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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Dan Johnson
Conducted by Kelly Crager
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Transcribed by Emilie Meadors**

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.

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1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History Interview with
2 Mr. Dan Johnson. Today is January 19, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Johnson is joining me from Albuquerque, New Mexico. I
4 am interviewing Mr. Johnson today in order to record his reminiscences of his
5 experiences in the United States Marine Corps in Vietnam. Mr. Johnson served with the
6 1st Marine Air Wing Headquarters at Da Nang from December of 1968 to June of 1969.
7 Mr. Johnson, to begin this interview, I'd like to get some biographical information if I
8 could. Could you tell me when you were born and where?

9 Dan Johnson: Yes, I was born September 19, 1946 in Spring Lake Heights, New
10 Jersey.

11 KC: In New Jersey. What were your parent's names?

12 DJ: John and Patricia.

13 KC: John and Patricia. What did your parents do for a living there in New Jersey?

14 DJ: My father was a lifer in the Army National Guard. He was a Full Bird
15 Colonel after he retired.

16 KC: Oh, okay, so you certainly had this military influence very early on then?

17 DJ: Right, and my mother was a legal secretary.

18 KC: Alright, did you have any brothers or sisters?

1 DJ: Yeah, I have a brother who just recently retired from the Air Force, also a
2 colonel.

3 KC: Oh wow, so military tradition is something very prominent in your family
4 then?

5 DJ: So, we have the Army, the Air Force, and the Marines.

6 KC: Very good, left the Navy out.

7 DJ: Yeah, while I was in the better part of the Navy.

8 KC: (Laughing) Tell me about growing up there in New Jersey. What was
9 childhood like for you there?

10 DJ: It was actually pretty mundane. We lived in a relatively suburban type area
11 that was right on the ocean. It was quiet, school was—we walked to school, there wasn't
12 busses or anything like that. So, it was a fairly good childhood. I was raised mostly by my
13 grandparents. They lived in the same area because my father was away a lot since he was
14 in the service and my mother had some medical issues when I was first born. So pretty
15 much I was raised by my grandparents. I had one brother and we communicate. For the
16 most part my childhood was fairly good. I had living at the ocean and obviously I spent
17 most of my summers sunbathing. Although we were brought up with a lot of
18 responsibilities and self respect, we were pretty motivated to make our way in life. Early
19 on in childhood my grandparents came from—I'm only second generation American.

20 KC: Where did you parents come from?

21 DJ: My grandparents were all either from Russia, France, or Ireland.

22 KC: Interesting.

23 DJ: Yeah, they all came over between 1911 and 1912 on both sides.

24 KC: Growing up in that part of the world with this kind of recent immigrant
25 background if you will, and with this kind of ethnic background, did you encounter and
26 sort of difficulties growing up or did your family encounter any sort of difficulties?

27 DJ: No, not really. My grandfather was very accomplished in his area. He was a
28 doctor and actually had several doctorates and my grandmother was also in the medical
29 field. My father's parents I never met. They died before I was born. Actually, they died
30 when he was about sixteen or seventeen. (Coughing) He went into the service right from
31 there and he was in ever sense until he retired whenever that was. I think 1980 or so.

1 KC: Wow.

2 DJ: The military life, I was kind of impacted by it in certain respects, but the fact
3 that my brother was with my parents and I lived with my grandparents, so we never really
4 established the brother bond although we talked and communicated and we went to the
5 same school, but there were never any issues. My grandfather was Russian, my
6 grandmother was on the French and I think she had some French and something else in
7 her background and they were both—as I say they brought me up to be—they treated me
8 more like an adult than a child. So, my childhood was a little bit different simply because
9 it was my grandparents, and they were constantly at home and my education was
10 emphasized. My father and mother, although we got along, you know, again, we had to
11 go a different type of bond because of the distance. After my grandfather passed away
12 then we were all living in my parent's house and that was my sophomore year in high
13 school. He had managed to go to two different high schools for whatever reason and the
14 last high school, I didn't really establish that great deal of, you know, close friends
15 although I did have some. Anyway, most of my childhood was very well spent, very, you
16 know, normal, normal childhood things.

17 KC: How well did you do in school?

18 DJ: I was pretty much average. Towards the end I was so a little bit above
19 average. My senior year I kind of aced a few courses. You know with my grandparents,
20 they kind of emphasized education and back then when you went to high school, it was,
21 you know, you started at seven in the morning and didn't end until three and you had all
22 academic classes because in the high school I went to while it was a small class,
23 relatively speaking to what today's classes are, the average classroom was probably
24 fifteen people. Sometimes it was seventeen or eighteen, but we had seven actual
25 academic courses plus Phys Ed. But you had the choice back then to pick whether you
26 were going to go onto college and say you got a totally different curriculum. And those
27 choose the technical side or, you know, more hands-on like carpenter or whatever so
28 there was two various curriculums at the high school. We were actually really pretty high.
29 In my graduating class we had two that were accepted Rhodes Scholars, three that went
30 onto Harvard or Yale or Princeton. I went into the service because I wasn't ready to make
31 up my mind yet, so I went into the Marines, but afterwards I ended up going to college

1 and majoring in political science of all things. Academics was pretty high on everybody's
2 scale. And probably even those people that weren't doing as well were probably better
3 educated than most people are today in class.

4 KC: So, it sounds like you weren't quite ready for college as you were?

5 DJ: Once I was graduating, I was a little bit—A couple things, first of all I was
6 dealing with two different issues. One, what did I want to do with my life? I hadn't really
7 focused in. Originally, I wanted to do architecture, but drafting scales while they were
8 good, they weren't good enough. So, I decided, you know what, I come from a service
9 family. I went down one day, and the Marine Corps recruit guy grabbed me as I was
10 walking in the navy recruit area and so I sat down and talked to them and, you know,
11 that's how I ended up in the marines. You know, by the time I finished that experience,
12 and to be quite honest at looking back on all of that, I would say that today's—I do
13 recommend that almost anybody, I don't care what they do in it, but the military service
14 teaches you a great deal of several things. Number one, self respect; number two,
15 responsibilities. A whole lot of issues that you use throughout the rest of your life and I
16 don't think people really recognize the service as that particular type of entity. Obviously
17 trying to tell somebody who's seventeen years old that they'll be using this experience for
18 the rest of their life and I've always thought that I'm a person that graduates high school.
19 The first thing they should do is spend a few years in the service and then go to college,
20 but that's my opinion.

21 KC: Well, that's sure by a lot of other people as well for a variety of reasons.

22 DJ: You know, it teaches people a whole lot of different, you know, things for
23 people to learn that you don't normally get if you're in the college situation. It's more
24 social although you do have to have some discipline in your education. It's a different
25 type of discipline.

26 KC: Now, how aware were you as you're making your way through high school
27 there in New Jersey? How aware were you of larger nation-wide or even worldwide
28 events? I'm talking about the Cold War, et cetera.

29 DJ: Actually, from my prospective, because I grew up in the fifties and sixties,
30 you know, those were my teen years. Early on, there was some world issues going on
31 mostly, you know, regarding communists and Russia and all this other stuff. We were

1 aware of it and obviously in classes we discussed certain, you know, current events at the
2 time, but there wasn't a great deal going on back in the late fifties and sixties. Vietnam
3 started just as I was coming out of, you know, in high school with a name people heard
4 of, but that was about it. They didn't really know a whole lot about it. But for the most
5 part in the fifties the most political stuff that you heard about was, you know, Russia and
6 all of that stuff and McCarthy and those types of things. Now, we were pretty well— not
7 isolated, but probably no worse off than most everybody else in the U.S. back in the
8 fifties where everybody had a car or a refrigerator and all the other appropriate
9 immentaties to live life and luxury. I mean, I can remember because of when I was born,
10 we didn't even have our first television until I was nine years old. My grandparents
11 obviously were not TV watchers, so I was not really into TV and I still am not. Actually,
12 for sixteen years I've never even owned one. Growing up back then was definitely
13 unique. I don't know that that particular area from the fifties to early sixties will ever be
14 repeated nor will I really want it to be. I think most people were living in a little bit of a
15 haze thinking that life is phenomenal and everybody's going to have two cars and dogs,
16 pets, own a home and, you know, carry on. Now, we lived in an area in New Jersey
17 where there wasn't a whole lot of prejudice that existed. In fact, neighbors of ours, you
18 know, our next-door neighbor was an African American, and he was a doctor, very well
19 educated. His son and I were good friends and our school, we had a good portion of— we
20 didn't have a lot of Hispanics, but mostly black or white, but still a low percentage. In
21 any sense, there wasn't any of like southern influence on the northern side of it and I was
22 raised— color to me didn't exist and to this day I don't see a person's color, I see the
23 person. I think it was a different type of upbringing in rural New Jersey as opposed to the
24 city part of New Jersey which was totally different. I found out later through friends there
25 was quite a gap between where I lived and other areas. I didn't really experience those
26 types of prejudices and biases. A lot of it had to do with the way I was brought up. You
27 know, it lasts a lifetime. I still to this day, you know, I understand history and all that
28 occurred and those were terrible things, but at the time when I was growing up as a child,
29 it had no real significance to me. Later on, obviously, in school and stuff like that you
30 learned more about what was going on. It was a fairly healthy upbringing if you ask me. I
31 saw all the right things.

