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**Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with James O'Kelley
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
August 4, 2000
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel**

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 STEPHEN MAXNER: This is Steve Maxner, conducting an oral history
2 interview with Mr. James Thomas O'Kelley, Jr. I am in Lubbock, Texas. He is in
3 Vienna, Virginia. It is the 26th of July, year 2000 at approximately 8:45 Lubbock time.
4 Mr. O'Kelley, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

5 JAMES O'KELLEY: Okay, James Thomas O'Kelley, Jr., I live at 1886 Cole
6 Creek Court, Vienna, Virginia. I was born March 24th, 1941 in Asheville, North
7 Carolina. My father is James T. Sr. and my mother is Marjorie Gunnan O'Kelley. My
8 father was born and raised in Asheville, North Carolina and my mother was born and
9 raised in Georgia. I went to school in Asheville and then I went off to college at Duke
10 University and majored in civil engineering. I was there from '59 to '64. I went an extra
11 year in order to finish up an engineering program. After I graduated from Duke with a
12 B.S. in civil engineering I went to work for IBM Corporation as a systems engineer and
13 worked there until the fall of 1965 when I joined the Marine Corps. I guess I joined the
14 Marine Corps for several reasons, and we'll get into that later, but primarily that's how I
15 got to the point where I ended up in Vietnam. Do you want more information than that?

16 SM: Yeah, why don't we go ahead and talk about your decision to volunteer and
17 in particular your decision to go into the Marine Corps?

18 JO: Well, when I was at Duke the fraternity I joined was Pi Kappa Phi and in that
19 particular fraternity were a number of young men whose fathers were officers and general

1 officers in the Marine Corps and one of the fellows I roomed with was a guy named Skip
2 Chapman, Leonard F. Chapman, Jr. I think he was, and his dad later became commandant
3 of the Marine Corps and his brother was also a fraternity brother and then my big brother
4 in the Marine Corps, I mean, in the fraternity, his father was also a general officer in the
5 Marine Corps on the air wing side. So, there was some influences there about the
6 Marines and from day one it was Marines, Marines, and when I was growing up as a kid
7 of course a man in the neighborhood had given me a K-bar he'd had when he was Marine
8 in World War II and I always had that Marine image as being the place to be. So, when I
9 went to work for IBM out in Hickory, North Carolina – they actually put me in Winston-
10 Salem and they moved me out to Hickory – I guess it was just I was kind of lonely and
11 kind of bored with that particular job at the time and looking for some excitement of
12 some kind. Also, I was very patriotic I guess would be the best way to put it and I was
13 concerned that people, Americans, were going to war over there and being killed and all.
14 One day somebody made the statement, said, “It’s better in your life to regret what you
15 did do than to regret what you didn’t do,” and that kind of stuck in my mind. So, on the
16 day, March 25th, 1965, the day after my birthday, I went down and signed up with the
17 Marines to join the Marine Corps. The individual who signed me up was a Captain
18 Mundy, M-U-N-D-Y who later became Commandant Mundy and he actually retired me
19 out of the Marine Corps in 1996 as well. So, it’s kind of every time I turn around there’s
20 one of these unique little things happening. It was like I belonged in the Marine Corps
21 and that’s where I was supposed to go. So, I joined at that point and I guess the
22 combination with the background with the students and the people and the pressures
23 there, the historical background of some of the things and all, plus the fact that we were
24 going to war over there and Americans were being killed, I think we landed around 8
25 March and I started watching those guys landing and all and I thought, “Hmmm, I got
26 some friends that are doing that,” and I was curious to see how I would react under those
27 kinds of circumstances as well, anyway. So, that’s pretty much how I got there.

28 SM: Now how about family as far as your dad and other extended family
29 members? What kind of military service did they have, if any?

30 JO: My dad didn’t make it into World War II. He got shot up real bad before he
31 got to war by one of his partners in a service station, so he had a couple bullets still

1 lodged in him. None of my other family...my brothers didn't serve. My one brother was
2 colorblind. He tried to get in the Air Force and he got kicked out. My other brother
3 didn't want to serve so he went to Carnegie-Melon and got some kind of deferment. My
4 cousins, a couple of cousins were in. One was in the Air Force and one was in the Army
5 in Korea. One was in the Air Force and stayed in England. My other cousin was in
6 Korea and he has a metal plate in his head. He was a platoon sergeant with a mortar
7 platoon on Porkchop Hill he said in I guess it was '53 or something like that. Prior to that
8 I would have to go back to my uncle who was in the First World War and got gassed in
9 World War I, and I got him a Purple Heart, incidentally. Unfortunately it came a year
10 after he died, but I was able to finally get the Purple Heart for him because he got gassed
11 with phosgene gas. At the time they didn't consider that Purple Heart; you had to get hit
12 with chlorine gas. Prior to that you'd have to go back to the Civil War, and most of my
13 family I guess fought for the south and primarily the Georgia infantry and all. My aunt
14 did a lot of genealogy of our family and all and she had all that information at one time
15 down.

16 SM: You weren't really aware of all that at the time that you went into the Marine
17 Corps?

18 JO: No, I don't think much of that had anything to do with my decision to go in.
19 It wasn't a family kind of decision at all.

20 SM: When you did go to the recruiter, to the Marine Corps, to find out what
21 kinds of programs they had available for someone like you with your engineering degree,
22 what did they sell you on? What did you actually go in for?

23 JO: Well, it's kind of interesting because you mention the engineering degree.
24 When I went to the IBM people and I told them I was interested in going into the military
25 they said, "Look, we've got some contacts. We'll get you a direct commission in the
26 Army Engineer Corps and you'll go in as a captain and you don't have to fool with all
27 that stuff," which would have been cool. Nowadays with my maturity I know that would
28 have been a better route in some ways in the sense of what I'm going through now as a
29 result of being in Vietnam, but at the time I was real gung-ho young kid and I just said,
30 "No, I want to be a Marine," and I'd made my mind up pretty much. I even tried to go
31 down and look at the Navy recruiters and some of the others and it just didn't set the

1 way...what I was looking for. But the Marine Corps, they didn't really say anything
2 more than, "We're looking for a few good men," that whole theory, and that it was a
3 challenge and that everybody goes in as an infantryman and if you'd make it through
4 their officer program you'll be leading Marines in combat because this thing in
5 Vietnam's going to get bigger and nastier it looked like. So, it's pretty guaranteed that I
6 was going to Vietnam and it was pretty guaranteed there was a war going on so those
7 things seemed to draw me into it for some reason.

8 SM: So this captain Mundy, future commandant, actually told you that basically,
9 "You can expect to go to Vietnam, you can expect the war, you can expect some nasty
10 stuff?"

11 JO: Probably. Now I'm not sure whether he said that or whether...see, he was
12 the OSO, which is the officer selection officer, and he's the one that swore me in. I think
13 I was talking to like a Marine staff sergeant or gunnery sergeant prior to talking to him,
14 so somewhere the standard line back then was pretty much, "You'll be going to war,"
15 because I think when we got to the officer's candidate school and we got to the basic
16 school, they told us pretty much, "Hey, you will be going to Vietnam guaranteed." The
17 Marine Corps was so small, there was no question we were going.

18 SM: So after you actually took the oath to become an officer, you went to your
19 officer basic, is that what it's called?

20 JO: It's called officer candidate school.

21 SM: Okay, you went to OCS?

22 JO: Yes, right.

23 SM: And how was that training?

24 JO: I thought it was excellent. Looking back on some of the stuff now, they
25 didn't have the sophistication that they have now in their capabilities of training and all
26 but primarily it was two things they were trying to do with us, it seemed to me; one,
27 physically challenge us to see if we could handle it, and secondly to get us as tired as
28 possible and see how we work under mental stress as well. Actually, to be honest with
29 you, I expected it be a lot harder than it was physically. I didn't think it was as physically
30 challenging; I could have done more physically, I think, because for the period from
31 March until I went in October, every night at home I would work out with weights and I

1 would run. I got up to where I was running 10 miles in boots at home. So, I was over
2 prepared when I got in there, in one sense. I weighed a lot more than what they wanted,
3 so they spent a lot of time running a lot of the muscle mass off of me, I think, because I
4 went from like...I don't remember what I was, somewhere up around 210 maybe, and I
5 ended up at 171 after 11 weeks. So, they ran most of that weight lifting muscle off
6 because the theory was "lean, mean, fighting machine" kind of thought. That was their
7 slogan.

8 SM: In terms of tactical training, things like that, how much did they emphasize
9 that in OCS?

10 JO: OCS you got...we would work...usually the Marines work in what they call
11 fire teams which is 4 men, and there's a lot of fire team work where you work together as
12 a team; fire maneuver, envelopment techniques, pretty much the standard work. But,
13 primarily it was physical training. There was a lot of marching and learning to do
14 maneuvers together as a group. There was marches, forced marches at long distances
15 under a lot of stress carrying heavy packs and stuff like that, and then there was some
16 classroom work, but basics of the M-14 rifle, the .45 pistol, stuff like that. But, primarily
17 it was the physical side was the main thing the Marine Corps focused on. The tactics,
18 some of it, yeah, we got some, and it was squad tactics, fire team tactics, and that's about
19 as far as you went at OCS. But, we had to play...we would be assigned different billets
20 and I'd be the gunnery sergeant for a week and things like that where you'd learn those
21 particular billets as well.

22 SM: Were there many injuries or people that couldn't quite make it?

23 JO: Yeah, there was a lot of folks that...I was amazed at the folks that couldn't do
24 a pull up, and the other thing I was amazed at – and I think it's even worse today – is the
25 people that wouldn't push themselves. They thought they were going to come in and it
26 was going to be a cakewalk and they get in there and those DIs started yelling and
27 screaming and pushing you and all and people would just fall out; they just didn't have
28 the guts to do it, and I wondered then about a filtering process of getting people in there.
29 I guess the Marines are probably known as being the hardest on their recruit's physically.
30 They have a little statement that says, "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed
31 in war," and I kind of think that's kind of the guideline we work with, and it seems to

1 have proven to be pretty good. But, yeah, we lost a lot of folks. A few of them went out
2 emotionally, just couldn't handle the stress, the emotional stress of running 11 miles and
3 then coming back and having to do a whole bunch of tasks with a team and stuff like that,
4 some people just couldn't deal with that. Others couldn't handle the physical stuff.
5 They'd drop out on the runs and stuff like that. I know one time on one of the 11 mile
6 runs up and down through those hills I was carrying a machine gun and I jumped over a
7 log and passed out and somebody picked me up and somebody grabbed my weapon and
8 two other guys picked me up and threw water on me and got some water in me and I
9 finished up. So, a lot of that was a mental thing more than a physical. It's having the
10 desire. It's just like running a marathon, you know, once you hit the wall, you go through
11 the wall, you're okay, but you've got to go through it to do it, so a lot of people never had
12 the ability to do that.

