almost nine months?" Well, anyway we went up there and
25 we fired them. They said, "Put your rifles down and try one of these." They handed us
26 an M-79 grenade launcher. Those were a hoot. I loved firing those. You could fire over
27 projectile, long range. Charlie is not dumb. The next day they sent the rest of the
28 company out to the very same rifle range, first time somebody laid it down on the firing
29 line, a land mine went off, blew part of his belly off. He survived. They killed a couple
30 of Cong and this E-7 that was getting out of the deuce-and-a-half at the time the land
31 mine went off, skinned his knee on the back of the deuce-and-a-half—

1 DD: Got a Purple Heart of it.

2 RJ: —got a Purple Heart. I couldn't believe that. I said "Oh, man!"

3 DD: A new low was reached.

4 RJ: I couldn't believe that. Well, let me tell you this much. One day before I
5 was ever sent up to Long Binh, one of my compadres from my room we were going to go
6 on duty that morning. So we were walking down to the open mess, which was about a
7 block-and-a-half down from where that hotel was to eat breakfast. He was late by two
8 minutes. By the time we got down there we started walking and about halfway down
9 there a claymore went off in front of that open mess. If he hadn't have been late, we
10 would have been there. Anyway it killed a Vietnamese and injured a couple of GIs.
11 Then one morning we came down the stairs and they said, "Don't go outside. The White
12 Mice found a claymore on a bicycle across the street." So we waited for about twenty
13 minutes. I said, "Man I've got to relieve somebody here. They've been on duty all night
14 long. They need to be relieved." Finally they declared that the area was clean. So we
15 went on about our way. While I was waiting there I met the CO of mine that was at West
16 Point and one of my squad sergeants. They'd sent them over there.

17 DD: Small world.

18 RJ: I said, "I'm a short timer, how are y'all?" They'd just got in-country. After
19 we got a directive that all units in Saigon would move out to Long Binh. Like I said,
20 there were a cordon of tents when I got there, when I left there was over two-thousand or
21 more. As far as the eye could see. At least a mile-and-a-half long, Long Binh was. It
22 was nothing but tents. Whenever I was on duty and I felt the supply sergeant screwing
23 up, nothing serious anyway, a minor infraction. I said, "Sergeant I'm not going to take
24 you in, but I'll be by to see you in a couple days."

25 DD: We can negotiate here.

26 RJ: "Yeah we can negotiate here. I need a couple of cases of Cs and a pair of
27 jungle boots." Well, I got them. One of the guys that I don't know if he's in the back of
28 this picture or not. This is me on duty. (referring to photo) I'd just been relieved of duty
29 in '66 at the main gate. One of these guys who cam in was from Chicago. He was a
30 mama's boy and he was meticulous about this appearance. He would floss every time he
31 brushed his teeth. Every hair had to be perfectly in place before he would put his helmet

1 on. I said, "You're fixing to put a helmet on that head of yours. You don't think it's
2 going to mess your hair up?" "Well, no." First night he was there, we didn't worry about
3 Charlie coming over the wire because headquarters was coming to pull guard duty around
4 the whole compound.