1 KC: Okay, you mentioned school again. When did you graduate from high
2 school?

3 DJ: In 1969.

4 KC: In 1969.

5 DJ: Yeah, 1969 I'm pretty sure— no, no, 1965. I'm sorry, 1969 is when I got out
6 of the Marines.

7 KC: Yeah, I thought our dates might have been off there a little bit there, 1965.

8 DJ: Yeah, it was 1965 when I graduated.

9 KC: Now, when you get out of high school you mentioned that one, you come
10 from this background, the military background.

11 DJ: Right.

12 KC: Two, you didn't know exactly what you wanted to do, but didn't think that
13 college was one of them. And then that three, you were interested in joining the military
14 and you were, I guess, cornered is one way to say it by the sounds of it.

15 DJ: Actually, I was. The guy came right out of his office as I was walking by.

16 KC: Well, so tell me about that. What did this Marine Corps recruiter have to tell
17 you that convinced you that that was the way to go?

18 DJ: Oh, he said, "Before you go wherever you're going, why don't you come in
19 and sit down and talk." And I said, "Oh okay." It wasn't like a planned event; it was
20 actually before I graduated. I was like three or four months away from being graduated
21 and thought I'd go in and find out what possibilities there were. So, he sat down, and we
22 talked about the Marine Corps and its esprit de corps, what some might call the Semper
23 Fi, and the camaraderie and the various different aspects of what the Marines did and
24 education possibilities. So, we sat and talked for probably about a good two or three
25 hours and, you know, finally I said, "This sounds like something I could probably
26 handle." So, I actually joined on that day and I was actually inducted prior to my actual
27 departure to Paris Island which is in South Carolina. So, I was in the real Marine Corps if
28 you really want to get down to it because San Diego is considered a Hollywood Marine at
29 the time. I don't know if they still use that, but Paris Island was where real Marines were
30 trained. I was in it for three months prior and so I listened to his conversation. He was
31 very straight forward and direct saying, "Listen, it's not going to be fun, it's sixteen

1 weeks of pure hell and screening and then you've got your infantry training for another
2 four weeks after that. So, you've got twenty weeks before you even hit a destination." Of
3 course, Vietnam was just starting, and he went through that a little bit. He hadn't been
4 there himself and it was just really, actually getting to have some notoriety at the time I
5 was going in. So, it wasn't until after I was there that I had become a major event, a world
6 event. Anyway, I ended up signing the paper and signed up and I remember coming back
7 to the house and telling my parents I joined the Marine Corps and my father, of course,
8 said, "What?" him being in the army.

9 KC: Right, I assume he wanted you to go into the Army rather than the Marines.

10 DJ: Well, he didn't even know—actually, I hadn't even discussed it with
11 anybody. It was a self motivating thing that I did on my own. So, when I graduated it was
12 in our book and everything, you know, "What are you going to do after you graduate?"
13 and mine was, "I joined the Marine Corps."

14 KC: During the intervening time did you do anything to prepare yourself for basic
15 training?

16 DJ: Yeah, basically I read up on the Marine Corps history and, you know, just
17 things like that. I got myself a little bit indoctrinated. Of course, the last couple of months
18 of school, you know, you have finals and you're doing all that stuff and getting prepared
19 to depart to, you know, adulthood I guess is what you might want to call it. I don't recall
20 anything other than basic rights. I just read up on it and was ready and the day that I had
21 to report to New York for my little trip to Paris Island, South Carolina. The odd thing
22 was, I was placed in charge of the whole bus group. I mean, from day one they took me
23 in kind of a leadership role.

24 KC: Why was that, why were you chosen?

25 DJ: Not really quite sure, but anyway, that's how it ended up. I remember that,
26 you know, the sergeant that was indoctrinating us and doing all the paperwork and blah,
27 blah, blah telling all the people that were going to be on. There were three bus loads and
28 there were three different people being in charge of each bus and I was one of them. I'm
29 not sure what the criteria was or what they used as a—we were never told that, so.
30 Anyway, that was my indoctrination experience into the Marine Corps. I said, "Oh great,
31 here I am in charge and I'm not even sure what we're doing." And then as soon as we

1 landed in Paris Island, South Carolina, in July in South Carolina, don't know if you've
2 ever been there, but it was hotter than blazes. We got off the bus and this drill instructor
3 slammed open the door, they already had my name, called me out and said, "Get the rest
4 of your" —they identified us as pansies or something— "out here and get them in line."
5 "Yes, sir." So, that was my first day at Paris Island and of course it was a whole two days
6 of getting indoctrinated, getting assigned to platoons, you know, all sorts of stuff. I don't
7 know if any of us really expected any particular—we knew it wasn't going to be a party,
8 but I don't know that we were expecting it to be quite as, I don't know, strict, I guess. We
9 all made it. I went in with a friend of mine and unfortunately, I've forgotten his name
10 since, but we went in and we actually were from the same area and we met at the
11 recruiting station after we both signed up and stuff. We were in the same platoon. I don't
12 know if you're familiar with the Marine Corps, but each regiment has four different
13 platoons and you get assigned to a drill instructor, assistant drill instructor, and then all
14 your clothes are issued and none of it, of course, fitting like you're used to. In any event,
15 it started off with a great big bang.

16 KC: Well, tell me about that. Go into as much detail as you can and tell me about
17 your daily routine.

18 DJ: Well, from day one it was, you know, the drill instructor made it very clear
19 that he was going to knock us all down and build us all back up. That was their goal was
20 to not only train us in a military prospective, but everything we've learned up until then
21 you throw it out the door and we're going to retrain you into a Marine. And the Marine
22 Corps is going to be a way of life until you get out. And he says, "And then you can be
23 on then." It's true actually, once a marine always a marine, I'll tell you. I mean, the very
24 first night was definitely an experience. We got there and finally after we got all our
25 clothes and stuff, they had put us in line, tell us how to stand. Again, I was still in charge
26 of that particular group. And we got to our barracks and we got assigned our bunks and
27 that night, you know, you think, "Thank god, we're gonna get a rest." Ha, ha, ha, no such
28 thing. I mean, that first night we were in Marine Corps training we went out onto the
29 parade ground and did a couple of runs and, you know, they tried to teach us how to do
30 things in military fashion and when we got back, you know, I think we hit the rack until
31 about eleven o'clock that night and the next morning was four a.m. and it never changed

1 for sixteen weeks. Some days were a day off, but if you want to call that a day off until
2 you put everything together, wash your clothes outside by hand, and training started the
3 very first day. We went through basic military courses, classroom instruction, rifle
4 marksmanship training, the whole military thing. You had to memorize the Code of
5 Military Justice, the Marine Corps slogans and various different things in Marine Corps
6 history, read up on the books, went out in the field to do field marches, forced marches. It
7 was definitely an eye-opening experience. There was never a moment that was let down.
8 Everybody would hold guard duty every single night and checking in with the drill
9 instructor who lived in the same barracks and you had to learn military time which I was
10 already familiar with. It was educational, it was physical, it was sometimes you just felt
11 like, “What am I doing here?”

12 KC: What do you do when you have that feeling and doubt creeping into your
13 mind about what you’re doing there? How do you deal with that?

14 DJ: You quickly come to perspective. At least for me, that’s what I did. A lot of
15 people just weren’t able to separate the fact that you had a different life before you came
16 in. This is the Marine Corps life, there’s bound to be some differences once you’re out of
17 the training. I put it into perspective that this was a training issue to get us where the
18 Marine Corps wanted every individual. And that basically was to respond to orders, react,
19 respond without question to things that were going on and what was being told was
20 respect for my fellow marines, respect for drill instructors and commands, do anything
21 that we could possibly do in the best manner possible. I mean, that goes from, you know,
22 doing parades, everything. It was just excellence was the only objective, nothing less. It
23 was—I was able to put things into perspective. As I say, during the course of the sixteen
24 weeks we probably lost four different people due to inability to adapt. People that were
25 rebellious and thinking that it was, you know, some things were relatively—you might
26 consider silly or not silly, but why are they doing this? If your shoes weren’t polished
27 correctly, they’d take your everything and throw them out and mess them up and make
28 you redo everything, but for me I was able to put it into perspective. I remember just
29 prior to graduating we had to do an inspection we had in the barracks and one of the drill
30 instructors came by and my particular bunk and my bunk mate, the footlocker was out of
31 sorts, so he pushed me completely out of the way physically. For whatever reason I was

1 off balance, landed and cracked my head on the corner of the rack and had to go to—I
2 experienced a concussion, and this is like four or five days prior to graduation. That was
3 kind of a bizarre experience. I didn't think anything of it other than that's what happened.
4 And needless to say, my parents came out—One of the things that did occur is when you
5 had mail call. They don't read what's inside, but they read what's outside. Well, my
6 father, I told him never ever to do that had on his return address, his rank. So, I got ribbed
7 completely by the DI (Drill Instructor) saying, "Oh, you think you're going to get special
8 treatment because your father's a colonel in the Army?" And all this other stuff so they
9 made my life miserable once they read that.