13 SM: What was the most challenging aspect for you?

14 JO: Of OCS?

15 SM: Yeah, of OCS.

16 JO: Oh, I don't know. I thought it was...see, I enjoyed it. It was a challenge to
17 me and it was fun. Several people before had told me and said, "Look, the only several
18 things you got to do is you got to remember to polish your brass, you got to remember to
19 say yes sir and no sir, and you just don't stand out in a crowd. You don't try to be
20 number one, you don't try to be number 20 if there's only 20 people there. You try to
21 blend, you try to be a part of a team, and you don't try to stand out. This isn't a place
22 where you want to be Joe Leader. You want to just get through it and do it correctly."
23 So, I don't remember any aspect being tremendously challenging in the sense that I didn't
24 think that I could make it. The only time I had any problems, and it wasn't any problems
25 then, it was just learning to do the manual of arms and working through some of the
26 military things I had never seen, but I had been in a band, a marching band in high
27 school, so I knew how to march and that wasn't so hard to do. The only thing...I did
28 have one problem, I guess it was a confidence course. There were a couple of things, a
29 couple of obstacles on the confidence course that caused me a little trouble, but it was
30 like swinging on a rope and grabbing onto a log and flipping over a log and a few things
31 like that. I think I flunked one of those. The only other thing I had problems with was

1 doing squat thrusts and I was remedial on that. And I did have some problems with, now
2 that I remember, with some blisters on my feet. Even though I had run with those boots
3 for all that time prior to it, I still ended up with blisters on my feet because I think when
4 people were coming in there they had just changed over to McNamara's concept of
5 everybody wearing the same boots, the same fatigues or utilities, and everybody looking
6 the same to save money. Well, everybody ended up looking like slobs and I'm not sure
7 that they fit the boots that well when we were going through and getting our boots and
8 everything assigned to us. The other thing they didn't tell us was stuff that would have
9 helped if they would have told us when we went out on these long hikes to put some
10 Vaseline on your feet and wear two pairs of socks; guys would not have had problems
11 like that. It was fundamentals like that, a few things like that, that I don't think they did
12 tell people.

13 SM: Anything else stand out about OCS?

14 JO: No, I guess one of the guys who was a physical fitness instructor who I
15 thought was really cool, a captain named Captain Sam Adams, and he used to get up
16 there and deliver all that. That was in October, November, December of '65. When I
17 landed at Coa Lu which is right outside of Khe Sanh with my company in November of
18 '67, I mired up in mud and some individual came up and grabbed me and pulled me out
19 of the mud and I turned around and there's Sam Adams again, so it was funny how we
20 come back, and he says, "What are you doing here, boy?" and I was the 1st lieutenant
21 company commander and he was the captain company commander and I made captain
22 within about 2 weeks after that, and he was still mumbling about that the last time I saw
23 him! It was kind of like, "Oh, man!" But, we both...I'm pretty sure he survived and of
24 course I did, too. That was kind of interesting.

25 SM: As far as the training you received, do you think that it helped prepare you
26 for what...your following school was the infantry basic course?

27 JO: Well, what it's called is the basic school. It's basic officer training. It's a 6
28 month course and that's where you learn the tactics, you learn the weapons, you learn and
29 you take familiarization in all the different what we call military occupational specialties
30 like engineering, artillery, tanks. You learn about all that, and you become a well-

1 rounded officer. You have leadership, you have ethics, you have administrative
2 functions, the whole works.

3 SM: And so you were pretty well prepared for all that coming from OCS?

4 JO: Yeah, it got you into it and everybody was pretty gung-ho because here we
5 were, we're starting into '66, Operation Starlight and some of those things occurred
6 during the fall and we were watching all that on TV at night and they were having
7 briefings on all the stuff that was going on in Vietnam. We had a Vietnam village, we had
8 Vietnamese in the class, all that kind of stuff.

9 SM: Vietnamese...

10 JO: Marines.

11 SM: Vietnamese Marines?

12 JO: Yeah, going through OCS with us and basic school with us. Yeah, they sent
13 them over.

14 SM: How well did you all interact with them?

15 JO: Well, there was the language barrier and number two, they were little guys,
16 you know, and most of us were big Americans kind of thing, so we ended up helping
17 those guys and I guess it was kind of the standard joke, "So-and-so whatever lieutenant,"
18 whatever his name was, Tranh or whatever his name was, "He's not going to be able to
19 carry that machine gun. One of us is going to have to carry a machine gun. How are we
20 going to do that?" So it was like carrying them along, and not in a demeaning way
21 exactly, but just the fact that we're going to have to help this guy because he's so small,
22 he's not going to be able to carry this huge machine gun and the 120 pounds of gear.
23 Sometimes we'd have to help them out a lot. But, its just because the training was set for
24 us and most of us are around 175, 180 pounds and this guy's probably 110, 120 pounds
25 soaking wet! They did pretty good, but they just didn't have the physical size that we did
26 to carry stuff.

27 SM: And how do you think that effected your perceptions of them, both overtly
28 or consciously and subliminally or unconsciously?

29 JO: Well, I think it did have an effect because I think when I got overseas there
30 and the stories I'd read and heard about Korea and the Koreans bugging out on the
31 Americans anytime it got to be a big fight, I was always a little suspicious of these

1 characters so when I get into any kind of situation where I had to use them I was always
2 kind of wary of them, and I never got into situations where they bugged out on me, but
3 then I didn't get into situations where they'd have had to bug out on me either, so it was
4 one of those kind of things. I did have one incident when we were doing a mine sweep,
5 we used to move up this one particular road, it was Route 1, and there was an ARVN,
6 Army Republic of Vietnam, had a fortress kind of at this road junction and they used to
7 block it off with these knife edges which was really kind of like a gate and they would
8 put grenades, booby trap grenades, all through the thing. So, we'd have to go up and then
9 we'd have to disarm their booby traps because they wouldn't do it themselves when the
10 mine sweep came up and then they'd sit on this kind of...it was like an old brick fortress
11 and they'd be up on the top of the thing and they'd start firing rounds over our heads and
12 all. I guess they thought it was a joke or something. That scared the hell out of my guys,
13 and after a couple of times of this and after trying to get the Dai Wis which is the captain
14 there to explain to him to have his troops not do that because it really scared my troops
15 and after having one of my guys get injured with one of those booby traps that we didn't
16 see, one day I got pissed and I told the gunny, we had a .50 caliber machine gun on an
17 aircraft mount on a truck and I told him to just take the top layer of brick off that damn
18 wall where those guys were shooting, so we turned the 50 on there and man, he just...the
19 guy who worked the 50 was very, very good and he just took the top layer of bricks right
20 off the wall. We never had any more problems out of those guys after that. I mean, they
21 kind of got the message that, you know...and that was something that took me a while to
22 learn. When I was an advisor to the Korean Marines I learned that, too, and that is they
23 don't respect you unless you have some kind of force. If you're forceful, they
24 understand, but if you just whine and go up and complain – not whine, but you know
25 what I mean – if you just complain verbally you're probably not going to get any reaction
26 out of them, but man, you go up there and pop something or do something like that,
27 you're going to get results. Now, the Koreans carried that to an extreme of course
28 because it was Asian on Asian and they could do things that we couldn't possibly do as
29 Americans without being totally wiped out in the press and everywhere else. So we of
30 course didn't try that kind of stuff, but the Koreans would do unbelievable stuff.
31 Anyway, I think that's enough on that.

1 SM: Why don't you...it's kind of before Vietnam, before our discussion of
2 Vietnam, but so we don't forget about it why don't you go ahead and explain some of the
3 Korean behavior that you witnessed in Vietnam?

4 JO: Well, I think they tended...I was an advisor there, and...

5 SM: What time period was this?

6 JO: October, it was in the fall of '66. I was a young 2nd lieutenant and the fellow
7 who had been assigned down there as an advisor to one of the 2nd ROK Marine brigades
8 at Binh Son, B-I-N-H S-O-N or something like that, it was south of Chu Lai, he came
9 down with malaria or something so he was Medevaced out of there to a hospital ship
10 repose I think it was, and while he was gone they sent me down to take his place. This
11 was during the rainy season and all. To me it was interesting because we had been told,
12 for instance, you never set up a position in the Vietnamese cemetery because you want to
13 show respect for the Vietnamese dead and it is tradition. Well, these guys were set up
14 right in the middle of a cemetery. I went to report in and the command bunker was dug
15 in right beside some graves and it was like you could see pieces of something hanging out
16 of the wall there and I'm going, "Good grief!" I've even got some pictures of that. I've
17 got some slides showing some of the Vietnamese, or some of the Koreans, there in that
18 cemetery area. The Koreans tended to be very brutal with these people. They'd go in
19 there and tell them before they set up, "We're going to be setting up outside your village.
20 If we receive sniper fire, we're going to level your village," and sure enough they
21 received sniper and they'd go in there and level the village, bring in bulldozers and
22 whatever else, and level the village. So, they just wouldn't...they demanded respect and
23 they gained respect. They also had a Tai Kwon Do demonstration team so anytime
24 they'd ever go into any area they'd take these guys and go and call the villages together
25 and they'd go through breaking blocks and doing all the stuff you can do with Tai Kwon
26 Do and everything and to impress on the villagers that they were not going to take any
27 crap out of those folks. They didn't catch anywhere near as many mines and booby traps
28 and all that kind of stuff as we did because the villagers were afraid to put them out I
29 think because they knew that it would come back on them.

30 SM: Now what about when you say level a village, did that include killing
31 people?

1 JO: No. What they would do, they'd pull all the people to the center of the
2 village and they'd just mow their houses down with bulldozers and all. Of course that
3 wasn't that hard to do when they're grass shacks. The people lived in some pretty thatch
4 kind of shacks and all that they lived in. I think when you see these pictures on the news
5 in the old days of burning these shacks and all down, it was those kind of things I was
6 talking about.

7 SM: Now what about discipline within the ROK units themselves?

8 JO: Oh, the officers had ultimate and total control. If they see something going
9 wrong, they could just take a guys helmet off and smack him in the side of the head with
10 it and knock him unconscious. They'd carry him off. They had kind of taken our book
11 and carried it to an extreme I think in our manual of how to run an Army kind of thing.
12 But, their whole thought process was somewhat different from ours in the sense that
13 discipline was the key and obedience was ultimate and that's what they expected across
14 the board from their troops; they were very good.

15 SM: What was the most extreme form of punishment you witnessed in terms of
16 internal discipline with a ROK unit?

17 JO: Just the smacking a guy upside the head in the morning during an inspection
18 kind of thing.

19 SM: You didn't witness any executions?

20 JO: Oh no.

21 SM: Did you hear of any?

22 JO: No. Now I have heard, and don't know this for a fact, but I had heard that
23 their interrogation techniques with the Koreans was that they'd take 3 Vietnamese
24 suspects up in a helicopter and they would hover at about 1000 feet off the deck and they
25 would ask one of them questions which they knew he couldn't answer and then they'd
26 throw him out of the helicopter, ask the second one that they knew couldn't answer and
27 they'd throw him out of the helicopter, and the third person was babbling away on
28 everything. So, that was an effective technique of interrogation according to guys I talk
29 with. But, Americans couldn't do that; we wouldn't be able to get away with it, but
30 Koreans could do it with the Asian on Asian I guess. Now that's hearsay.

31 SM: You didn't witness that yourself, you heard of it?

1 JO: Yes, yes. But, there was enough of that going around that I figured that there
2 was probably something to it. The other thing the Koreans did that was kind of
3 interesting, I thought they were kind of like a paid Army in a sense because we were told
4 that each Korean was allowed to take one conex box, you know the big 6 by 6 by 6 box
5 of gear home with them. I assume that was officers. When they came over and fought
6 for a year in Vietnam they were allowed to take that stuff back home with them, so they
7 would hit the PXs, like in the rear area there'd be a PX in Danang, a huge big PX and
8 those guys would go up there in trucks and just load up with goodies and take everything.
9 I think they're even allowed to carry their rifles back with them if I'm not mistaken. So
10 anything that the Americans gave these guys pretty much ended up being theirs to take
11 home with them, too.