5 DD: Ah, okay. I was going to ask you about that. Okay.

6 RJ: We would take our clothes off and putting on shorts and t-shirts to go to
7 sleep. There he is still laying over there on top of his blankets, fully clothed. I said,
8 "Hey man, Andy get your clothes off and get in bed." He said, "No, Charlie might
9 come." I said, "You don't have to worry about Charlie, he ain't coming here. If he does
10 you are going to know about it real quick and you will get time to put your clothes on."
11 We had a lot of fun with him. We called him Mr. Clean. We sent him over to the beer
12 tent, the company across the road from us, to get a case of beer. Well, he came back with
13 a case of beer and it was all open. I said, "Why did you get it open?" He said, "Well,
14 they wouldn't sell it to me otherwise." I said, "Okay." They hadn't been able to get to
15 the PX (post exchange) in Bien Hoa. You were allowed six cases of beer a month and
16 people that didn't drink, we'd use their ration. It was \$3.15 a case of beer. \$2.40 for a
17 case of soda water. Whiskey, Crown Royal was \$3.15 a quart, I believe. Then it went on
18 down. Vodka was ninety-five cents a quart. We had a guy there in Long Binh I didn't
19 know his rank until one day I saw him sober. (Laughter) He came in cussing and
20 everything, raising hell. He had a big Bowie knife and he cut his hand on that. I said,
21 "Papa San, what's wrong with you?" That's what we called him because he was thirty-
22 eight years old. I was probably the next oldest in the platoon outside of the platoon
23 sergeant and the squad sergeant. I was twenty-five. I turned twenty-five over there. He
24 was talking about somebody giving him a ration of shit someplace. At the first of the
25 month Smirnoff was \$1.15 a quart. He bought that and as the month went by the vodka
26 got cheaper and cheaper. When we woke up in the morning he'd reached down in his
27 boot and pulled that bottle out and glug, glug, glug, glug, glug, glug, glug about six times
28 and then his feet hit the floor. We gave him a little award for the wine-o of the month.

29 DD: I can understand that.

30 RJ: He always carried vodka in his canteen, even on duty. I caught him one
31 time—I was on duty to the TOC (tactical operations center) and I hadn't seen him in a

1 while. So I got the attention of the guy walking around headquarters and said, "Take
2 over here for about five minutes. I'm going to go find Papa San." When I went through
3 the back gate, this was at night, there was no one there. I said, "Where in the hell did he
4 go?" About that time I heard (snoring). There was a trailer there with a tarp over it. He
5 was lying down in there sleeping. I said, "Get up. I catch you in this trailer again, I'm
6 going to open up this back gate and I'm going to roll you down this hill." That was the
7 hill that went down to the amphitheatre. "I'm going to roll you down this hill in this
8 trailer." He said, "Okay." He got up and went over and sat down in his chair. I said,
9 "Don't get back in that trailer, not until we get relieved in the morning. If I catch you in
10 that trailer sleeping—"

11 DD: You won't have to worry about your stripes anymore.

12 RJ: Well, he continued on carrying that vodka in that canteen. He drank a quart
13 of it a day. I had the unfortunate job of riding herd on a group of people guarding the
14 main gates at the wharf, people on boats, on the Liberty ships guarding holes. I came
15 around one evening Papa San was sitting on this gate shack. And a Quan Canh and a
16 White Mouse was standing out in front of him and he was on the verge of being
17 completely passed out. One night there at the dock I pulled up to check on one of my
18 sentries at this gate and this guy came in and said, "I'm an ex-lieutenant colonel from the
19 Army." He was on board one of those Liberty ships, I had seen him. I said, "Who
20 cares?" Anyway he said, "Let me show you something." He tried to take my .45 away
21 from me. That was a mistake.

22 DD: Boy that was.

23 RJ: He was a little bit intoxicacated. I just said, "Get in here." I had my Quan
24 Canh ride in the back and he rode up front with me. I said, "What ship are you on?" He
25 pointed it out and I went to stop and got out. I said, "You stay here, bubba," to the Quan
26 Canh, "And you come with me." So I walked him up the gangplank. Whichever officer
27 was on duty there at the watch, wanted to know what was going on. I said, "This is so
28 and so military police. I need to see the captain."

29 DD: Good Lord.

30 RJ: He said, "Are you sure you need to see the captain?" I said, "You bet I do. I
31 don't care if you've got to wake him up I want to see him." Well, he led us to this

1 bulkhead where the hatch was to the captain's door and knocked on it. He came to the
2 door and he was an old white-haired man about sixty-five or seventy. He said, "What the
3 hell is all this about?" I started explaining it to him. I said, "This guy here, one of your
4 seamen tried to take my .45 away from me at the gate down there." He just reached over
5 to his side and he grabbed what looked like a riding crop. He said, "Come here," and he
6 started beating that guy with that riding crop. He was hollering, "Please, Captain! Don't
7 do that! Please don't do that!" The captain said, "Five days no pay. You will work a
8 month in the machine room down there, the boiler room." Oh, no. That's where all the
9 sweating goes on. I said, "Thank you very much, Captain. Sorry to bother you but I
10 thought you might want to hear this right now. I could have taken him downtown and
11 booked him but I didn't." I thought I probably got more good out of that than if I took
12 him and wrote him up.