10 KC: Tell me about your DIs, what were they like?

11 DJ: They were very stark, very focused. Looking back on it, their primary
12 objective was to make everyone of us as perfect as possible. So, their goal wasn't to
13 demean us or to, you know, make us feel less. Their goal was to make us feel more and to
14 be more. But of course, going through it you see it as, "I bet this guy hates my guts." You
15 know, they're well-trained professionals and their goals and objectives. In the Marine
16 Corps, and I have to admit, not just because I was in the Marines, but a lot different than
17 the other services and way more at stake, break down the individual and build them back
18 up.

19 KC: Explain what you mean by that.

20 DJ: Well, they literally do break you down. They destroy— not destroy, but they
21 try to break down everything that you thought of and reeducate you into the Marine
22 Corps' form of thought process. You know, "I will follow the instructions without
23 question, without fail." You know, physical stamina was the upmost importance, and you
24 go even when you think you can't, you continue. You learn everything that you possibly
25 can and if you don't know it then you study it and make sure that you do know it.
26 Everything was symphonic and everything was to break down whatever you think might
27 be acceptable and they did a good job. Most of us that graduated were definitely in a
28 much better responsibility fashion. We saw life differently, at least I did. I know people
29 who I've spoke to after we got out of graduating. We talked to them and you went from
30 boyhood to manhood in sixteen weeks. I don't know that there's any other way to explain
31 it. There was a definite change from the day you landed there to the day you left. There

1 wouldn't be anybody that I knew that wouldn't see the difference. And for us going
2 through it, we don't necessarily see it, but we feel it.

3 KC: What as the most difficult part of boot camp?

4 DJ: (Coughing) Probably the physical stress. It was a push, push, push till you
5 dropped and that was literally, till you dropped. And even when you dropped you better
6 get up. I did have—probably that would have been the most, as I say, I think I adapted
7 better to a lot of what was going on because of my upbringing or because I was used to
8 the military. In any event, I was able to go through it without a whole lot of problems.
9 You know, as I say, there were quite a few people that couldn't quite make the grade.
10 They never did graduate with us. It was quite (buzzing in the background)—I'm sorry
11 about that.

12 KC: That's okay. When you finished with boot camp there at Paris Island, what
13 would you want to do in the Marine Corps? What did you want to be our next step?

14 DJ: Actually, what I really wanted to do was absolutely what I ended up doing. I
15 wanted to go into something a little bit more challenging. I didn't want to just be a grunt.
16 When you get out of boot camp, I'm not sure who they are, but somebody goes through
17 all the various different individuals, their background, education, et cetera and assigned
18 them a military occupational specialty or an MOS. As it turned out, at the end of our tour,
19 ninety eight percent of the people that were in my particular regiment all got assigned as
20 grunts in the infantry if you want to put it in Army terms. However, I got assigned for
21 ammo demolitions person which was a specialty MOS of which I had to go to school for.

22 KC: Now why did you want to do this?

23 DJ: Actually, it wasn't that particular, what I wanted to do was something other
24 than just carry a rifle. And so at least it was a step in the right direction. Once you're in a
25 specific occupational specialty, there are educational opportunities where you can take
26 courses, etcetera to either change your MOS and move forward or whatever depending on
27 your capabilities. They give you aptitude tests of assignments, obviously I must have
28 done well. And my first year there, because I liked drafting and design, I wanted to go
29 into an occupational specialty for embarkation which was actually designing shipload
30 designs for loading and stuff for Mediterranean cruises and things for the Marine Corps.
31 And ultimately, I took the test for that and had my military occupational specialty

1 changed from ammo to embarkation and I went to design school ultimately in Norfolk,
2 Virginia.

3 KC: Tell me about that, tell me about design school.

4 DJ: This is basically it's like drafting, but basically what you do is instead of
5 building a house, you're actually building—you take a ship and you're loading it and a
6 process in which, you know, when the Marine Corps goes out on sea duty, they have to
7 load up all their own equipment. It's designed on paper first and then loaded off a border
8 ship for their six-month cruise. And so, I learned all of that aspects of loading various
9 different types of ships or embarkations for the cruises. It was really, you know, I enjoyed
10 it. It was very good. I did several things later on in my career there that I used that with,
11 but that will be down the road here. But that brought me out of—originally, I was
12 assigned to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and I was in an infantry division with my
13 particular MOS, and they actually stuck me in an office which was okay with the
14 headquarters. I think what they do is in the Marine Corps your educational background
15 and your aptitude tests really dictates where they're going to put you. And so, I always
16 ended up in the slightly higher billing and a lot of my, you know, partners in crime there
17 in the Marines, because of my educational background and my capabilities I guess of
18 which I had no problems with. It was a good experience. So, at Camp Lejeune I did all
19 sorts of things. I did use some of my, you know, training and everything while I was at
20 Camp Lejeune. I was in the supply battalion and from there, that's when I went to
21 Norfolk, Virginia, when I passed the aptitude test for the embarkation. Once I got up to
22 Norfolk, Little Creek, actually. I went to class, graduated, did very well, was transferred
23 back to Camp Lejeune and then subsequently during that whole process was assigned to
24 then actually go to Vietnam, but because I was what they considered a critical MOS, they
25 sent me to California and once I got there they pulled me out of that particular group that
26 was going to be going to Vietnam and they kept me in California and into that supply
27 battalion because they needed somebody with my background.

28 KC: Now, what year was this? Was this 1966?

29 DJ: This was in 19—Okay, well let me put you in perspective. The boot camp
30 thing was in 1965 and that was from July, August, September, and October. And then
31 November and December was infantry training or November to part of December. I went

1 to Camp Lejeune from December to the following December, I believe, but in the
2 meantime, I spent four months up in Norfolk getting training. Once I got back to Camp
3 Lejeune then I went in 1966 and I went to Camp Pendleton. So, at Camp Pendleton in
4 late '66, '67. There's when I got to use my embarkation and my computer skills.

5 KC: How so—?

6 DJ: Now back then computer skills were very hard to find. I picked a person that I
7 had worked with and there was a system that they used that was all manual. It took hours
8 and hours and hours. I had decided that there was a better way to do it using the computer
9 that they had which was gigantic. It was a spare UNIVAC (Universal Automated
10 Computer) and put things on a card system. And so, I asked for a person. By that time, I
11 had already been promoted to Lance Corporal and then Corporal in between this whole
12 time I was sent. Within a year and a half, I was up E-4 (Corporal). In California I
13 suggested to our commander, I said, "I can work on the number of hours to prepare all
14 this. I'll probably cut it, at minimum, half the time which would save a ton of stuff." So,
15 after three months working with the system, I actually cut it down to where it only took
16 what normally took about eighteen to twenty-five hours down to two.

17 KC: Wow.

18 DJ: I mean, it saves a ton of money and it was for shipboard loading and stuff like
19 that. It became automated. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, they still use the basics of what
20 was creative way back then and what they do, obviously, generations of computers and
21 stuff that's changed, but that was the basis of what they did. The ship work was all
22 computerized from that point forward. It was no longer manual. I got a meritorious
23 promotion of sergeant.

24 KC: What was it that you did that streamlined this?

25 DJ: I took the manual system and put it—back then, the computer system was a
26 card system. That means you place all the various different components and you identify
27 size, shape, you know, reclaiming of space and everything and you put it into a computer
28 and the computer then would spit out a card saying, "Okay, this one goes in space, you
29 know, wherever it goes on the ship instead of someone sitting there on a piece of paper
30 drawing out saying, okay, this is like, you know, twenty by twenty, it fits here." You get
31 halfway through the thing and it's saying, you know what, we need to get a tank in here

1 somewhere and there's not enough space, so they have to redesign it. The computer
2 system actually took down the card. It was very rudimentary during crack down, but in
3 any event, it was definitely helpful. So, I got a meritorious promotion out of it.

4 KC: You've risen very quickly then.

5 DJ: Yeah, I was a sergeant within two years and actually, later on in my career I
6 got promoted to staff sergeant and was one of the youngest staff sergeants in the marine
7 corps.

8 KC: Wow.

9 DJ: In fact, when I was in Vietnam, my boss, they thought I was a picture-perfect
10 post card marine, I guess, during my whole career. To be real honest, my focus on life is
11 when you're doing a job, you should be doing a job the best you can. It wasn't relevant
12 whether you liked it or disliked it, but you always do the best that you can. I focused on
13 my work and so I became kind of a—in fact, after I left Camp Pendleton I was
14 transferred to Okinawa where again I was working behind the scenes, I believe. I can't
15 remember now anymore, but I was there for several months or almost a year. I got a navy
16 achievement medal for my work there. Then, there was a billet open in Vietnam in which
17 I volunteered for. It was an actual officer's billet, but they were filling officer's positions
18 in the air wing with the enlisted people that had capabilities. So, my transport to Vietnam
19 was as an individual, not as regiment or anything. I was twelve months or almost thirteen
20 months in Okinawa and went directly to Vietnam from Okinawa. I never came back to
21 the states.

22 KC: Okay.

23 DJ: I went over as an individual and went to the 1st Marine Air Wing where I
24 worked at the headquarters there at administrative—in charge of the administration. My
25 boss was a full-blown colonel. And his boss was the general in charge of the 1st Marine
26 Air Wing.