12 SM: By paid Army, are you implying mercenary?

13 JO: Yeah. I kind of think...now I'm not sure of that, that's a much higher level
14 than where I was dealing, but there was a lot of folks over there – we had the Australians
15 there, and there were little groups of different units from different places there. The
16 Koreans probably had the biggest presence of any other group besides the Australians.
17 At one time we were told that was all the power of SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty
18 Organization, so everybody was over there kind of like the UN kind of idea, World War
19 II kind of idea, supporting the war. But, it was predominantly American. Anytime
20 anybody came in there we gave them all their gear and everything else. They would
21 come to us for all sorts of help and they would get priority help over any of our guys. We
22 were pretty much told, “When they ask for stuff, get it!” One time I went down, they
23 wanted some 175 millimeter guns and so I took a convoy down the road, down Route 1 to
24 Binh Son with 175 guns and dug the gun pits and put them all in for them and we
25 surveyed them in and the whole nine yards. The interesting part, I was a young 1st
26 lieutenant I think by then and I had to drive down the road in the jeep ahead of them to
27 make sure if there was any mines in the road my jeep would hit it first. So, that's kind of
28 like walking in front of a group as you go through a minefield. They'd sacrifice me to do
29 that. I look back on that now, and at the time I thought, “Boy, this is great,” you know,
30 “I'm in charge of this whole entire convoy, the convoy commander!” It was more like
31 sacrificial lamb sort of thing.

1 SM: How long did you serve with the ROK Marines?

2 JO: I was only down there fully with them...I can't remember exactly, Steve, I
3 think it was I want to say 2 or 3 or 4 weeks, maybe a month, and then Poliasco, Jerry
4 Poliasco came back. But, I was in and out of there all the time because we did a lot of
5 work down there, like that convoy. I wasn't assigned to them when I was doing the
6 convoy but I was down there working and so we could get there, it was like a 30 minute
7 drive from where we were, maybe an hour at the most depending on the status of the
8 road.

9 SM: And what major city or town was this near?

10 JO: Binh Son, B-I-N-H- S-O-N. It's north of a major city called Quang Nai,
11 north of Quang Nai.

12 SM: In the Quang Nai Province of I Corps?

13 JO: Yeah, Binh Son was not too far from...you know that place where Cally had
14 all his problems?

15 SM: My Lai?

16 JO: My Lai; it was kind of west of My Lai, right off of Route 1. I think it crossed
17 the Song Tra Bong River if I remember correctly.

18 SM: Anything else?

19 JO: It's amazing how that came back.

20 SM: Just the memory?

21 JO: Yeah, all of a sudden that came back to me, the Song Tra Bong River.

22 SM: Anything else you want to talk about with regard to your work with the
23 Koreans?

24 JO: No, I think that's about it. I learned how to eat Kim Chi, which is destructive
25 to your whole entire intestinal track. [Both laugh]

26 SM: I take it you got along pretty well with the Koreans you worked with?

27 JO: Yeah, I got along real well. I tried to respect them and work with them. I
28 was a pretty gung-ho, hard working kind of guy so I'd get in there and sweat with them
29 and dig and everything else and to see an officer in there digging with them and working
30 with them was kind of unique I think for them. They weren't used to seeing us do that.

1 My whole theory was lead by example and be out front, so that's kind of what the Marine
2 Corps teaches you and I tried to practice that and it seemed to work pretty well.

3 SM: Any problems that you had personally with the Marines, the ROK Marines?

4 JO: None, in fact an officer would invite me...I had dinner with him most every
5 night in his tent and stuff like that. The colonel invited me in for dinner a couple of
6 times; it was pretty nice.

7 SM: All right, well let's go ahead and turn back to your pre-Vietnam training
8 then. In OCS and then in the basic course, what kind of weapons familiarity did you
9 have with the M-16?

10 JO: We had no weapons familiarity at all with the M-16 when I went through
11 there. The Marine Corps didn't get the M-16 in Vietnam in our area until about I think it
12 was April of '67. So, we were working with the M-14 completely, which thank the Lord
13 for that because I've got some very strong feelings on the M-16 as a lot of our guys did.

14 SM: Let's talk about that when we get to your Vietnam service.

15 JO: Yeah, sounds good.

16 SM: With the basic course, in terms of, again, the [FDXs] or field training, how
17 much emphasis was there at that point on tactics? Did they talk about different types of
18 warfare, insurgency versus...or counterinsurgency versus conventional warfare, things of
19 that nature?

20 JO: Yes, there was a lot of work on small unit tactics. Counterinsurgency was a
21 big deal looking back on some of the stuff that had been done in Malaysia. We had a
22 fellow who later became Commandant PX Kelly who had done a lot of work with the
23 Malaysians and that counterinsurgency operation of the British which was quite
24 successful. We had a Vietnamese village built out there and we had all the different
25 kinds of booby traps that they had seen to that point and the tunnel systems and the way
26 that the villages were set up and all that, so it was pretty effective there.

27 SM: And what time period was this, now?

28 JO: This was...let's see, OCS was October 11, October to 17 December '65 and
29 the basic school was like first week in January until about the end of May of '66.

30 SM: So a good length of training?

1 JO: Oh yes, it was very long...not very long, I think it could have even been
2 longer but they had shortened some of it up because they needed people in Vietnam so
3 quickly. But, I think they did as well as they could at the time.

4 SM: Now were any of the instructors that you met at the basic course, did any of
5 them have any time in Vietnam yet?

6 JO: Every one of them had, just about. Across the board, even in OCS, the folks
7 in OCS even had been to Vietnam, so they were bringing the combat veterans back in to
8 teach the course because one of the things that always concerned them was that you're
9 trained to fight the previous war as opposed to the war that's occurring now, so the intent
10 there was to bring us into this particular war knowing that this was the war that we were
11 going to be fighting.

12 SM: Did they invoke a lot of the information or lessons they had learned recently,
13 anecdotes and things like that?

14 JO: Yeah, we even had a pamphlet called, "Lessons Learned in Vietnam," and it would
15 come out on a weekly or a monthly basis – I can't remember exactly – but it would be
16 printed material and it had pictures of like mines, booby traps, techniques, tactics, lots of
17 stuff like that, things like, "Americans tend to be lazy so if you're walking down a trail
18 and there's a tree the Americans will tend to go on the low side of the tree and the
19 Vietnamese know that so they plant the booby trap on the low side of the tree and the
20 Vietnamese always go to the high side of the tree," things like that.

21 SM: Those lessons learned, when you finally did get to Vietnam, did you find
22 that they had been accurate and helpful?

23 JO: Yes. There was really an attempt to get that information out to help us, but
24 where the system failed a little bit for us is that we were only over there 13 months and
25 we had a new group rotating in. If you stayed there for a long period of time, its
26 extremely effective because you've been there, done that, and seen it. For the new
27 recruits coming in, if you survive the first couple of times you're under fire or you run
28 into these kind of situations you're probably going to be okay. But, you rotate out and
29 sometimes you never come back, and the new guy has to relearn everything every 13
30 months kind of thing, which was a very ineffective way to do it. I understand politically
31 why they were doing that, but its still kind of rough.

1 SM: But based on your description of the Koreans you interacted with, that
2 wasn't unique to the American experience; the Koreans did the same?

3 JO: Rotate out?

4 SM: Yeah.

5 JO: I think so. To tell you the truth, I don't remember but I think they were on a
6 13-month tour, also, but don't hold me to that; I'm not exactly sure on that one.

7 SM: Now in both your OCS class and the basic course, what was the ratio, do
8 you think, an estimate, between OCS...well, not in your OCS class, excuse me, just in the
9 basic course, what was your estimate of the ratio of OCS candidates, OCS officers, to
10 academy trained or ROTC officers?

11 JO: I don't think there were very many...I don't remember very many academy
12 at all because they would have graduated in May and they would have probably gone in
13 in like a June or July course. I'm in January so I'm outside that rotation cycle when our
14 group went in, so those guys would have been ahead of us. ROTC guys, again, would
15 have been the same kind of situation unless they had been held over or in some cases if
16 they had had injuries and stuff like that they'd rotate back in.

17 SM: Or if they were fall graduates.

18 JO: Yeah, fall graduate. Another thing that sometimes happened was we had law
19 school people and all that who had just gotten out or some special programs would come
20 in there, and I think at that time there was a build up so there was probably a que getting
21 into the basic school.

22 SM: So the vast majority of you were OCS candidates or OCS graduates?

23 JO: I think so, yeah.

24 SM: Did the officers that you did eventually interact with that were academy
25 graduates in particular, was there much of a cliquish nature to that in the Marine Corps
26 while you were in the Marine Corps; the differences between OCS or ROTC or Naval
27 Academy?

28 JO: Not really. I didn't see any of that, or not very much of it. My impression,
29 and I can't tie it to any one person, is occasionally you'd get an Academy graduate who
30 was a little arrogant and think he was better than everybody else, but that didn't take long
31 to get that one straightened out. But, more or less, I didn't see any of that. You didn't

1 really know, and nobody ever asked – I mean I never asked – so it wasn't really one of
2 those kind of things. I do remember one Academy...officer who was an Academy
3 graduate who worked in the rear area of our battalion who used to take the sea tiger and
4 he used to go down and mark off the names of all of his contemporaries as they were
5 killed in action kind of thing which was kind of a morbid thing to do, and we thought he
6 was kind of a nut case, which he probably was. But, he was an exception to the rule.

7 SM: The reason I ask is in the Army there's some cliquishness; ring knockers...

8 JO: Yeah, absolutely. See, we don't have that because we don't have our own
9 Academy, and if you know one thing that happens I think the top 5% of any of the three
10 academies can actually request to take a commission in the Marine Corps and some of
11 them do. We get people – very few from the Air Force – but we usually get some folks
12 from West Point and of course we get a lot from the Naval Academy, but primarily the
13 Marines draw a lot of people from places like VMI and the Citadel and places like that
14 because – and I think this is a true perception – it seems to me that the Marine Corps is
15 kind of the one place where the old aristocracy of the Confederacy kind of thought
16 prevails and you get a tremendous number of southerners in there, you get a tremendous
17 number of Irish Catholics from Boston area in there it seems like – I'm not sure what that
18 says. But, there's a lot of folks in there that have a real respect for the military and its
19 kind of part of the aristocracy kind of idea. So, a lot of the fellows from VMI and the
20 Citadel and all those places, their families had been in for years and years in the military,
21 in the Marine Corps, particularly. That's not the word I'm looking for; there's a
22 particular word I'm looking for. It'll come back to me in a little while, though.