13 DD: He probably never did it again. I wonder if the guy really was a lieutenant
14 colonel.

15 RJ: Who knows?

16 DD: It wasn't worth finding out.

17 RJ: It wasn't worth finding out. I got to see a Puff the Magic Dragon.

18 DD: Did you?

19 RJ: Yeah. In action.

20 DD: Cool.

21 RJ: It was the bridge leading over to Cholon and it was just about half or three
22 quarters of mile down from the dock. This thing spewed out fire that looked like a steady
23 stream of light. They were tearing Charlie up somewhere about three-hundred yards
24 from me. I went and I saw. I didn't go across the bridge, turned around and went back to
25 the dock. I knew he wasn't going to fire on that. The last few days I was in Saigon me
26 and three other E-4s and one sergeant, we were in charge of escorting the 25th Infantry
27 Division inside in-country off the docks. We were taking them out to a staging area at Cu
28 Chi outside of Cholon. Some of the Big Red One was going to pick them up and take
29 them to Cu Chi. Well, on one of the trips out me and my partner were coming back to go
30 back down to the docks to get another convoy. About that time one of those monks was
31 using a gallon of gas and wasn't going nowhere. There were about a thousand little

1 yellow robed dudes walking up. I had to thread my way through the traffic there, the foot
2 traffic. All of a sudden we heard a ka-thump in the back of the jeep. I was doing about
3 ten miles an hour. We didn't even hesitate we just bailed out. It was in low gear so it
4 wasn't going to run over anybody. It went on about another thirty or forty feet down the
5 road and came to a halt, stopped and the engine died. We cautiously edged up there and
6 looked in the back of the jeep and it was a big old rock. Somebody threw a rock. That
7 was just past the big fish market there. Oh, man, talk about a fish market? It'd close your
8 nose.

9 DD: Throwing that rock put hair on your chest.

10 RJ: It also made something else pinch up. (Laughter) I neglected to say anything
11 about honeywells and honeywagons in Korea.

12 DD: What's a honeywell?

13 RJ: It's a big hole in the ground filled up with human excrement. Then they've
14 got a big old wooden keg on the back of this old deuce-and-a-half from the Korean War
15 with a big old spigot on the back. They fill it up. They go through all the villages and
16 send out guys with an A-frame and five-gallon buckets.

17 DD: To clean it out?

18 RJ: They clean out all the *benjos*. That's what they're called. They bring it back
19 to the honeywagon and they pour it in. They go out to the rice paddies and fill up the
20 honeywell. Those things could appear out of nowhere over night. Two of our guys were
21 chasing this dude down a dark alley in Uijongbu and they all three ran off into a
22 honeywell. Their equipment and their uniforms and everything laid out on concertina
23 wire for three months. The smell never did come out of them. Finally they just put them
24 in the trash. That is unbelievable. You would not believe that. All those hilltops over
25 there that are bare, it wasn't Agent Orange it was napalm that did it. I talked to a guy in a
26 bar here about four or five or six years ago. He was over there in '85 and he said it's still
27 that way. He was part Korean. His mom was Korean and his daddy was white. He said,
28 "It's still unbelievable over there." They way they take a hog to market is get the hog
29 drunk on makkoli, which is a rice wine. You drink enough of it, you'll go blind. They
30 poured it down this hog's throat until he was drunk you really could tie him upside down
31 on the back of this bicycle and pedal him to market.