27 KC: Why did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

28 DJ: Because I knew once I went, I would be coming right back and because that
29 would have been my next tour of duty. Actually, that's not true. I was never, if I recall
30 correctly there was a possibility for me to go to the military guard and I didn't want to do
31 that. That was kind of like a color guard and that didn't do anything for me.

1 KC: Did in the field.

2 DJ: And I was reading and because of my position I was reading all these things
3 that were needed and I said, “Oh, I think I’ll”— I told my boss in Okinawa, “Can I apply
4 for this?” And so, they sent all my records down there and the colonel in charge down
5 there said, “Yes, I moved down.”

6 KC: What did you know about the Vietnam War up at that point? We’re in 1968.

7 DJ: At that point this was 1968, it was definitely a war, I mean got things and I
8 thought, “Well, I probably should do my part.” The responsibility that I was. I decided I
9 would forgo maybe the month or two that I would be back state-side and then just do it
10 right from there. There was nothing to call me back to the states and I was actually
11 enjoying overseas and decided that I would just get it over with right now. And because I
12 was able to pick where I was going, it would have been better than being assigned to
13 someplace that maybe I didn’t want to be.

14 KC: Sure.

15 DJ: And plus, it had some, you know, had some intellectual capabilities there.
16 And again, when I was in there, I was there for eleven months before I got discharged
17 and I also stuff from my boss there, the Navy Commendation Medal for my work there.
18 So, my career as a marine was pretty positive considering in the background here, you
19 know, my lifestyle existed, but it was not a focus for me. There were people that knew
20 who I was but had absolutely no barring on anything at all. I never experienced any type
21 of prejudice or anything of that nature my entire time in the Marine Corps. And I’ve been
22 like that ever since my whole life. The person that you are that’s transferred to how you
23 treat people and how they treat you. I wasn’t out to make a mark other than the fact that
24 I’m a human, I’m a contributing person, I have value, and everything else was secondary
25 to that. I don’t know if you’re following what I’m saying.

26 KC: Yes, yes, I do.

27 DJ: I never focused in on the fact that there were people out there that were
28 prejudice and biased and there still are and I don’t ever deny that. Most of my
29 experiences have been positive. Not only just in the military, but also my civilian career,
30 my ability to be open about who I am and also be accepted and also be a person with
31 responsibility and some power. If you give respect, you get respect, I don’t care who you

1 are. It's not something that—I don't know how to explain it. You either have it or you
2 don't, or you work to have it. My focus was to be who I am, but my focus always has
3 been to be the best I can be at whatever I do, I don't care what it is. And that comes
4 across and that has a tendency to allow people to view you as a person, not a person with
5 some variations in life or lifestyles or whatever. You know, they see you for who you
6 really are. I mean, I've actually had, in my lifetime I persuaded people, not persuaded
7 forcibly, but just by who I am to change their tune. I mean literally, with letters of, you
8 know, one person in particular in my career who was hard of focus on the family. I don't
9 know if you're familiar with that and maybe I shouldn't even say things like this, but you
10 think that certain people deviance or whatever. This person was in that organization, high
11 up, and resigned and sent a public apology for his years of faking based on his experience
12 and his knowledge and knowing me personally. Now, I wasn't even unaware of this until
13 he sent me that tape. So, I mean, individually, everyone has the capability to make a
14 change. Maybe not in mass, but one at a time and that's how I've always thought of it. I
15 can't make a change or a difference on the entire world, but I can make differences in my
16 own little world. So that, actually, the Marine Corps taught me.

17 KC: Alright, now let me have you take me back to your first experiences in-
18 country in Vietnam. I assume you arrive in Da Nang, correct?

19 DJ: Yeah, actually I landed in Da Nang airport just before major offensive. There
20 was a person there that met me in a jeep, and we drove from the Da Nang Airport to the
21 1st Marine Air Wing Headquarters which is about seven or eight miles, and it was only
22 moments until I experienced the fact that we were definitely in a warzone.

23 KC: Tell me all about that.

24 DJ: Rockets and bullets flying everywhere.

25 KC: What was your initial impression when you first got to Da Nang? What was
26 Da Nang like? What did you see, what did you smell, and what was it like?

27 DJ: Actually, what I saw there, it was like hotter than blazes, a little bit on the
28 chaotic side. I mean, there was so much activity at that airport coming and going that it
29 was really hard to really focus on anyone thing. There was like one thousand things going
30 on within, you know, a fifty-yard radius. And then it's actually a quite a green and lush
31 country. The drive from the airport to the base was spectacular if it wasn't for the war, it

1 would have been, you know, a pleasurable experience. The city itself, obviously, was a
2 little bit in shambles. The Vietnamese people are totally different from what you're used
3 to. Although coming from Okinawa I was a little bit indoctrinated in the Oriental lifestyle
4 and wasn't totally soft, but there were people, you know, carrying, you know, like little
5 rice patty things on their shoulders wearing the loose clothing that everybody sees in
6 pictures and stuff with the straw hats and they were everywhere on base, not on base, at
7 the airport, on the streets. Obviously, their sanitary conditions were some what less than
8 what we're used to. It would not be uncommon to see somebody on the side of the road
9 in a ditch squatting. The one thing that really stuck in my mind that very first day was the
10 amount of war activity going on and the amount of just normal day to day living from
11 these village people just doing their normal thing. It was almost like dodging bullets and
12 rockets or whatever. It became part of their life. I was kind of awe struck on that very
13 first day just in those first few miles of driving. It was quite unusual to say the least.
14 (Static in background) I wasn't sure what to expect. When I got there everything was, as I
15 say, pretty chaotic. There was a major offensive that was about to start, and I guess it was
16 known because there was lots of preparation for—you could see troops preparing to
17 deploy into the lands of whatever. I remember being very, very tired from the flight from
18 Okinawa and talking to the sergeant that picked me up and I'm asking him all sorts of
19 stupid questions.

20 KC: Like what?

21 DJ: Like, "How is it over there? Did you spend any time in the field or have you
22 always been on base?" He had been on the field for some parts of his tour. When you're
23 in the air wing normally what happens is you go six months in the field, six months in the
24 air, if you're an airborne, or six months in an office. I found out later the stress level in
25 the air wing while you're in the air, especially because I was in helicopters which were
26 our primary apparatus. Mostly helicopters had life expectancies very short. They were
27 either shot down, rocketed down, crashed, or whatever so there was quite a bit of
28 apprehension when I was going in and listening to this guy telling me what was going on.
29 I like to see things firsthand that was nothing like you read in the papers. In fact, the
30 papers were, as I got further along in my tour of duty in Vietnam was about ninety
31 percent lies.

1 KC: Well, tell me about that; tell me what you're reading in the papers.

2 DJ: Actually, they abridged so much stuff there. In fact, because I was in
3 headquarters, I wrote some of the reports and to read about them, what happened there
4 was not even any similarities. One in particular event that did occur which actually took
5 one of my best friends died. I wasn't in that particular one, but there were seven
6 helicopters that were out on a mission and there was some ground fire that knocked a
7 quite a few of them down. One in particular was almost exploded in mid air. When it
8 landed, people were burning and stuff like that. Three generals were lost in that. The
9 newspaper, you know, the article that was presented and what occurred during that
10 particular skirmish was pretty catastrophic. The US newspapers, however, when they
11 reported it said, "A minor incident of which the Marine Corps surpassed." Well, that
12 wasn't true at all. You know, we lost quite a bit so the American people sitting on this
13 side were reading one thing and the troops over there were sane of the reality which is
14 probably why a good deal of Vietnam Veterans have some issues with the whole thing.
15 When you're seeing that firsthand, I don't think that there was anybody, including people
16 that I spoke to that could tell you why it is we were even there. And to this day, what was
17 the reason we were there? If you read the history books, you can pull out some
18 information, but there was no real emphasis. Why is it that we're dying over here? And
19 nobody could answer that, at least of all the American people who weren't there. They
20 were sitting there saying, "Okay, well it's America, we better make this sound like it's
21 worth while." And that's what most people that went over into Vietnam presumed that it
22 was propaganda which it was. I have to be real honest, there was definitely propaganda.
23 And made to make the American people that were sitting here on state-side think that we
24 were there for some gallant reason and I don't think that there's still an answer today as
25 to why we were there.

26 KC: Tell me about first coming into your new occupation, your new job there at
27 Da Nang. When do you arrive and what's it like getting accustomed to it?

28 DJ: It was not knowing what to expect when they dropped me off meeting, you
29 know, my boss for the first time and finding out what I was going to be doing keeping in
30 mind that I was going to be stationed at the Da Nang headquarters which used to be a
31 French compound. So, there were actually wood buildings and things like that there. It

1 was not sitting out in tents and things like that. They weren't you know, spatial it was just
2 basically square barracks with bunks, but they were wood. There was a regular
3 compound and my boss basically said, "Hey listen, we work eighteen hours a day. You
4 need to hit the area running." I literally went down my bunk, dropped off my gear, came
5 back, and from that day forward from the day I landed there till the day I left it was
6 eighteen-hour days, seven days a week.