23 SM: Anything else that you want to discuss about the basic course?

24 JO: No, I think overall it was well done. I think today that there would be some
25 emphasis on a few things differently because I think now they have an extension of the
26 course which is called infantry officers course, so when you finished the basic school and
27 you've got all this generic officer training, then you go off to your specialties and they go
28 into infantry training, and they do even more infantry work. At that point, when I left
29 there I went into my engineering training. My military occupational specialty was
30 engineering because I had the degree. Then, I went off to school down at Camp Lejune,
31 so where I didn't get that extensive...see, the fundamental thing about the Marine Corps

1 is they tell you every man is a rifleman first, and then you go to whatever your military
2 occupational specialty is, like artillery, tanks, engineers, whatever. Well, that's well and
3 good, but where that system fails a little bit is the fact that if that's true, then you really
4 ought to put everybody through the infantry course, the advanced infantry course, as well.
5 They do that with the enlisted now, and they run them all through it, which helps a lot.
6 We didn't do that at that time, maybe because they were anxious to get us on over there
7 and get us into position to help because they were – by the time I got over there in August
8 of '66 – they were in Operation Hastings and they were losing a tremendous number of
9 officers, especially 2nd lieutenants.

10 SM: Was there much talk during basic school about that?

11 JO: Oh yeah, and its funny, we even watched...there's a TV show called, "The
12 Lieutenant," or something like that I think it was called which was a show about...it was
13 the popular thing back then during the early part. People really were in favor of going
14 over there and helping out and all that. It wasn't this masking of everything with this
15 anti-war stuff. It wasn't that way in '64, '65, '66, even up into early '67. Folks were
16 really supportive of what we were doing over there. I'm not sure where all that broke
17 down, but I can remember there was this TV program called, "The Lieutenant," and it
18 was about this young lieutenant in the Marines over in Vietnam, and it was a very, very
19 popular program, so we as a class most of us would sit there and watch that once a week.
20 We actually learned something from those experiences, even. So, of course we weren't
21 encouraged to do that because they were saying they were Hollywooding things and the
22 Marines on the one hand enjoy the publicity of Hollywood but on the other hand they see
23 a lot of things that are wrong that Hollywood puts into these movies and stuff.

24 SM: The lieutenant that's pictured in this TV series was a Marine lieutenant?

25 JO: Yes.

26 SM: Okay. Were you at all surprised in watching that television program at the
27 accuracy of some of the things they depict? You were getting your weekly updates, your
28 lessons learned; were they incorporating that kind of information into that program?

29 JO: Well, it seemed to us at the time like they were doing a pretty good job,
30 which is quite different from if you would watch a program now. There's such a
31 divisiveness between the military and the media.

1 SM: Do you recall what network was airing that?

2 JO: No, I don't, but I think...no, I don't, I really can't remember.

3 SM: Or a popular program...

4 JO: It was whatever network was carrying the Gomer Pyle stuff and the Andy...

5 SM: Andy Griffith?

6 JO: Andy Griffith. I think Andy Griffith was the one that supported that. So,

7 whatever that network was; I want to say NBC but I'm not sure.

8 SM: Okay.

9 JO: But, it was called, "The Lieutenant."

10 SM: And also, do you know or recall the actors or the principle actor who was

11 The Lieutenant?

12 JO: Oh boy; I can see his face, but I don't know a name. No, I can't get his name

13 right now, but I'll try to see if I can figure out something on that. It was pretty good thing

14 to have a look at, though.

15 SM: It seems like it would be also an interesting historical...

16 JO: Yes.

17 SM: ...source to look at.

18 JO: And another thing that would be good from your Archive point of view is

19 some of those incidences and all and how they were depicted there, versus how they

20 really occurred, would be really interesting too. Looking back on that, if I saw it today I

21 might have a little different perspective, of course, having had been there, but before

22 going over there that was about all we had to look at.

23 SM: So you watched this program while you were at the basic school?

24 JO: Yeah, sometimes at night we had this kind of arena where they had a TV and

25 most of the young 2nd lieutenants would go in there and watch that, an awful lot of us.

26 SM: And what was the prevailing attitude about Vietnam, what was going on in

27 Vietnam? When you were sitting around in this type of a forum, what would you talk

28 about?

29 JO: Well, I think most of us figured we were going, and most of us thought it was

30 an important to do. One of my best friends had been at Duke with me and he had gone

31 and when he left Duke I went with IBM and he went with the peace corps and he came

1 back later and we both ended up at OCS at the same time, and we'd talk some and we
2 figured we were all going over there. But, we didn't have any thoughts about getting
3 killed or anything like that; it was just we were going over there to serve the country. It
4 was just kind of an accepted thing and everybody thought it was a thing they ought to be
5 doing.

6 SM: Now when you say you didn't have any thoughts, do you mean that you just
7 didn't voice them; that it would have been detrimental to morale if you had focused on
8 the fact that many of you may not come back?

9 JO: Yeah, I don't think we even wanted to face that, to be honest with you, and
10 we didn't face that to be honest with you. I don't think...it would have been considered
11 wimpy to do that, probably. You would be a wuss. Those terms are kind of derogatory
12 terms nowadays, but it was just meant that you don't focus on stuff like that. You focus
13 on doing the job the best you can and learning things, becoming as good an officer as you
14 can to lead your troops. You take care of your troops, they'll take care of you; that was
15 kind of the theory.

16 SM: Well, based on all this, what did you think we were trying to accomplish?
17 Can you recall looking back at the basic school or even OCS? What did you think we
18 were trying to accomplish in Vietnam at that time?

19 JO: Well, it seemed to us two things; that communism was trying to take over
20 that country which was trying to become a democratic country. There was a great deal of
21 brutality on the part of the communists. The North Vietnamese weren't exactly the
22 people we were talking about then, it was really the Viet Cong, which were then
23 communist insurgents. I don't think people realized at that time how much the North
24 Vietnamese were involved in that entire process. It was more like a guerilla war from the
25 inside, kind of like Malaysia and things like that, so it was a counterinsurgency operation
26 and we thought we could go in there and probably wipe that thing out pretty quick, given
27 the opportunity to do it. What I didn't realize or the rest of us realized is what
28 McNamara was pulling behind the seams kind of thing; kind of tying our hands behind us
29 with these rules of engagement, a lot of the politics that seemed to just wipe us out, and
30 every time we'd make a step forward there'd be two or three steps backward kind of
31 routine. None of us understood all that until we got over there. We assumed the country

1 would be 100% behind us and we were over there to win. The idea was to destroy the
2 insurgency movement and establish democracy, and of course there was a big theory
3 back in those days also that was the Domino Theory, that if one of those countries fell a
4 whole bunch of them would fall. Another thing was the SEATO, the Southeast Asia
5 Treaty Organization; we had obligations to support, defend, and help those people. So,
6 that kind of historical precedent plus the...I guess some of the patriotic stuff, all built into
7 mentalities, kind of a gung-ho mentality that says, "Let's get over here and clean this
8 thing up," and we can do it.

9 SM: So in training, they didn't...in your basic school in particular, when you
10 were doing your counterinsurgency training and talking about Vietnam, they did not talk
11 about a northern infiltration of South Vietnam? This was all about a guerilla fight in
12 South Vietnam and it was the government trying to overcome that and we were trying to
13 help them overcome that?

14 JO: Right, and it wasn't that much...see, at that time there wasn't that much of
15 the North Vietnamese Army appearance in there. We didn't start running into North
16 Vietnamese Army troops until I think probably Operation Hastings or later in I think the
17 late summer of '66. I think '66 Operation Hastings which some of my classmates were
18 involved in was the first time they'd run into any large groups of North Vietnamese
19 troops, and the problem with that was they were closer to their supply lines than we were,
20 and we had not fought against the conventional forces before, which is some point along
21 the line we need to talk about because the way you get ready to go out into an operation
22 against NVA is a whole lot different than the way you go out against VC, and it took us a
23 while to figure that one out. It didn't take us long to figure out what we should do, but it
24 took us a while to figure out who we were fighting. I mean, the intelligence...another
25 issue we need to talk about is Intel because we over...as usual, with intelligence people,
26 they had a lot of Intel information but they didn't share it with the ground troops that
27 needed it because it was too highly classified. I've got some pretty strong thoughts on
28 that because I even worked with CIA after I left for a while. So, this whole concept of
29 classification and keeping it from the troops rather than getting it to the troops, to me, is
30 very bad.

1 SM: Absolutely. In terms of your engineering training, your transition from
2 basic school to engineering, there is of course more of an emphasis on combat
3 engineering in the Marine Corps engineering training you received. How did that
4 compare with the engineer training you received in college?

5 JO: Can I take just one break for just about two minutes?

6 SM: Yes sir, let me go ahead and pause this, I'm sorry.

7 JO: Okay, can I just... [Break here] alrighty.

8 SM: All right, so actually before you answer that last question, one more question
9 about the lieutenant program that you watched. How did they depict the Vietnamese
10 people? Do you remember?

11 JO: Not a whole lot. It wasn't negative. It was more or less working together,
12 except I guess there were a couple of situations, I'm trying to remember...there was a
13 movie that John Wayne was in, I'm trying to remember, it was something about Green
14 Berets, something like that...

15 SM: Yes, Green Berets.

16 JO: ...and they showed a lot of guys in there, Vietnamese in there, and most of
17 them they showed in a positive way but there was a couple of spies in the camp and stuff
18 like that which kind of left in the back of your mind, "Is this guy a spy? Is he not a spy?
19 What are we dealing with," kind of stuff, so I think there was some of that always in the
20 back of my head.

21 SM: But as far as "The Lieutenant" program?

22 JO: It seemed to be pretty positive, that we were over there helping a very
23 deserving people and that kind of stuff.

24 SM: What about that attitude of we're kind of carrying a load for them, too; the
25 inadvertent mentality that had to have developed from your experiences in training with
26 them, that they're much smaller than we are, and it seems like we're kind of fighting the
27 fight for them?

28 JO: That's exactly right, and that did carry over and I think in the northern I
29 Corps for sure, more than likely...now see, I'm at a company level and I'm not doing it at
30 the general level where a lot of stuff, where maybe the strategies were being developed,
31 but at the tactical level it was pretty much my experience that we worked independent

1 and we never did many combined operations with the Vietnamese. If we did do them, we
2 had them out doing their own thing and we were doing something different, or we were
3 side by side but you better believe that we're kind of watching that side to make sure
4 nothing's going on, so we tended to prefer to work independently. I guess later on there
5 was this concept called Vietnamization where Nixon probably more than anybody else in
6 later years was really trying to get the South Vietnamese to assume all the responsibility,
7 and that probably...I don't know, I guess a lot of our guys went back as advisors in that
8 area. It's difficult to make a judgement on that because it was such a different war for us
9 and for them because most of those folks in Vietnam that were in there were in there for
10 the lifetime kind of thing. We were in there for 11...for 13 months, rather, and we're out,
11 so there was a different concept of the war. I can see, if I'm in there from day one and
12 I've been fighting for 5 years, I'm not going to be as interested in taking certain risks that
13 I've seen all my buddies get killed taking as I might have been if I'd been there only 13
14 months and had not seen those kinds of things. Plus, you have family and all that other
15 stuff they had to deal with, you know, that were actually being impacted on a daily basis,
16 so I think there was two different ways of looking at the war and then of course those
17 perceptions also effected how we looked at individual work within that, with individual
18 Vietnamese and things like that. The other thing I think is that the way that war ended up
19 being carried out; during the daytime it was hard to tell who was who. The VC, the
20 pictures you see of these black pajamas and that kind of stuff. Well, a lot of different
21 people wore black and it was never easy to tell who the hell was who. In some cases,
22 when we got VC suspects or captured guys shooting at us, they were wearing white. So,
23 its not one of those – pardon the pun – black and white situations. It was like shades of
24 gray all of the time; you never know who is what, so you have to be wary of everybody.
25 In one example of that, the Army came into a lot of areas where we were around and of
26 course the 3rd [?] and of course MACV imposed on us that we should hire indigenious
27 individuals to do certain kinds of labor throughout our camps and all and that would be
28 even down to emptying out manure and cleaning out tents and things and basically like
29 barber shops and things like that. Well, the barbers in many cases ended up being VC
30 spies and more than once these guys later on in an attack you'd find them laying in the
31 wire and you shot and killed one of them because he's leading the attack through the

1 entire camp that he'd had months to draw up and figure out. That used to cause the hair
2 on my neck to kind of stand up because these guys would cut your hair and we built this
3 little place for them to use for a barber shop, and they would always cut it...all they used
4 was a straight razor and a comb. But, I never went in there by myself and I don't think
5 any other Marine did, either. We always went in there in a couple or twos or threes or
6 something like that. So, the guy didn't have many chances to cut my throat or something
7 like that I don't guess unless he wanted to commit suicide. But, on the other hand, he
8 sure got a lot of good intelligence information.