1 DD: He was a happy camper. I didn't know that. I always wondered how they
2 did that.

3 RJ: Well, when I was at Long Binh we'd every now and then go to Bien Hoa to
4 open mess for breakfast over there. One morning we was going along there and there
5 was a dump truck stopped in the road and a mangled bicycle and there was a body lying
6 in the road. What had happened was a Vietnamese, he had got underneath rear wheels of
7 the dump truck and it was fully loaded.

8 DD: Good Lord.

9 RJ: His head was about as flat as a pancake. There was a big, about five-foot
10 diameter circle around his head that was green, gray and red because it had squeezed
11 everything out of his brain. We were going to breakfast. And some mornings, we didn't
12 get over there all the time, just occasionally. Most of the time we ate food that we bought
13 at the PX or begged or borrowed C-rations, you know. We were given an allowance to
14 buy food. We didn't have a mess hall. One morning, the first morning we drove by there
15 and I looked at it. I couldn't figure out what was going on. But it was a little building
16 built out over what I call a stock pond. The water underneath it was just frothy. There
17 was a little ramp built out from the bank. Then I got to noticing the second time by there
18 was a little head sticking above the tin on the side of the little building. What it was was
19 a community bathroom. They unloaded their business in there and the carp ate it and
20 then they caught the carp and ate them.

21 DD: Got recycled again.

22 RJ: Yup. Most people wouldn't believe you if you'd start telling them what
23 you'd seen. It just blew my mind on certain occasions over there. I saw a little kid with
24 gangrene. An old Korean woman wanted me to take him to the hospital. I said, "I can't
25 do that." I was on the gate. So I called the medics and they came down and looked at
26 him. They did take him up there but I think he lost part of his leg. He'd pulled over a pot
27 of boiling water on him. Every now and then you'd have some kid with an artillery
28 assimilator he'd picked up, blow his hand off with it. I even had to pronounce one kid
29 dead because he was blue. He'd been swimming in the river and wasn't breathing, no
30 pulse. I told Cho, "Tell her that he's dead." There was nothing that I can do or the
31 medics can do because he's not breathing, no heart beat.

1 DD: He ain't breathing. He ain't going anywhere.

2 DD: This is an oral history interview of Russell E. Johnson, Jr., an MP Spec-4 in
3 Vietnam. The interviewer is myself Dwight D. Daniel a volunteer at the National
4 Museum of the Pacific War located in Fredericksburg, Texas. Today is 19 August 2003.
5 This interview is taking place at Mr. Johnson's home, 20704 Thurman Bend Rd.
6 Spicewood, Texas, 78669. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War
7 Studies, which is the Archive of Preservation of Historical Information at the National
8 Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife. This is Tape Three, Side A.
9 (Editor's note: Tape Two, Side B is missing and is not included in this interview) You
10 were talking about—

11 RJ: Sergeant Johnson.

12 DD: Sticking that armadillo in his bunk.

13 RJ: He was laying there, spread-legged and I just picked up the sheet at the end
14 of the bunk and I stuck that armadillo in there and it went right up to his crotch. He came
15 up out of that bunk. There were about six of us and he said, "I'll whip everybody!" He
16 got pranked, but he got a good laugh out of it, too. We had one guy that was assigned to
17 us. He was a draftee and he got through with his service and they attached to my
18 company the 149th MP Company. Well, he was a weightlifter. He was so muscle bound
19 you couldn't hardly shoot pool. It was a herky-jerky movement trying to shoot pool. His
20 name was Joe Bednarski, alias Ivan Putski. The wrestler here. One night he was giving
21 this guy, his name was Burns, a rash of garbage and started picking on him. This little
22 dude weighed 165, whooped him unmercifully. He didn't let Bednarski's hand get on
23 him because he kept pounding him in the face with jabs. Every night you'd hear from the
24 next barracks over: clonk! when he'd drop his weights on the floor. One time at Long
25 Binh in Vietnam we had this guy from Chicago named Patrick Reardon. He and I were
26 drinking. He said, "Let's go over and see our (unintelligible)." They lived across the
27 road. We knew where they lived and everything. I said, "Why don't we take a sheet
28 over there and put it around us and hide in that elephant grass over there because they
29 might come walking along there?" So it was dark and we put the sheet around us and we
30 could hear them talking, coming down the path. We jumped out at them and went,
31 "Whooo!" They scattered, they started cussing and they went to the hooches and he and I

1 walked up and they gave us a ration of, probably, too. (Laughing) Scared the hell out of
2 them.