7 KC: Wow. Describe a typical day for me.

8 DJ: A typical day would have been getting in reports from all the various different
9 helicopter missions, you know, doing reports and stuff. Well, my boss for the general to
10 report as to what actions were taken place, what was going on in the air and various types
11 of places such as Chu Lai and all sorts of places. There were a couple of obvious ones
12 with no names on them which were usually classified, but we still had to report those to
13 where they were, and my boss was the one that reported to the commanding general for
14 the 1st Marine Air Wing. So, all helicopter and skirmishes and activities and that's what I
15 would do and plus regular administrative stuff. So, from that perspective although the
16 very first night when you go in-country and you're on a base such as Da Nang where I
17 was, you are not really given the opportunity to fire out of your compound. However,
18 every single night you were rocketed and/or bullets flying and that includes in the
19 compound. I mean, you were dodging them when you go to breakfast or wherever. And
20 then there was guard duty and stuff on the perimeters, and we were totally sealed off. But
21 every single night—now the strange thing was you could always tell somebody new in-
22 country. When they hear the rocket, they go head straight for the bunker. Well, at that
23 point that's kind of useless because if you can hear it, it's already passed you. It's the one
24 you can't hear that's going to do it and that did occur twice in my thing. In fact, at one
25 point about six months into it my boss was in his little cubicle and I was in mine and the
26 next thing you know is this humungous explosion in the wall just came right in on us. An
27 ammo dump had blown up and was blowing up and in fact, we lost a good portion of that
28 and had to obviously evacuate for awhile. And then plus you're rocketed every single
29 night and bullets flying no matter where you're at and you just deal with those issues.
30 When you're first there the first couple of nights you're definitely wondering if the next

1 one coming in is the one with your name on it, but eventually, like anything else, you
2 kind of get used to it.

3 KC: What is it like to live through one of these rocket attacks? Whether it's the
4 first one or the last one, what were they like?

5 DJ: Well, as I say, the first you're sitting there running for the bunker and then
6 until everybody tells us, "If you can hear the rocket there's no need for the bunker." So,
7 the bunkers are very rarely ever used. Now, we were not a primary target, but there was a
8 base camp that was right next to us which was a primary target. That's where a lot of the
9 ground troops were deployed from. Now mind you, Vietnam is very heavily and a lot of
10 it comes from hills that are in the surrounding areas. You can see the, you can see the
11 flash on the lock of tracers, the trace of bullets that they use. So, you're definitely fearing
12 for your life the first few times it occurs, but eventually, because it was pretty much every
13 night, it's sad to say, but you kind of just roll with the punches and you just go about your
14 daily work and hope for the best. You're always on edge, you know, there were actually
15 days I recall when we had some time to ourselves and we could actually lay on the roof in
16 the middle of the day and get a sun bath. Not too many of them, but there was a couple.
17 Yeah, you're always on edge the entire time you're there. And again, most people there
18 are some of the people that I work with were in and out of the field. For whatever reason,
19 I managed to avoid any direct confrontation in the field. I was in the air, but nothing
20 catastrophic other than one where they were all locked we all or most of us auto-downed
21 if you know what that is, but when a helicopter is hit, there's ways in which you can
22 actually auto the loader and auto land. That means that there's no power, but the blades
23 are still intact, and you can land relatively normal. So, if they don't keep the blades to the
24 helicopter, you know, it's when they hit the blades and stuff like that of the tail that they
25 do a crash landing or explode.

26 KC: Tell me about this going out in these helicopters. What would you be doing,
27 what would be your role?

28 DJ: It's just like everybody else, you're going out on a mission. Now most of
29 mine were just—actually, I was letting out on two, there were just reconnaissance on this
30 particular one that was right at the very end, so it was not like we were going to fire or
31 firing out. It was pretty non-descript. You know Vietnam the majority of the casualties, et

1 cetera, in the helicopters were gunners and people that were actually at the opening and
2 were doing, you know, rescue missions or missions of which they were firing on the
3 enemy sites and getting fired back on. But the majority of losses for ground troops that
4 were out there being—relatively in prospective we were living in the life of luxury in
5 comparison to people that were out in the field. I mean, there was no comparison and I
6 felt very fortunate. I feel slighted or anything, you know, I'm glad I was in the position
7 that I was in of the ground troops because God only knows whether or not or would have
8 ever survived and whatever it was. As I said, the friend that I went in with, he survived
9 Vietnam, but he didn't survive mentally. When he came back, he was pretty much
10 mentally destroyed and ended up in the brink. Quite a few other people that I know did
11 not handle the situation very well. Some of them because they would read what was
12 going on back in the states and knowing that it was either totally false or a good portion
13 of it was false and getting really ticked off about the whole thing. Which is why people
14 when we came back, you know, to see these people when I landed in El Toro there were
15 picketers out there calling us murders and et cetera, blah, blah, blah. That was not fun.
16 Most of us have served in the military and we're serving what we believed would have
17 been appropriate. We're American citizens protecting America although we were hard
18 pressed to figure out how. In the back of everybody's mind they're saying, "Okay, we're
19 here for a specific reason." Whatever it is, somebody will eventually tell us. But to come
20 back and be taunted and called names and stuff like that was definitely devastating for
21 most of us that came back.

22 KC: Sure, sure.

23 DJ: And now people have really forgotten how bad it really was. When the troops
24 returned, they were ignored and admonished and made fun of and called names. They're
25 over there doing a job that they felt was initially probably if they were doing
26 appropriately. By the time you get over there you realize, of course, ninety percent of us
27 when we all talk, it's, "Why the hell are we here? What is this doing for America?"
28 Nobody had an answer. But that was the biggest issue that there was no answer, there was
29 nothing, it wasn't protecting American soil, it wasn't protecting Americans, why was it
30 that we were there? And to this day I don't think that anybody could ever give a
31 definitive answer to why in the world we were ever in Vietnam and that it ended up in the

1 hands of where it would have been had the French just let it go; with no casualties and
2 would have been the exact same thing as it is today, a communist country with not all the
3 death and destruction. If somebody can show me otherwise or show me that there was
4 some value in our losses over there, I defy them.

5 KC: Very good questions. Tell me about base life there in Da Nang.

6 DJ: I'm sorry?

7 KC: Tell me about life on base there in Da Nang. Obviously, you were very, very
8 busy. Eighteen-hour days, seven days a week as you said.

9 DJ: Yeah, most of it was just, you know, just keeping up with everything that was
10 going on in-country. The 1st Marine Air Wing obviously, we were controlling everything
11 that happened in the air wing throughout the country and that's from the north to the
12 south. So, it all funneled in through us, so it was mostly administrative problems, not
13 problems, but work and then plus we had other issues. You know, we're still in harm's
14 way there so there were necessary things that I had to get done on a day-to-day basis.
15 And because, you know, most of the troops were required in the field, you know, fighting
16 the war that the administrative type things which are necessary to, you know, keep things
17 going. There were few and far between, so it'd be twenty of us in the headquarters area
18 and work for about one hundred and twenty of us. My boss was the same way. We were
19 in there every single morning until late at night every single day as I was taking care of
20 business. Now my boss, I went through two of them because they're six months flying
21 and six months on the ground. He was jet pilot, he wasn't a happy camper down there,
22 but he was a nice guy.

23 KC: What about R&R (Rest and Recuperation)? Did you get a chance to go on
24 R&R?

25 DJ: No, none.

26 KC: None.

27 DJ: There was no such thing. Well, I had an opportunity to go to Australia, but
28 there was an offensive going on and it was cancelled, and I was due to be discharged
29 shortly there after.

30 KC: Okay, so it just didn't come back up again.

31 DJ: So, I missed my opportunity to go to Australia.

1 KC: You mentioned earlier when you got in-country you were talking about the
2 Vietnamese. What was your impression of the Vietnamese and what sort of contact did
3 you have?

4 DJ: Actually, on base I did have some contact with a lot of the locals and to be
5 real honest, even afterwards I did because they came back to the states. They're very
6 rural people, very earthbound. Their focus on life was to raise their rice and their kids and
7 they didn't care about politics, a lot of them. Some of the younger ones that were
8 indoctrinated and drugged and stuff like that. We had several that came to the base and
9 obviously you don't let them in because you never know who was going to be having a
10 suicide bomb on their back or grenades or whatever. It could be a kid, it could be a
11 woman, it could be an old man, it could be someone carrying a baby carriage. That was
12 the problem over there, you never knew who your enemy really was. The ones that were
13 allowed on base were just very—you think about maybe people that were living in the
14 outskirts of the hills of Nebraska or something or other flatlands just farming. That was
15 their primary focus in life. There were some that were educated that worked in factories
16 and had some engineering degrees and things like that just like anywhere else, but those
17 were far between the majority of the Vietnamese people were farmers pretty much.

18 KC: What was your view of the way the war was being fought? From the picture
19 that you had there in your job at Da Nang, what did you think about the way the U.S. was
20 prosecuting this war?