9 SM: And so the depiction that you witnessed, to get back to the question about
10 the TV program, was it was positive but it also had some of the undertones of, "Well,
11 we're here to help our little brown brothers?"

12 JO: Well, I wouldn't say it quite that way. I guess I'm more sensitized politically
13 and diversity wise and I wouldn't quite say it that way. I would say it more like, "We're
14 here to help these folks establish a democracy and avoid being caught under communism
15 and we're also here to protect them from the extreme cruelties of the VC and the
16 businesses of impaling people and torture and all that kind of stuff.

17 SM: How much of that did you hear about in the basic school?

18 JO: Quite a bit. We'd see a lot of pictures of where village chiefs were being
19 disemboweled and the idea of killing off the intelligence and the political leaders and
20 putting their heads on stakes and stuff like that; there was quite a bit of that kind of stuff,
21 and that's probably part of a psychological warfare concept of dehumanizing the enemy.
22 Then, the term "gook" and "VC", all that stuff is also part of any Army's attempt to
23 dehumanize the people you've got to kill so that you can deal with it.

24 SM: Do you recall when the first time you heard that expression was?

25 JO: Which one, VC or gook?

26 SM: Gook, referring to them in such a non-human fashion.

27 JO: We might even have heard that as early as sometime in OCS with some of
28 the guys who'd come back, some of the enlisted instructors, sergeant instructors and all.
29 I'm sure that monocular was out there. I don't know when the first time, really.

30 SM: In terms of discipline, enforcing discipline in both OCS and at the basic
31 school, were there ever any kind of physical altercations between instructors and trainees;

1 or that wasn't necessary I'm sure because you're officers but there were always potential
2 challenges?

3 JO: I never saw any among the instructors versus candidates.

4 SM: How about amongst candidates?

5 JO: Oh yeah, among the candidates we'd have trouble. I got in a fight with one
6 guy one time.

7 SM: Do you remember why?

8 JO: He was kind of a cocky Irishman from Boston and he was always giving me
9 a ration of shit, you know? Pardon the expression, not that you're anything like cocky
10 Irishmen, that's probably an oxymoron. But, he was one of these redheaded Irishmen
11 from Boston, he was kind of cocky, and he'd fight anybody, anytime, for any reason and
12 I didn't like him and he didn't like me. It was kind of a personality thing, so we got into
13 a couple of knockdown drag-outs.

14 SM: How did they deal with that?

15 JO: Oh, they assigned us to extra duties and I got to swab the floors and clean up
16 the squad bay on the weekend where everybody else was going out someplace; walked
17 guard duties and all that kind of good stuff. But, they don't want to discourage that
18 because that's exactly what they want. I mean, they want you to be into that kind of mode
19 and everything. There's the 23rd Psalm of the Marine Corps, have you ever heard that?

20 SM: No.

21 JO: "Yea thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I'll fear no evil
22 because I'm the meanest mother in the valley," kind of thing?

23 SM: Yeah, okay.

24 JO: You've seen that one?

25 SM: I have.

26 JO: But, that's the whole theory. If you're going to have to be cocky and
27 arrogant to a certain degree to get in there and deal with that kind of situation, you've got
28 to have a certain mindset to deal with it, too. That's why young guys do it.

29 SM: Absolutely. So talk about engineering school for a little bit.

30 JO: Okay.

1 SM: What was that like? How did that compare to your engineering training in
2 civilian school at Duke?

3 JO: My engineering training at Duke was pretty much more theory than practice.
4 Even our lab work and our surveying course and all was still theoretically oriented and I
5 did get some practical experiences during the summers when I was working. Prior to
6 going into the Marine Corps I was working with my cousin in his surveying firm and so I
7 got a lot of surveying practice and then I worked for the Bureau of Public Roads building
8 the Blueridge Parkway and I got a chance to do some work there and some tunnel work
9 and all and so I learned some stuff there. I'd learned a lot more if I'd have gone into
10 construction, but this was just...I just learned – and this is important later – I learned
11 more horizontal construction than vertical construction, so what I mean by like that is
12 more about how to build roadways and things than I did about building buildings. So,
13 when I got off to engineering school I was the only graduate engineer with a degree in
14 engineering and the Marine Corps had very few of those. In fact, that's how I ended up
15 in engineering; I still wanted to be an infantryman when I went in there and I applied to
16 be an infantryman. They gave you – at the end of basic school – they give you three
17 choices; you get three choices on your MOS and you get three choices on where you
18 want to go. So I put in for something like infantry, artillery, engineers, and then I put in
19 Vietnam, California, and then East Coast. So, they guaranteed you got one of your first
20 choices so I knew that if I put in for Vietnam that I'd get a first choice, so I got first
21 choice on location but I got third choice on being in engineers because at that time I was
22 still really too gung-ho. Looking back now, I was very gung-ho and the thing to do, they
23 tried to get everybody to get us into infantry. Well, thank goodness they put me in
24 engineers because two reasons; one, they needed me, they didn't have enough, and it did
25 work out best for everybody in that situation. The engineering school was at Court
26 House Bay. There was probably about 15 of us, maybe 20. I can find that out; I've got it
27 in here somewhere in my records. But the course was all practically oriented stuff; it was
28 mine, warfare, and demolitions where you went out and you learned about each and every
29 kind of mine that we had, anti-personnel, anti-tank, anti-blast. We learned how to do it,
30 how to implant mine fields, how to survey them in place, where you put them, where are
31 they most useful, things like the killing radius of mines and all that stuff. Those were

1 friendly mines, and then we did enemy mines and we learned about those and about
2 booby traps and all that, what to disarm, what not to disarm, how to do it, and all that
3 kind of stuff. Then we had field fortifications, which is how to build bunkers and things
4 of that nature. Then we had bridging, how to build bridges and foot walks and things
5 over obstacles and over rivers and stuff like that. Then we had rigging, which was how
6 to pick up heavy loads and move extremely heavy loads with minimal amounts of
7 mechanical equipment and things of that nature. Then we had roads and airfields and
8 stuff like that as well. It was...I don't remember how long, I think it was a two month
9 long course. Most of the guys in there didn't have very much engineering experience and
10 so they kind of had to start from ground zero and that was their first real taste of a lot of
11 this information. Having had the theoretical background out, it was real easy...not easy,
12 but it was not a challenge for me in that sense so I ended up helping, working with and
13 helping, a lot of other guys. About halfway through the course they assigned me as
14 course leader to take over and be the president of the class or whatever the term was, I
15 don't remember, but I ended up graduating honor graduate and course leader and all that
16 stuff. The main reason for that is because I was the engineer in the crowd, you know? I
17 had kind of a step up on all those guys, I knew what I was doing.

18 SM: And you had some real world experience.

19 JO: That's right, yeah, so I could apply a lot of that and understood a lot of it and
20 I understood the theory behind it as well as the practical aspects of it.

21 SM: Now did you...did they train you much and talk about using the PSP, the
22 steel planking?

23 JO: Yeah, they didn't do much with that, no.

24 SM: Oh, okay.

25 JO: Now you're talking about for airfields and stuff?

26 SM: Right.

27 JO: The Marine Corps is kind of unique with their engineers. There's what they
28 used to call Pioneers or Combat Engineers. Then there was Force Troops or Heavy
29 Engineers. Anything else that had to be done was done by the Seabees primarily. So,
30 when you get down to some of the real heavy kind of stuff like airfields and ports and
31 things like that, the Seabees came in and Navy Mobile Construction units would come in

1 and build an awful lot of that stuff. We had the capability in the Heavy Engineers where
2 I ended up doing a good deal of that stuff, but not to the level of the Seabees until later on
3 in the war when they turned a lot of stuff in and gave us a lot of capability to pave roads
4 and stuff like that. Prior to that we didn't have indigenous equipment to do that.

5 SM: Again, when you're looking at this from the standpoint of tactics, were there
6 any kind of discussions about the nature of the war? You were most likely going to
7 encounter...that is your classroom was probably going to be involved in Vietnam, and
8 how engineering could be used in certain ways as part of the counterinsurgency doctrine,
9 especially, for instance, civic action, nation building, those buzz words?

10 JO: See, our job was to go in there and do two things; destroy the infrastructure
11 of the VC and to build up the infrastructure of the friendly South Vietnamese. So on the
12 one hand we're going in destroying bunker complexes and anything like that; anything
13 like the underground tunnel systems and all that that the VC had. On the other hand,
14 we're over there building the Dickey Chapel Memorial Hospital, we're building bridges,
15 we're putting in water distribution systems, we're supporting and building little medical
16 facilities, what they called combined action platoons which were a really excellent
17 program the Marine Corps had where you bring Marines in working side by side with
18 Vietnamese and it was a combined action platoon and they would protect their own
19 village and stuff like that and we'd always have a couple of docs in with them, medical
20 folks, corpsmen, that would take care of the villagers and all.

21 SM: So but in terms of engineering training, do you recall them talking about the
22 combined action platoons, the CAPs, while you were in training?

23 JO: Not in training.

24 SM: That was when you got to Vietnam?

25 JO: Yeah, that was a program that was developed while we were over there I
26 think. In fact, one of the...I've got a newspaper in front of me here and in the middle of
27 it is a section on combined action platoons. They had their own unique insert where they
28 really spent a lot of time talking about how important these combined action platoons
29 were to our overall...we had a newspaper called the Sea Tiger which was...there was
30 Stars and Stripes which was kind of put out for all the units and then the Sea Tiger was

1 unique to the Marines and unique to that was called CAP News, the Sea Tiger monthly
2 supplement, news about the combined action programs.

3 SM: So a monthly supplement that just talked about CAPs in Sea Tiger?

4 JO: Yes.

5 SM: Wow!

6 JO: I've got that right here to give you guys.

7 SM: That's awesome.

8 JO: It's really kind of a neat paper and it's starting to get a little yellow; that's
9 why I want to get it to you guys so you can do something with it and protect it.

10 SM: Yes sir, absolutely. Now, that was published the whole time you were in
11 Vietnam?

12 JO: I don't know. I don't remember seeing it when I first got over there, but this
13 one I've got in front of me was May 3, 1968 and it's getting a little bit frazzled on the
14 edges.

15 SM: I would imagine. Quick question about some of the mine and anti-mine
16 training you received; you mentioned when you were rattling off lists of mines that you
17 learned to work with anti-blast mines, I think that's what you said.