3 DD: I can understand that.

4 RJ: That was one time being drunk didn't really get you in trouble with Charlie.
5 But one of the guys was sober and he said, "Come on let's get up Highway 1. I think I
6 know where there's a Green Beret compound up there. Let's see if we can't get any of
7 those rifles, Chinese rifles." So we were sitting there drinking and I said, "Shoot, why
8 not?" I've got my rifle and my pistol and we had grenades with us and extra beer. We
9 took off and went up the highway, about twenty miles or so Highway 1. We went
10 through a rubber tree plantation and the further we got up Highway 1, the nastier the
11 looks we got.

12 DD: That just wasn't one of your smarter moves, then. (Laughter)

13 RJ: No it wasn't one of our smarter moves. Then when we got up there I said,
14 "Where's this Green Beret compound?" He said, "It's supposed to be right here." I said,
15 "Well, evidentially it's not. Let's get the hell out of Dodge. Let's get back to where
16 people are a little more friendly looking towards us than the ones we see around here."
17 Well, we get back to the compound there and one of the guys from headquarters comes
18 walking down and we said, "Hey what happened up north there about twenty miles?" He
19 said, "Hell we had a major operation through there two hours ago." That's why
20 everybody was looking at us so bad. (Laughter) Oh, hell. Young and dumb, bulletproof,
21 and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

22 DD: That's scary you survived this isn't it?

23 RJ: Yeah.

24 DD: We all do dumb things when we're young. Did you ever do any road
25 patrols?

26 RJ: No, mainly in Saigon by the harbor area and the compound. It was mainly a
27 static post. Two guys that were on duty at the gate of that chateau in Bien Hoa. One
28 night they heard a ka-thump on the sand bags that were sitting behind them. Nothing
29 happened and one of the guys looked over and there was a grenade lying there with a
30 rubber band still wrapped around its handle. See Charlie's mind was if you take a rubber
31 band and put it around there and pull the pin and rub it along the pavement, the pavement

1 was going to cut the rubber band. Meanwhile he would be long gone. They called DOD
2 (Ordnance Disposal) and had them take care of that. The thing about it, a kid could walk
3 up and stick one in your back pocket and run and you would never know it because
4 grenades in Vietnam were fused four seconds. The ones in Korea were seven. The ones
5 in World War II were ten. One, two, three, four, boom! That's about how long you'd
6 have lasted. That's why my partner and I jumped out of that jeep while it was running,
7 too. (Laughter)

8 DD: I can understand that.

9 RJ: Well, that's about it, Bubba.

10 DD: Okay. I can't think of anything else. You didn't see a Bob Hope show so
11 what good are you?

12 RJ: Well, some of our guys did escort Ann Margaret in. They said, "As soon as
13 she hit that heat all that make-up was cracked and it made her look like she was sixty
14 years old." I don't know if you've ever seen the commercial of her without make-up.
15 She doesn't look that pretty.

16 DD: Oh, no kidding?

17 RJ: I'm not even going to get in to VD (venereal disease) very there because I
18 never caught any of it.

19 DD: That's all that matters. I asked about the USO (United Service
20 Organization) because one guy, he was in the Pacific in World War II for—I think he
21 didn't see a round eye or American woman for, I think, twenty-two months. They got a
22 USO show so he said it was the best thing since sliced bread. It was Randolph Scott and
23 Ray Bowles. All he wanted to see was women. I said, "What did these guys do?" They
24 came out, shook our hands and talked. I said, "What good is that?" He agreed.

25 RJ: I'd like to have met Randolph Scott. He was a good actor. I've got a samurai
26 sword back here would you like to see that?

27 DD: Yes.