21 DJ: I'm gonna have to go on the fact that most of us there were wondering why
22 we were there. They were doing things; I think based on the fact that the people in that
23 country were fighting us to become communists and we were fighting back and pretty
24 much that comes down to it. You know, we were just fighting them because they were
25 fighting us. It was kill or be killed. I don't think there was too much difference in
26 somebody saying, "Oh, there was some valor in our efforts there." We were fighting the
27 American cause and most of the troops that were responsible, you know, I was. I was
28 doing my job regardless of what I felt about that particular war or more how politics were
29 handling it. It basically comes down to kill or be killed and you did the best you can to
30 protect the American way of life. Lifelong or a indifferent, pretty much I think that's how
31 the war was fought.

1 KC: What sort of contact did you have with people back home with friends and
2 loved ones?

3 DJ: Well, I felt pretty much— I even called on the phone on MARS (Military
4 Auxiliary Radio System) once in a blue moon. They were clueless as to really what was
5 going on. I didn't get a chance to speak to them freely because most of what we either
6 wrote had to be very limited and because of my knowledge and capability and what I
7 saw, you know, obviously I could never repeat that with inform to anyone outside of the
8 military.

9 KC: Sure.

10 DJ: I did, however, write about that ammo dump that got printed in the paper
11 which I got thirty lashes for doing.

12 KC: Tell me about that.

13 DJ: I had no idea my father and mother were going to put that in the newspaper. I
14 still had the article. It was just kind of a journal of what was going on that whole entire
15 twenty-four-hour period when we had to be out in the trenches protecting ourselves from
16 shrapnel et cetera and I was just explaining the situation. It wasn't giving any details per
17 say, however, they printed it without—I sent the letter not expecting it to end up in public
18 print, but there was nothing in there that was, you know, what you would call confidential
19 or anything. Like keeping this anecdote would be—It was actually I think the only
20 description of what occurred on that particular day. It was never recorded with anyone
21 else which is probably why it got to be an issue. Nothing got reprimanded for, it was just
22 saying there was nothing really disclosure on it.

23 KC: What kind of a fear was raised about this? What kind of trouble did you get
24 into?

25 DJ: They said, "Your parents, especially with your father being in the military
26 should have known that this should have never been in print." He said, "While locations
27 and specifics were not there, it should not have been in print." I said, "I agree, I had no
28 idea." I got a free phone call to my father to explain to him the facts of life. He should
29 have known better. I really upset and the next thing I know I didn't even see the article
30 until they brought it to me, and I went, "Oh my god." It was a local newspaper, too. It
31 wasn't like the New York Times or anything.

1 KC: Right, right.

2 DJ: And to say there was nothing confidential or really of any security violations
3 or anything, but it was a spectacular event, and I just wrote a journal and actually, I was
4 in the bunker right next to my boss's full bird colonel, and he said, "What are you
5 doing?" and I said, "I'm writing a journal." "Oh, a good idea." But I did that for lots of
6 things. I still write journals and stuff.

7 KC: Outside of this one attack—

8 DJ: But it goes into my computer and find out my passwords I can read some of
9 them.

10 KC: Oh, lets hope that doesn't happen. Outside of this attack that you wrote
11 about, what would you call your most significant event or moment or even discovery of
12 your time in Vietnam?

13 DJ: Um, from the war perspective or from my personal perspective?

14 KC: Either or both.

15 DJ: Okay, well, from a personal perspective, you know, as I said, my focus was to
16 do my job and do it the best I can, and I did that. One of the biggest surprises that I got
17 was one day, and I got pictures of it, when my boss called me out and he said, "We have
18 to show you something." And I said, "Okay." And everybody was out there and, "What
19 the heck is going on here?" and so in front of everyone with everything they presented
20 me with a navy commendation medal from my work there.

21 KC: Wow.

22 DJ: So that was an epic moment.

23 KC: It must have made you feel great.

24 DJ: Yeah, and then before I left 'Nam, he brought me in the office and sat down
25 and talked to me and asked me what my future was and he goes, "We're all expecting
26 you to stay in the Marine Corps." And actually, from looking back on it, I might have
27 been, you know, okay at the reenlisting, but I didn't want to come back. If it wasn't for
28 Vietnam, I probably would have stayed in the Marine Corps. It was a good experience; I
29 had no problems with the military way of life. However, I did not want to come back to
30 the war although I probably would have gotten a promotion to 2nd Lieutenant.

31 KC: Wow, that would have been difficult to turn down, I think.

1 DJ: Oh, well I did. In any event, it's obviously neither here nor there. They were
2 surprised that I wasn't staying in because by focus has always been the best marine I
3 could possibly be. And even though I was not a field Marine, you know, it takes lots of
4 different people to make something work and you don't always have to be the fighting
5 machine in the Marine Corps although we all had to be trained in it because the potential
6 was always there and always warming and comforting.

7 KC: Sure.

8 DJ: But as I was saying, there's opportunities in the military for just about
9 everybody. I don't care what your persuasion is; it's a good training ground for
10 responsibility and for those that want to make it a career, it's a really good career. To be
11 real honest, in the military respect between individuals has a greater priority than there is
12 in civilian life. And I've been out of the Marine Corps for what, forty years? And I still
13 think like a Marine.

14 KC: It stayed with you then. What was the most significant moment for you from
15 the perspective of the entire war?

16 DJ: The most significant moment during the war. Actually, when I left base to see
17 the devastation of the country and the loss of comrades and friends and various different
18 skirmishes, those were probably the biggest or had the biggest impact on my personal
19 feelings. Losses were a given, but it didn't make any difference whether it was the first
20 one or the 20th one. It never changed; each one was pretty devastating, especially when
21 you hear when it happens. I think that left the biggest impact on me as the losses that you
22 are constantly aware of on a day-to-day basis. It's not just periodically, it's every single
23 day.

24 KC: So, you regularly lost friends there?

25 DJ: Yes, oh yeah.

26 KC: What kind toll does that take on you after seeing this day after day?

27 DJ: It definitely has an impact, even today. You sometimes think back to, "Why
28 are these— what did they lose their life for?" I mean, obviously it gives you a better
29 value to your own life, but you want to believe that people have fought the battle and
30 there was some reason for it. And I think the saddest thing was that most of us could only
31 think of the reason. I mean, it was different from World War II where you were really

1 doing something that ultimately ended up for the good. Korea was similar, but not quite
2 the same. Vietnam was a unique conflict. I don't think that there's anyone that could
3 possibly put into words or describe with value that may or may not have been in that war
4 with all the losses and deaths. At least from my perspective I don't know that I could. It
5 had a lasting impact, it didn't destroy me, but it's always there. When people asked, it
6 was years before or actually decades before I could actually talk about it which I think
7 most of us who have served in Vietnam regardless of whatever they were telling whether
8 it'd be on the ground or not, probably held in most of our experiences for many years
9 without, you know, basically discussing it. I know when I returned back to the states even
10 though my father and my brother were both military at the time, neither one of them had
11 been over there and they wanted to talk about it, and I was not interested in any way,
12 shape, or form. I wanted to put most of that experience behind me. So, it was probably
13 decades later when somebody asked and I was slowly, but surely, you know, give some
14 inkling as to what I experienced and what other people may have experienced. I don't
15 think that's any different than most people that served. I don't know if any recounts that
16 had been printed, and I read a couple, that dealt with it in such a personal reflection. At
17 least I'm not aware of it. I've written some things for myself which were kind of
18 therapeutic for my own part, from my own thoughts and recollections and how I
19 personally felt during the time I was there. You learn to try and put yourself aside. It's
20 sort of like maybe looking at yourself from afar. You're not really there, but you are
21 there. And then when you come back, some of the reality sets in and you just kind of put
22 it into a compartment and you leave it there for a long period of time. Some people
23 couldn't resist the post traumatic stress that so happened. Are you there?

24 KC: Yes, I'm here.

25 DJ: Oh, okay, I just wanted to be sure my phone's not dying. You know, I've
26 spoken to people that were there and had much more devastating experiences than I did
27 and their families and mine were very similar. You compartmentalize when you returned,
28 and they hope that something like that does not ever reoccur again. Although, I think to
29 some extent it is in the smaller fashion not quite as devastating, but still, we're repeating
30 ourselves again. It was an experience that takes a long, long time to incorporate into your
31 lifestyle and to begin to acknowledge it, I guess. For those that couldn't, you know, the

1 veterans that you see on the streets and the ones that couldn't make it mentally are still,
2 you know, they're still around, they're still here and they're basically forgotten.
3 Unfortunately, America has a tendency to forget their veterans and what they did. I mean,
4 they remember them on occasion and now there's a little bit more going onto kind of
5 acknowledge the fact that veterans are fighting for our freedom and whether or not it's an
6 agreeable for whatever reason, you know, politically speaking people believe that it's for
7 our freedom. American Democracy has gone through some radical changes. I'm glad I'm
8 on my way out and not on my way in. It's kind of sad to say, huh?

9 KC: Yeah, that's really poignant.

10 DJ: It was much better life way back when. Today's politics personally suck.

11 KC: Why don't we take a break there for today.

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Interview with Dan Johnson

Session [2] of [2]

Date 2 February 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Dan Johnson. Today is February 2, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Johnson is joining me by telephone, again, from
4 Albuquerque, New Mexico. Alright, Mr. Johnson, as we were discussing off the record a
5 moment ago, you were describing your basic feelings or attitude towards your time there
6 in Vietnam. You said that it was a positive experience. Could you go ahead and tell me
7 that again so that we get this on the record?