18 JO: They actually were blast mines. What they were was...

19 SM: What is that?

20 JO: I said the wrong term, its anti-personnel and then within the anti-personnel
21 mines there was blast mines and fragmentation mines. What that really means is some of
22 them have shrapnel in them; others of them just have a concussion effect. M-16 A-1, I
23 think it was, was a Bouncing Betty they used to call it, but which was like a tomato can
24 and had a thousand ball bearings in it. The M-14 was just a blast mine, a little small little
25 mine about probably an inch in radius or something.

26 SM: And the purpose of that was just mostly to disorient?

27 JO: No, it was actually just like to blow your foot off. The concussion would just
28 blow parts...blow toes off or mess up a foot or something. The chances of it killing you
29 weren't that good unless you fell face down on it or something. But, it would just disable
30 you because one of the tactics later on that was very helpful and worked very well for the
31 North Vietnamese especially was rather than trying to kill guys, they were trying to

1 wound them because then you take at least three people out because you take the
2 wounded plus the other two that are trying to come get him. Or you take a whole bunch
3 of people and when they try to come get them you just pick them off as they try to come
4 rescue the guy. See, the Marine Corps had a philosophy, “Never leave a man on the
5 battlefield.” We’d never leave our wounded or our dead. So, you always knew that if
6 you were going to be injured in any way that your buddies would risk their lives to get
7 you, and that was part of the Esprit de Corps.

8 SM: Do you think that was important in maintaining good morale?

9 JO: Oh, yeah.

10 SM: Especially when you got to Vietnam?

11 JO: Absolutely. That’s just one of the bonds that we had; very important. You’ll
12 see it in many cases with the Army and all, they’d get into conflicts and they’d bug out
13 and leave guys laying out there in the middle of the battlefield, and then the next time
14 you’d turn around and the lieutenant says, “Charge that hill!” people are going to say,
15 “Forget that crap, man, I’m not doing that. Last time you did you left Joe Smith, Private
16 Joe Smith, laying out there. I’m not going to do that.” 800-749-9603

17 SM: What was the most challenging thing about engineering school for you?

18 JO: The disciplining of my own troops, my own fellow officers.

19 SM: Because you were the class leader?

20 JO: Yeah, which like, “Who the hell are you,” kind of thing. There was a lot of
21 arrogance, but of course our guys were really getting gung-ho and cocky, get over there
22 and kick ass kind of routine, so they weren't too gung-ho to kind of focus in on all this
23 engineering stuff so I had to try to motivate them and work with them and keep them
24 positive and keep them oriented. They were ready to go. Its just like when you get a
25 football team that’s ready to play the game, and if you have a couple of days when its
26 rained out those guys become disciplinary problems almost because they’re just keyed to
27 go.

28 SM: What about the most...did you recall if there was any particular lesson or
29 part of the instruction that was extremely helpful or useful when you finally did get to
30 Vietnam and you were a combat engineer? What aspect was most important?

1 JO: The demolitions and the mine warfare stuff. Those were very, very
2 important because that's much of what we did for a long time was mine sweeps and the
3 mine warfare part was a big part of the whole entire stuff we had to deal with on a daily
4 basis.

5 SM: Was there anything – when you got to Vietnam – was there anything that
6 you wished they had talked about or that they hadn't taught you?

7 JO: We could have had more instruction, more hands on instruction, with
8 demolitions and with disarming mines and things like that, that would have been very
9 helpful, but it would have been hard to do that, too, because they were trying to push
10 people through and over there so fast and they were, on the other side over there, at the
11 other end of the conduit, they were running short on everybody. So I think they did the
12 best they could with what they had to deal with.

13 SM: Were there any problems during that training, any shortages of...in order to
14 be properly trained in demolitions of course you need to have access to some.

15 JO: Right.

16 SM: Were there any shortages or any problems with getting your hands on that
17 kind of stuff?

18 JO: I don't think so. I never noticed it, at least at the level where as a student I
19 never saw it.

20 SM: You had plenty of hands on experience?

21 JO: We had some. Like I said, I think we could have used more, but I'm not sure
22 it was a function of lack of materials as much as it was a time compression problem.

23 SM: Anything else you want to add about your engineering school experience?

24 JO: I think just that Marine engineers are unique and they're different from Navy
25 engineers, Air Force engineers, or Army engineers, because they usually come not from
26 an engineering discipline. They come usually from a background other than engineering
27 and so they tend to be more Pioneer or Combat Engineer oriented where the old World
28 War II flame throwers, satchel charges, that kind of stuff. But, you can't count on those
29 guys normally to do a whole lot of heavy construction. That's what the Army, Seabees,
30 people like that are for. I bet I'd have had a good time doing some of it. It was because
31 there wasn't any other guys around to do it.

1 SM: This is Steve Maxner, conducting interview number two with Mr. James
2 O'Kelley. Today is the 4th of August, year 2000, at approximately 8:45 a.m. Lubbock
3 time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. O'Kelley is in Vienna, Virginia. All right, Mr.
4 O'Kelley, would you please begin by talking about the circumstances, which took you to
5 Vietnam? When did you find out you were going to Vietnam? Did you volunteer to go,
6 and things like that?

7 JO: Okay, actually when I joined the Marine Corps I figured I was going to end
8 up in Vietnam because that's where the war was going on and when I joined on 25
9 March, 1965 the Marines had landed on 8 March and had had some additional landings
10 after that. I had always had kind of a feeling in my mind that I'd much rather regret the
11 things that I did do, rather than the things I did not do, so I joined knowing that I was
12 going to go to that war. So when I got in the Marine Corps and we went through all our
13 training, it was all being focused on Vietnam so everybody knew that's where we were
14 headed anyway because they were in the middle of a big build-up. When the time came
15 which was probably around March of '66 after we'd been through OCS – OCS lasted
16 until December and then we got a Christmas break and we started back in January –
17 around March we had to put in our request for two things; one, what Military
18 Occupational Specialty we wanted to go into and I put down infantry, artillery, and
19 engineers. Then, the second thing to put down was where did you want to go, and I put
20 Vietnam, West Coast, East Coast, and they said they always guaranteed you one; you'll
21 get one of your first choices. So, I figured if I put in Vietnam I'd get my first choice,
22 which I did. So, probably in about early May the orders came out and I was assigned to
23 the 1st Marine Division and that's when I knew I was going over. But from that point I
24 had to go on into the engineer school for training, additional combat engineer officer
25 training. That was down at Camp Lejune, North Carolina, and that lasted for a period of
26 about two months. So that was like June and July and I took I think two weeks leave and
27 then in early August I left for Vietnam and met a friend of mine and we traveled out there
28 together, and we left from Travis Air Force Base at that point.

29 SM: By what mechanism or what means did you go to Vietnam; by ship, by
30 plane?

1 JO: Okay, I traveled mostly by train...not train, plane, excuse me. I flew out
2 from Ashville, North Carolina, to Atlanta, Georgia, flew out to San Francisco, went out
3 to Travis Air Force Base, got on a civilian...I think it was probably a 707 back in those
4 days, and flew from there to I think we went to Seattle, to Tokyo, and then into Okinawa,
5 and then we staged in Okinawa and went into Kadena Air Force Base there and went up
6 to Camp Hanson which was the Marine Corps Base there, and I have a lot of slides of
7 those areas as I went into them.

8 SM: What kind of training or briefings did you get before you left; before you
9 left country?

10 JO: I think by the time that I'd gotten through engineer school, there wasn't many
11 more briefings. It was pretty much, "We're going," and I don't remember even much at
12 Travis except for, "Line up and get on the plane," kind of routine. Then when we got to
13 Okinawa they lined us up, took us up to Camp Hanson which is on the other side of the
14 island from Kadena and there wasn't much there either, just that, "We're processing you
15 to go in country," and that was it, so we had to leave our sea bags and most of our
16 uniforms that we weren't going to obviously need in country and I think we went in with
17 just pretty much all I carried was a hand bag if I remember correctly, or a back pack, I
18 can't remember what but it wasn't much.

19 SM: Where did you arrive in Vietnam?

20 JO: The best I can remember we flew out of Kadena again and we went on a C-
21 130 and we flew into Danang. That was where all the Marines processed in. That was
22 the place to process all the what they called transient processing and we flew into there. I
23 probably got in there like the 28th of August or something like that I believe, I'm not sure.
24 I'll have to check the date, but it's pretty close to the 28th of August of '66.

25 SM: And on the flight over, did you spend much time talking with fellow
26 Marines or other personnel that were on the plane with you about Vietnam, about what
27 was going on, what to expect? Were there any veterans on board going back for the
28 second tour?

29 JO: I don't remember any. I do remember talking with a couple of guys who
30 were going to be F-4 pilots and chatting with them briefly and talking in general terms
31 but I don't believe there was...in fact I can't remember any anticipation or anxiety or

1 anything like that. No, we just were going over there as another adventure kind of thing.
2 It's what you trained for. I just remembered one thing; I didn't fly directly out to San
3 Francisco. I forgot that what I did was I flew to Saint Louis, Missouri. My uncle worked
4 there in Saint Louis and his son's daughter's father was a McDonald Douglas senior
5 executive so while I was there visiting my uncle he took me out to the McDonald
6 Douglas plant and I had a chance to see all the F-4s being built for all the countries in the
7 world and a lot of them had Marine Corps tack marks on them and everything else, so
8 that was really kind of cool. Later on those guys saw them all over the place in Vietnam.

9 SM: And so when you arrived in country, what were your first impressions?

10 JO: Well in Danang it was just like a huge, massive airport. It reminded me more
11 of like Washington National or any of the big airports around here except it was hotter
12 than Hades. The temperature and humidity of that place was the first thing that you
13 recognized, it just knocks you for a loop, and I didn't stay there but I think one day. I
14 went out to the 1st Marine Division. In fact, it wasn't even that, I went to the 3rd Marine
15 Amphibious Force transient officer check in or something like that and they checked me I
16 and assigned me to the 1st Marine Division, which the headquarters was down in Chu Lai,
17 which was south of Danang. So, I stayed overnight in kind of a transient officer's billet
18 there which was kind of flaky because you know you have no weapons or anything and
19 there you are in the middle of supposedly a war country, a country of war, and that was a
20 little bit...there was some anxiety there, and I think all of the other guys, too, were
21 looking around too like, "If we get hit, what do we do?" kind of routine. The next day I
22 got up and went down to processing and after a series of typical military, stand by to
23 stand by, hurry up and wait kind of routines, we left out of there and got down to I think
24 if I remember correctly we flew down on either a C-130 or a DC-3, I can't remember
25 which, but I think it was a DC-3 from Danang to Chu Lai and Chu Lai was considered to
26 be really Indian country. It was out in the boonies, but the interesting thing of that is its
27 right on the South China Sea and when we jumped off the plane there everybody said,
28 "You've got to go tactical." Well I didn't have anything to go tactical with, but we got
29 off and it was very, very white, hot sand. The sand was very white and just kind of a
30 glare that was just unbelievable, and the heat and humidity was just beyond believe. I
31 don't remember as much of the stench. A lot of guys will talk about how it smelled so

1 terrible and all. I didn't smell that...I don't remember that as much because we were
2 right on the ocean. We get a lot of the ocean breeze out at Chu Lai, and it was kind of
3 different. But you did...I do remember the smell of the cooking fires that the Vietnamese
4 always used, the wood cooking fires. I can still remember that kind of smell and some of
5 that stuff.