8 Dan Johnson: Well, considering all the circumstances, you know, the conflict and
9 the war and everything going on, our particular command which is, you know, pretty
10 strict military rule, but as things go, everybody was right into— there was hardly ever
11 any type of negatives or things like that. Everybody did their jobs, we did it well. Most of
12 us had pretty much eighteen, nineteen-hour days when you're over there for everyone.
13 That includes from the highest command to the lowest. It was pretty well run, I was
14 entrusted basically with, and you know, the leadership that was over there, it was very
15 well done. They were really realistic, they were not—they weren't textbook people if you
16 know what I mean by that.

17 KC: Sure.

18 DJ: They operated based on real—what physically was going on. Protocol was
19 used when necessary, but for the most part everybody was all part of the same team and
20 that goes for in the highest command down. You know, we all knew each other as
21 partners more than officer, you know, senior officers. It was a much different experience
22 over there than it was back in the states when protocol was a priority. You know, there
23 basically the job that you do and getting it done right, getting it done well. Mend people's
24 lives so protocol to the back seat.

25 KC: Sure.

26 DJ: My process to of them were excellent.

27 KC: What was your opinion of the command structure and the way they
28 prosecuted the war as you saw it?

1 DJ: From our standpoint being in the Air Wing and other things, it was pretty
2 structured, but they ran a smooth operation when there were missions to go out on, you
3 know, scrambles and things like that. They were very speedy, well rehearsed people that
4 were in command and definitely got the job done. I mean, from that perspective, I
5 thought it was very well done. From a political perspective, that was a different story.
6 You know, from the actual command, the Marine Corps trains their people well.

7 KC: Well, you allude to the political leadership and that you don't have quite as
8 high an opinion of that, talk about that for me.

9 DJ: Well, the political leadership we're trying to deal with more impressions or
10 perceptions that people have. I don't know that they necessarily lied outright, but it's like
11 any other politician. They omit certain things to make it sound a little bit better than what
12 it really is. A lot of the missions that were over there as I was in personal contact with
13 were reported as very minor things and, you know, the U.S. was making great strides and
14 one of the things that always got me a little bit bizarre, there were a couple of reports that
15 came across when I was doing my job that identified casualties and I would imagine if
16 someone gives some sort of mathematical review of the reports and stuff. They were
17 reporting that half of the country in Vietnam probably died during that war and that
18 wasn't the case. Basically, what happened on one of them there, we know that there was
19 only five insurgents that were actually killed for the years reported that over forty and
20 that is because the circumstance surrounding that particular one was an explosion and so
21 each body part was counted as a casualty and vice versa when it came to American
22 casualties. They would eliminate certain counts if they couldn't identify a full person,
23 that person was not counted. So, it was kind of an interesting way to report the casualty
24 process. That was probably one of the most bizarre things I did find out. I used to talk to
25 my boss and not that it was funny or anything, but it was like, you know, the amount of
26 information that's getting out there was totally inaccurate.

27 KC: Right, and this is coming from all sides.

28 DJ: From our side, yeah. I think basically during the Vietnam War because of all
29 of the protests and all of that, I don't know, but to me or the people back here who
30 weren't over there. I needed some of the people that were actually in-country. I think I
31 said some of this in my last interview and I think most people would have been hard

1 pressed to really define why we were there. And I don't know that today I could actually
2 say, "Why were we there?" You know, you read the textbooks and something like that
3 because it was crucial to, you know, world democracy or whatever, some major platitude
4 that may have made some sense to some politicians but didn't make sense to a whole lot
5 of people either here in the states or there in-country. Although most of the people, and
6 most of the people in-country, that I came in contact with were doing their job and
7 following basically following orders and sometimes that's really hard to do when in the
8 back of your mind you're saying, "Why am I doing this?" Nevertheless, we were there
9 under the support of America, I mean, the government itself, not necessarily the people
10 that were protesting. And I think it was pretty well known by all over there. That there
11 was some question as to the validity of our presence and ultimately the outcome kind of
12 proved that in a way.

13 KC: How so?

14 DJ: The outcome after the war was finally finished and done and Vietnam went to
15 the communist side while all of the destruction had it gone that way in the beginning;
16 many, many, many lives would have been saved and not much would have changed in
17 the atmosphere for that country and where America stands today. You know, we have a
18 relationship with them even though not considered a democracy. I mean, of course
19 Monday morning photograph, everything is 20/20 hindsight, but I guess at the time from
20 a political standpoint there was a good reason to be there. But I don't think anybody
21 truthfully could say that they know precisely the reason why we were there. But
22 nevertheless, we were there, and we did our jobs. If you dwelled on some of the things
23 that happened over there, I imagine it would take a major toll which, you know;
24 unfortunately, a lot of our veterans from war were mentally scarred for life basically. I'm
25 in contact with quite a few, but again, war is kind of a hell which I don't think there's any
26 doubt about the mental capacity of each individual was definitely challenged during
27 Vietnam. It's much different than any other war or conflict.

28 KC: Why do you think that was?

29 DJ: Um, I think it all reverts back to the reasons why in the world were we there. I
30 don't know that, I mean, from Washington D.C.'s point of view I guess they had some
31 answers, but once you look Washington D.C., I don't think anybody did. I'm not saying

1 right, wrong indifferent, I'm just saying that most everybody that I came in contact with
2 in-country, we did our jobs because we were fighting for America; right, wrong, or
3 indifferent regardless of what we thought. We were doing the right thing by doing our job
4 and that's really what the military's all about. It's about doing your job without question.
5 It's like unconditional love, this is unconditional, you know, work I guess is what you'd
6 call it. If you have a tendency to question everything you're doing and everything, you
7 could probably drive yourself crazy which I'm sure a lot of people did.

8 KC: Right.

9 DJ: One of the things about with me, you know, you see a lot of this stuff that was
10 going on in-country, the death and destruction, not just from the American point of view,
11 but from all for the troops that were fighting over there. It takes its toll on an entire
12 society and it really makes you want to question everything that you do and if you get too
13 far down in trying to figure out what's right and what's wrong during that time, it
14 probably, really probably could do a lot of damage, I think. And we're seeing the results
15 of it. I think today, if you see the vets that are on the streets and stuff like that, of course
16 some of them, not all of them are from the Vietnam Era that just, in fact, vanished. That
17 was probably one of the most unfortunate part of that particular war is so many of our
18 vets came back damaged mentally. I don't know that we've done everything that we can
19 do. Some of them don't want assistance, I've had those people, too. I did it today when
20 some of the stuff that occurred afterwards in local hospitals or rehabilitation places that
21 really didn't put enough emphasis on the fact that the veterans that they were working
22 with, damaged though they may have been, deserved much better treatment. It's much
23 better now, but the first probably five to seven years after Vietnam they weren't treated
24 very well, bottom line. And that includes our military hospitals, they were more of a
25 burden and an expense than they were human beings that needed help. That was probably
26 the saddest part of that war. I mean, today when our veterans come home, they come
27 home to people that are proud of them and our families didn't get that opportunity. It felt
28 like you were some sort of third-class citizen when you returned from Vietnam. I think
29 today we're viewing the Vietnam history in a little bit different light. It doesn't quite have
30 the same impact it did at the time it occurred. You know, time heals all wounds as they
31 say and people in general, I think, when you mention Vietnam, especially of the younger

1 people. They haven't a clue as to what you're talking about. I'm sure that they don't
2 relate at all to the magnitude of that ten-to-twelve-year period.

3 KC: Tell me about that process by which you come home from Vietnam. I believe
4 this is in June of 1969?

5 DJ: Yeah.

6 KC: When you were a short timer, what's going through your head and then when
7 do you get the word you're coming home? Take me through that whole process.

8 DJ: Basically, my tour of duty actually, I knew it was coming to an end while I
9 was serving over in Vietnam because I pretty much decided by myself that I wasn't going
10 to reenlist. Although looking back on it I probably would have been okay. I liked the
11 military life, per say. My experiences were generally positive, and you know, the training
12 and stuff. So, it's a decision that I made to not reenlist was important to me. But once I
13 did make that decision, I knew I was going to be going back to the states. I told my boss
14 or security officer that I intended to not reenlist and that was about a month prior to me
15 leaving. So, the last month I was there I was contemplating what I was going to be doing
16 and where I was going to be going. Out of all those life choices that were going to be
17 made. Again, we're so involved, even that last month I was working right up until
18 probably ten minutes before I got in a jeep to go to the Da Nang airport for departure. It
19 was a bittersweet moment for me. A lot of people that I had known, you become a lot
20 closer to people in those situations than you do just like in civilian life because you're
21 each others protector. So, it was kind of sad what I was reading, but I was looking
22 forward to my experiences after I got back to the states.

23 KC: What did you want to do when you got back to the states?

24 DJ: Huh?

25 KC: What did you want to do when you got back to the states?

26 DJ: Actually, I knew I was going to go back to school and try to begin a career.
27 My original intent was to go into politics if you can believe that. So, I took up political
28 science as a major. So that was my objective was to go back to school and then, you
29 know, build myself into corporate America somewhere. I'd like to go back to one thing
30 about leaving.