6 SM: When did you first interact with Vietnamese people?

7 JO: It probably was a week or two maybe before I really got out into seeing the
8 Vietnamese people themselves because pretty much we'd go from the transient officer's
9 quarters into the town there and you'd pass by indigenous personnel but you wouldn't
10 have any reason to stop by and talk to them or anything. A lot of them were laborers
11 working on roads and air fields and building houses and that kind of stuff, so they're all
12 very busy people it looked like and the first week to ten days it was just what we called
13 snapping in. That's a term off the rifle range but what it really means is you just get out
14 there and you go through the motions of learning and understanding and signing papers
15 and reading directions and trying to figure out what it is you're going to be doing, rules of
16 engagement and the whole works, you try to learn all that stuff.

17 SM: Was that part of the briefing package you received when you finally did get
18 into Vietnam? Were there briefings when you got to Vietnam?

19 JO: Not many. I don't remember a whole lot of briefings at all. Most of the stuff
20 that I learned at the basic school was the name of the game because they had lessons
21 learned pamphlets they gave us and books to read on the stuff and then of course we had
22 the Vietnam villages we went through and all and I don't think we had very...in fact,
23 there was almost no additional training there. What they would do with the enlisted guys,
24 they would send them, after they got into an engineering battalion, down to the 1st
25 Engineer Battalion to their mine, warfare, and booby trap school. I never got to that
26 because they took me and moved me into a...when they found out I was a graduate civil
27 engineer they immediately just scoffed me up and put me into design and construction
28 areas because they didn't have any graduate engineers that could design major horizontal
29 and vertical construction projects. So, they dumped me in there pretty quick.

30 SM: Now what did you think was going on in Vietnam when you arrived, in
31 terms of what kind of war is going on, who's fighting against whom, things like that?

1 JO: When I first got there in August of '66, we are pretty much fighting the VC,
2 which were the indigenous guerillas. Most of those guys were running around in...the
3 typical identification of them is usually black pajamas and sandals and an M-1 carbine
4 more than anything else, and that was more or less what we really ran into for a while.
5 But, in August of '66 on the DMZ, which was north of us, that was the first major battle
6 where the Marines ran into North Vietnamese regulars I think and that was in Operation
7 Hastings. A lot of my class, 2nd lieutenants in my class, were killed up there during those
8 battles on the DMZ and back around the Rockpile and those areas. But we were lucky.
9 We were down south and we were still dealing primarily just with VC guerillas and what
10 they called irregular forces. The guerilla forces we were dealing with weren't even what
11 we call regular guerillas. They were irregulars, part time guerillas I guess is what they
12 were.

13 SM: What about politically what was going on? To your understanding at the
14 time when you went to Vietnam in August of '66, what did you think was going on
15 politically in South Vietnam and in North Vietnam?

16 JO: Well, I think most people went over there feeling that there was a
17 communistic overthrow threat to the South Vietnamese government and we were there to
18 help protect and stabilize that government kind of like what we did in Korea. After being
19 there and watching all that for a while, it seemed to me that the people didn't care one
20 way or another. They just wanted to be left alone so they could carry on their lives.
21 Anytime they got government interference of either South Vietnamese, North
22 Vietnamese, or whatever, they didn't want anything to do with any of that stuff. I think
23 that country and those people in that part of the world, from my impression, they tended
24 to be influenced more by power and brutality and it seemed to me that they kind of
25 condescended to whoever was in power at the time. They didn't have much choice
26 because they weren't heavily armed. The only way they could fight against folks like us
27 was with guerilla warfare and mines and booby traps pretty much. They couldn't take us
28 on one on one. They couldn't fight against the VC because the VC had the weapons and
29 they came in there and just disemboweled all the political leaders. There was a lot of that
30 kind of stuff going on. If they tried to fight against the North Vietnamese they didn't
31 stand a chance either, so I think they were between a rock and a hard place all the way.

1 There was no place for them to go. They just had to kind of bend with the wind, so to
2 speak, and whoever was standing on their front porch at the time was the man in charge.

3 SM: Why don't you go ahead and describe your first duty assignment, your first
4 position in your unit?

5 JO: When I went to the first Marine division they sent me down to 1st Engineer
6 Battalion and they assigned me to the 9th Engineering Battalion. The 9th Engineer
7 Battalion in the Marine Corps was considered a heavy engineer battalion. In the Marines
8 there's two types of engineers; there's the combat engineers which are more like Pioneers
9 which deal with very basic pioneer construction, mine warfare, demolitions, that kind of
10 thing. Then the heavier engineers have capabilities to do other stuff like building bridges,
11 roadwork, airfields, things of that nature. The 9th Engineer Battalion had been formed
12 specifically to go to Vietnam and when I got in there the folks had been...they had
13 formed up at Camp Pendleton back in early '65...I guess early '66 and they had arrived
14 in country in I think it was May of '66 and when I got there in August there were a
15 couple of people, a lieutenant by the name of Ted Zealey who was a graduate civil
16 engineer and I think he was the only graduate civil engineer in the battalion at the time so
17 he was working in the design and construction and the S3 shop which is the operations
18 shop. So they immediately assigned me to work in there was what they called an S3
19 alpha, which would be just he number two guy behind Lieutenant Zealey. He was a 1st
20 lieutenant and just about ready to pick up captain. I started working with him and we
21 became great friends, and we had a lot of mutual respect for each other. I think the
22 battalion commander wanted to have somebody he could have to check on Ted's
23 engineering work, but it wasn't really necessary because Ted was really an outstanding
24 engineer and my checking on it was just more or less pro forma because there was no
25 question that Ted was an outstanding...in fact he's still...he's working out in Salt Lake
26 City now with Parson's Brinker office, a senior engineer building an interstate system,
27 and I followed him along a lot of ways in my career over the next 30 years, it was funny,
28 and in fact the last place I retired out of I relieved him and became the CO of the unit
29 when he retired, so its amazing. But, it was mostly what I started off doing was design
30 and construction. We were responsible for Route 1, which is a major north-south
31 interstate system equivalent to our Interstate I-95 but certainly not the same caliber. But,

1 it was a main highway and it had a railroad that paralleled it all the way to Danang and I
2 think it went all the way to the border of North Vietnam. One of the responsibilities was
3 mine sweeps. The other one was road repair and maintenance. The VC would come in
4 there and plant a lot of mines and blowholes in the road or they'd plant mines and blow
5 up vehicles and so we had to do the sweeps everyday. I've got the plans, I designed 8 or
6 7 bridges north of Chu Lai where we ran into a situation where the North Vietnamese
7 started coming in there with some of their demo people and blowing up the major
8 highway bridges. So, we went in and Ted and I worked on a design for converting the
9 railroad bridges into highway bridges so we could get traffic across. So in the midst of
10 doing that while they were setting it up so that we could get traffic moving up the road.
11 We were building new bridges, and so I designed 7 reinforced concrete and steel bridges
12 and we ordered the steel from Japan and we got the concrete through...there used to be a
13 group called BRKRMJ – Brown, Root, Knudson – the engineering companies.

14 SM: Brown and Root is still around.

15 JO: Yeah, that's right. Then John Jones construction company out of Durham or
16 some place like that, there was a whole series of those guys that came in and they put this
17 consortium of engineering companies and construction companies together and they went
18 over there and they were probably in '67 they were really becoming active in helping
19 build things and put stuff together and all. Interestingly enough, in some cases when
20 some of their equipment, when they got ready to pull out and move north, they were
21 going to bury a bunch of their equipment rather than try and take it back, so they buried a
22 couple of trucks and we went and dug the trucks up and used them. So, it's amazing!

23 SM: They didn't offer them outright?

24 JO: No, they should have, but for some reason they couldn't do that, some kind of
25 government regulation or something, so they just buried the thing and told us where they
26 buried them and we went back and dug them up. But the Marines never could get...the
27 biggest problem in the Marine Corps was money and working off of shoestrings, so we
28 never had the right equipment or enough equipment, and everything we were using was
29 Vietnam...I mean, Korean War and even World War II vintage stuff. My canteen that I
30 was issued, what they called 782 gear was the name, there was a form called a 782 form
31 and you spell it out and that's where you get things like your backpack and your

1 suspenders and your cartridge belt and your K-bar knife and all the stuff, your combat
2 gear, and in my 782 gear the canteen, one of the canteens I got – and these were the old
3 metal canteens – I turned it up and looked underneath it and it said, “1944 Saipan” on it,
4 so I’m going, “Hmmm...” you know? The Marines never threw anything away.
5 Actually, a little aside real quick, but those metal canteens, the problem with them was at
6 night on patrols they’d make some noises if you left the canteen cup, which is also metal,
7 in there because the canteen slipped down in the metal canteen cup and then there was
8 like a wool cover over it. If you took the canteen cup out, you could make it quiet
9 enough. The water sure tasted a hell of a lot better in those metal canteen cups than it did
10 coming out of those plastic things. Later on when you started drinking the water they
11 brought you some of these plastic ones over because they were quieter and they were
12 lighter weight and all sorts of things, but the biggest problem was water, when it got real
13 hot in those things, just tasted like you were drinking it out of a hot garden hose so a lot
14 of guys would just get nauseated from the taste of the water. So between that and
15 drinking it out of the rice paddies, there was enough to make you throw most of it up
16 anyway. We’d use the halizon tablets, but it was really amazing the things that the
17 people back in Washington thought would be helpful, they never field tested by coming
18 out and checking it out themselves and they'd send out all this stuff thinking, “Oh, this is
19 the greatest thing since sliced bread.” Well yeah, but sliced bread molds in those places,
20 so it doesn’t do you a whole lot of good.

21 SM: So once you received that stuff you couldn't get rid of it?

22 JO: No, in fact they collected all our old stuff so we had to use the new stuff.
23 That was the same thing we’ll talk about later, I’m sure, about the M-16 rifles; same kind
24 of stuff. They took away the good stuff and gave us junk.

25 SM: Well, let’s go ahead and talk about your equipment real quick. As an
26 engineer, what weapons were you issued? What did you have with you when you were
27 on these projects, building roads and bridges and things like that, and what kind of fire
28 support could you depend on if you ever came under attack?