31 KC: Oh, please do.

1 DJ: It's not like leaving a vacation, it's much different. Once I got out of the jeep
2 to actually get to my plane it was, you know, you turn around and you look in various
3 different visuals because Vietnam was very early and stuff. You can see hot spots all over
4 the place and know that you're actually leaving to return to the states. But the interesting
5 thing is, when you take off on the Da Nang airport in the jet. Now, most people are used
6 to the nice, casual runway takeoff that you do in the US airports when you're going on
7 vacation. When you're in-country, the plane that you get on, you're sitting there and the
8 next thing you know when they're ready for take off, this is not a gradual incline that
9 most people are used to when they take off in a jet. This is a straight up avoidance take
10 off if you want to escape with gunfire. I mean, It was the most bizarre feeling of first of
11 all, not expecting it and second of all, you know you're being fired at and this plane is
12 going straight up to get the heck out of that airport. I remember that explicitly and I'll
13 probably never forget that particular experience.

14 KC: What was the atmosphere like on that plane?

15 DJ: Well, on the plane that I was one because, again, I was not really coming back
16 with a regiment or with a little group of people. It was a mix of military and civilian.
17 (Coughing) It was actually very quiet. Almost all of them except for those that had
18 experience in takeoff from Da Nang for main country; they all experienced the same
19 thing I did, it was like total shock. It was certainly quiet. The amount of sound, I recall,
20 luckily, I was talking to a master gunnery sergeant who was relatively quiet, and he was
21 from the ground, so he had a totally different experience than I did. So, his conversation
22 was a little bit—I think we kept them on things that were very innocuous. It was the main
23 thing about the war, about in-country or anything like that. I recall for the most part after
24 I slept most of the way back to Hawaii and then from Hawaii I went to El Toro and from
25 El Toro I went to Camp Pendleton for my final three weeks before I actually got
26 discharged.

27 KC: What kind of reception did you receive in the United States?

28 DJ: Horrible.

29 KC: Tell me about that.

30 DJ: When we landed at El Toro there were protestors right outside screaming at
31 us, "Murders." It wasn't pleasant. I just kind of tried to ignore it, but it was kind of hard

1 to ignore the fact that there were definitely harassing us. I basically just, you know, I
2 think there was a better group of five or six of us that were walking together and we just
3 kind of shrugged it off as they had no idea what they're talking about or anything like
4 that. Basically, just ignored it and let it go with that and went into the terminal. The
5 others that I was with went to direct to where it was that they were going. Two of them
6 were actually getting discharged from El Toro within twenty-four hours. I had another
7 month to go so I went to Camp Pendleton and got a job as a platoon sergeant for a month
8 for the people that were being out of the military for various different reasons. Yeah, it
9 was kind of sad in a way to know that these people were sitting there blaming the military
10 troops for political decisions. I never quite understood. I don't even understand it today.
11 You know, you don't shoot the messenger or attack them essentially. You know, yes,
12 they are doing a job that they may or may not be in favor of, but they're doing the job
13 nevertheless because we're all Americans. You know, I'm not saying that we're all
14 perfect, but the people that they should have been actually screaming out with the
15 politicians, not the military service men and women. They were basically doing their job.
16 I didn't have a whole lot of empathy for protestors that blamed the military service men
17 and women for all of the problems.

18 KC: Did you keep up with the war after you were discharged?

19 DJ: Yes, to some extent. First of all, once I was finally discharged, I remember
20 my first couple of months at my parents' house because I went back east for a few
21 months before I went back to California to start school and whatever. I was pretty quiet. I
22 remember having a conversation with my father and my brother who were both totally
23 clueless. Neither one of them has been over there even though they're both military, but
24 they were—their perception and my perception were from two different arenas. Theirs
25 was strictly from, I don't even know what you want to call it, from the Pentagon side, the
26 political side. Neither one of them experienced what was actually going on over there and
27 they didn't believe half of what they heard. They felt it was all fabricated, they didn't
28 believe that one of the things that was rather disheartening when you're over in-country is
29 there was kind of a saying that if you're a 2nd lieutenant and you end up in-country, your
30 life expectancy was probably less than five months, not because of enemy fire. And my
31 brother and my father just didn't believe that any of that happened, but I can guarantee

1 you it did. Anyway, once my initial transition into civilian life, I really focused on myself
2 and getting myself back into, you know, school mode and everything else, but I did
3 follow what was going on periodically without these heated compositions with my father.
4 The last, what was it, three more years, four more years I think we were fine.

5 KC: It was '73 by the time the US leaves officially.

6 DJ: I mean, I followed it to an extent not to, you know, not on every single day
7 basis, but I did follow what was going on and to be quite honest, one of my last to dates
8 with my father was the fact that he kept saying, "We're leaving in-country and we're
9 leaving on a bad note." I'm saying, "That's the best thing we have ever done was to leave
10 there and just let them do what they do." He didn't see it that way. Of course, neither did
11 the political environment.

12 KC: Sure.

13 DJ: You know, as it turned out, I mean, yes there was still some, you know, heavy
14 duty life loss over there after we left and it was left up to the North to direct traffic, but
15 ultimately, they, you know, nothing lasts forever so it became a regular country just
16 under a non-democratic rule. But for the most part the people over there were farmers and
17 stuff and could care less of who was in rule. It was only the people in charge that were
18 impressed with themselves. I don't know if it's much different here. You look at our
19 current political environment.

20 KC: Well, just a couple more questions I have for you, Mr. Johnson.

21 DJ: Okay.

22 KC: How do you think your experiences in Vietnam have affected you most as
23 you look back on it?

24 DJ: Probably in a very broad spectrum, it's overall that's affected the way I look
25 at things. I probably should have been born in Missouri because, you know, show me. I
26 need to see and feel and touch things and people, or I believe it. Word of mouth to me is,
27 until I can show proof of it, it really doesn't have a whole lot of impact. I can listen to all
28 sorts of people talk, but I've learned since my insurances in the service and Vietnam in
29 particular that you only believe half of what you hear and half of what you see. And
30 unless you're really feeling and touching it and experiencing it, that's the only real thing
31 that exists. So, I pretty much focus on my little sphere. I try to think of myself as being,

1 you know, relatively open and honest and I treat the people that I meet the same way. I
2 respect life a whole lot more, my own included. And I feel like the experiences I've had
3 have actually made me a stronger, more worthwhile person. I don't think otherwise
4 without those experiences that I probably would have had that same strength that I have
5 today, but it is a double-edge sword, you know, because some people come out on the
6 exact opposite end of the spectrum. I feel like I was extremely fortunate. My life has been
7 very fulfilling. I mean, I'm not rich by any means, but I don't think that I can look back
8 on anything I regret from what I've done. I mean, maybe there's some maybe small
9 instances, but for the large part of my life everything that I've done was an experience
10 that made me who I am today. I'm satisfied with myself. That makes so much sense as
11 military training. It made you feel valuable and worthwhile. I've never lost, no matter
12 what my circumstances are in particular, the value of human life, your own included is
13 extremely important and how you treat other people and how you view other people. The
14 fact is, there's an old cliché that unless you've walked a mile in that person's shoes you
15 don't really know anything. I deal with myself to make sure that I'm doing what I believe
16 is the right thing to do. I'm very eclectic in my thought process. I don't judge people. If I
17 meet someone that I don't particularly care for than that's a personal opinion, but I
18 certainly wouldn't make judgments fall on another person for what they do or don't do.
19 That, again, is partially military and my experiences in 'Nam and the various other
20 environments.

21 KC: What about for this country? How do you think the Vietnam War has most
22 affected the United States?

23 DJ: Most affected the United States?

24 KC: Yes.

25 DJ: Probably, in some respects part of the lesson is there's no such thing as
26 invincible. The second thing is that before you go wondering off the war, it's a little bit
27 more of a thought process (background static) and basically, I think Vietnam's turmoil
28 and the way people judged it and treated it taught some people a lesson to be more
29 respectful. And I think, even today, there's enough conflict between those that believe
30 we're doing the right thing and those that believe we're not. Still, they're still treating our
31 troops as we should be with respect and like they were doing their job. I don't know

1 about heroes, that word is so abused. I think it's also a lesson that we need to be more
2 respectful of the people that are out there fighting for what they believe is freedom. Even
3 if some people don't think that's what it's for. It really is what we're fighting for is
4 democracy and freedom. And that's the bigger picture. The smaller picture is to not be
5 real happy with the current political environment. I want to be a man of advice and I
6 think it's maybe we'll think more than fights on the way in which we treat each other. We
7 can all have differences because we're all Americans and we're all basically listening to
8 the same thing, the freedom to be who we are. I don't think there's any place in the world
9 that has that as much as we do. I think that changed drastically after Vietnam. We miss
10 people there that I think that regret some of the things that they did. That's when people
11 thought it was bad like celebrities. It was others that probably will never learn.

12 KC: Mr. Johnson, is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview before
13 we put an end to it?

14 DJ: No, other than the fact that, you know, I'm proud of my own history and as I
15 say, military experience is something that I believe everybody should go through. It
16 teaches respect, responsibility. That's pretty much it.

17 KC: Alright, thank you very much.