29 JO: Well, we had our own support primarily. One of the things about the
30 engineers, most of the time we provided our own security and then in certain cases we’d
31 get infantry support, but the infantry was so thin at that point because they had all that

1 stuff going on up north when I first got there, we were doing most of our own security.
2 Over a period of the six months, the first six months I was there, I worked a lot doing a
3 lot of night patrol work because I got assigned as battalion security officer because I was
4 kind of a gung-ho guy and young and wasn't worried about anything and a lot of those
5 guys weren't too gung-ho to go out in the woods at night, especially after working all day.
6 So, we were issued initially M-14 rifles. Everybody had an M-14 rifle and officers had
7 side arm .45s as well, .45 caliber pistols. Then you would get the standard M-26
8 grenades and when we'd go out on a lot of these road reconnaissance things I had special
9 jeeps and all and I've got pictures of all that for you, too, slides of everything. We would
10 take a personnel carrier which was kind of a truck, small, almost like a pick-up truck, a
11 four wheel drive vehicle, and we'd have an M-60 machine gun on that and then we'd
12 have a radio jeep, what they called a Mark 83 Radio Jeep and it had a massive antenna
13 and that would allow us to communicate back to the battalion headquarters. Then what
14 we would do, wherever we went, we pre-setup check points so that as we moved down
15 the road there'd be somebody in battalion communications center monitoring where we
16 were and what we were doing and as we moved to a work sight then we'd check in that
17 we were at the work sight and then we'd have a radio operator who was responsible for
18 checking in every thirty minutes or so. We'd set up how often they needed to check in
19 and that kind of stuff, and then we had, at that point, we had it set up so that if there was a
20 need we had some reaction force people that could come out and help us if we ran into
21 any problems and in addition to that we tied in and linked in to the 1st Marine Division
22 Command Center. Their tactical operations center, what they called TOC, would be
23 monitoring our radio traffic as well. A lot of times what happens, just like artillery nets
24 and everything else, there are a lot of people monitoring your net, your radio network,
25 that aren't necessarily involved but they're just monitoring in case you get into trouble of
26 some kind. So when we'd go out we'd have that and then on the large trucks, the big
27 what we called six by trucks, we'd have a ring mount which is an anti-aircraft mount and
28 it would have a .50 caliber machine gun on that and that was good hunting there because
29 that sucker would fire for long distances and had a very lethal round. So, that was always
30 helpful. In fact, the infantry liked to have us around because a lot of times they didn't
31 have .50 caliber machine guns and we did, so that was nice help.

1 SM: When you would go out on some of these projects, would the whole
2 battalion be there?

3 JO: No, huh-uh.

4 SM: If you went out on either a road repair job or a bridge building job, how
5 many people did you generally have with you?

6 JO: It would vary between a platoon, which would be, in the Marine Corps,
7 around 40 plus or minus a few people. The way the Marines are organized, they start off
8 with the smallest unit is called a fire team and that's four men, four Marines. Then with
9 the fire team there's three fire teams and a squad leader and that makes up a squad and
10 that becomes thirteen, and then three squads plus a platoon leader and a platoon guide
11 and a platoon sergeant makes up the platoon, so the platoon runs around 45 men plus or
12 minus because over there you might have a table of organization which said you had 45
13 and you'd be lucky if you had 25 in the platoon because it just didn't have enough
14 people. The next step would be the company level. The companies would be made up of
15 three or four platoons, depending on whether the headquarters platoon went with it. Like
16 I had Delta Company and I had the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd platoons and then I had an H&S
17 platoon and that's headquarters and service platoon. So when I'd go out, if I had a
18 company...well, normally what we'd do, you'd assign a project to a company from the
19 S3, the operations people. The battalion S3 would assign the project to a company. The
20 company then would decide who they wanted to do the job and how many men it would
21 take. Normally, in a lot of those cases, it would be a platoon size thing and for instance
22 on a mine sweep, we'd take a platoon north, we'd take a platoon south, and a platoon
23 going west and a platoon going east to the shore. So in that case, one company could
24 handle three out of the four of those, and by using the headquarters people they could do
25 all four if they needed to. On bridge building we'd have to call in some additional
26 people. One of the things that we had in the engineer battalions...I'm losing my voice a
27 little bit, just a minute, I'll get a little coffee or something here [pause]. In the
28 engineering battalion, the heavy engineer battalions, we had a service company, which
29 was the biggest company in the Marine Corps. It was usually made up of almost a
30 thousand men sometimes; maybe not that many, maybe 500, I take it back because the
31 whole entire battalion wasn't over 2,500, it was probably around 500 men, and that

1 would be truck drivers, heavy equipment like bulldozers, crane operators, rock crusher
2 people, we had our own rock crusher. Later they brought in some paving machines and
3 our guys learned to use those things. They had what we called heavy equipment; the
4 term over there was heavy junk, which was really any big construction equipment,
5 scrapers, and things like that. In that case, they would augment whoever was doing the
6 work. Say if you're building a bridge, we'd have like a platoon that would be assigned to
7 go out and provide security around the bridge if you're in a rough area. If you're out in
8 an area where you expect that you might get attacked we'd put platoon forces out around
9 us in all 360-degree perimeter. Then we would have a couple of positions set up actually
10 near the construction itself so that if somebody came driving through, civilians or
11 something, we could take them out if we had to. Then we'd have another platoon
12 working on the construction and we'd probably have like guys with cranes driving piles,
13 you'd have other folks laying the span of the bridge, other people decking the bridge, and
14 you usually had to dig out and make some channel changes and deal with the water
15 around it and put Khe Sanh's in so that you could actually put the intermediate supports
16 in and things like that. So in some of those projects, it would be as many as a couple
17 hundred men could be working out there and maybe a fourth of them, or less than a
18 fourth, would be actually providing our own security. Sometimes we were lucky; if there
19 weren't a lot of operations going with the infantry we'd get infantry to come in and give
20 us a platoon to help us out and support us, too. Then we could free up more engineers to
21 do the actual work. But, one of the things, again, remember we talked about the Marines,
22 first of all, you're an infantryman and after that you do everything else? So with that
23 kind of concept, a lot of times engineers – in many cases – we provided our own security.

24 SM: Now the M-16 issue, you mentioned that first you were all issued M-14s,
25 officers had side arm .45s?

26 JO: Yes.

27 SM: When did you first get introduced to the M-16?

28 JO: April of 1967. The Army had been getting the weapons for quite a while.
29 Even the Vietnamese what we call the ARVN, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, we
30 called them Marvin the ARVN, Marvin had been getting those weapons for quite a while.
31 The Army had, too, and the Marines had been fighting it because they didn't want the

1 weapon, they didn't like it, and all the tests and all they were unhappy with it. A lot of
2 what they had felt unhappiness about and all later turned out to be prophetic because
3 there was a book written called The Betrayal by James Corson, Lieutenant Colonel, Ph.D.
4 type Marine who had an infantry group and spent a lot of time talking about how under
5 designed the weapon was, how the government had gone out and purchased this powder
6 from [Olan Mathison] that didn't work properly in the gunpowder and the weapon.
7 There was a collusion of government contractors that caused a lot of the problems and all
8 and there's a couple of stories...I taught a course over at the Command and Staff College
9 called "Moral and Ethical Aspects of Military Leadership" and in that I've got three or
10 four major articles about the M-16. One of them's called, "The M-16: A Bureaucratic
11 Horror Story," and it talks about all the weapons development and all the contractor
12 influences and a lot of the collusion with contractors and all. Most of us felt that we were
13 betrayed by that weapon I'm pretty sure. I can say very strongly that most of us did not
14 like the weapon. We all had terrible experiences with it. They brought it in and gave it
15 to us on like April...maybe the 10th or something. We had three days to [fan fire] and get
16 used to the weapon before they took our M-14s away from us. See, the M-14 was a .30
17 caliber weapon and had been tested and all and there was two things that we really liked
18 about it; number one, in all that sand and dirt and mud and everything over there, it was
19 easy to clean - there weren't a lot of small parts - and sometimes you'd just pop a round
20 in it and shoot a round through it and clean it right out and that was a heck of a lot easier
21 than the M-16. You had to lay that sucker out on a poncho, then you had to take it apart
22 and there were all these little, bitty pieces, little small screws and things that had to be
23 taken out, and it was almost like Murphy's Law that if you had half...we'd always do it
24 half the platoon would take them apart and the other half would stay on duty. So, about
25 the time you got everything taken apart, Charlie would drop a couple of rounds in on you.
26 So, now you've got pieces of weapon flying all over the place because people are diving
27 to get into foxholes and stuff so it was just a royal pain in the butt. The biggest problem
28 was that the extractor, when you would push around into the chamber and it locks in
29 place, after it fires, the round expands and seals against the chamber. Then you have an
30 extractor that comes in and has to break that seal and bring the round back out and that
31 throws the round out of the chamber and then another round is driven in. Well, the

1 extractor was not properly designed so in many cases what would happen, the round
2 would fire and then it would seal into the chamber. The extractor would slip off of the
3 casing of the round, come back and grab the next round, and try to jam it in on top of that
4 round. So now you've got a hot round in the chamber that had exploded, been shot, and
5 you've got another...and then it won't come out, and then its trying to jam a second round
6 in off over it and sometimes the round would cook off because of the heat or other times
7 it would jam up. So what happened was in many firefights early on with that weapon,
8 you'd find dead Marines lying around with their ramrod in the weapon trying to get the
9 dad-gum round out of the chamber! That was a major occurrence. The second thing that
10 was bad about it was it was smaller and it was shorter. Now on one hand, the guy's back
11 in Washington said, "Oh, man, that's great," because it was going to be lighter weight,
12 won't be as hard to carry, and it can throw out more rounds in the jungle. Yeah, that
13 might have been true except for one thing; when you get into up close fighting and you
14 use your weapon to fight with like with butt strokes and things of that nature, you hit
15 somebody in the face with an M-16 the damn thing breaks! The plastic breaks! So, we
16 used to have a saying, "If it was from Mattel, its swell." It was like a toy rifle. The
17 actual bayonet on the end of it was ridiculous. It was just a small...it was about a third
18 smaller, and you don't want that. You want something a little longer so that you can
19 reach out and touch somebody if you need to; you don't want to have to get any closer
20 than you want. You didn't have any range with that thing. The other thing was on the
21 rate of fire, the theory was, "Well, if you're carrying this M-14 the problem is the rounds
22 are so heavy and the magazines are so heavy and all that." Well, what happened was the
23 cyclical rate of fire on the M-16 was so much higher than the M-14 that these guys would
24 just be spraying rounds all over the place and the result of that was they still had to carry
25 a hell of a lot of rounds. They ended up with more rounds, but they were wasting rounds
26 when they fired them. If you got an M-14 and you got a .30 caliber, your rounds more
27 than likely most guys had some fire discipline and they tended to fire aimed rounds.
28 With the M-16 the guys would just get it and aim it in the general vicinity and open up on
29 automatic and then all the rounds are gone. So it didn't work out the way the planners
30 sitting in Washington thought it would.

1 SM: And when you received these weapons, I would imagine that there was a lot
2 of conversation about these issues?

3 JO: Oh yeah, yeah. From day one the Marines had heard from their...infantry
4 got them first before we did and infantry said, "Boy, you don't want to get those if you
5 don't have to because they really are terrible," and we were dreading getting them and we
6 finally got them and sure enough, it was self fulfilling prophecy on that.

7 SM: Did you have personal experiences where the weapon jammed?

8 JO: Oh yeah, yeah, I had a lot of trouble with it. In fact, in one operation – it
9 wasn't an operation, it was an ambush – I can remember seeing one of my troops getting
10 off the vehicle, we were under fire, moving over to the edge of the road, and a North
11 Vietnamese standing up with an AK-47 and my guy going up and smacking him across
12 the face with a butt stroke and the damn weapon breaking and the North Vietnamese shot
13 and killed him.

14 SM: Oh my God!

15 JO: So, that kind of crap. Other cases where you'd see guys charging a North
16 Vietnamese position and the weapon firing away and then all of a sudden the weapon
17 locks up on them. Well, if you're a North Vietnamese and your head's down because
18 you're being shot at but all of a sudden the guy's not shooting anymore, you're going to
19 stand up and start shooting at them. So a lot of cases we lost a lot of guys because of
20 that. Again, the point I'm trying to make in here, I think, is my perception is that these
21 guys designing all these weapons systems and all this kind of stuff, the only way you can
22 really understand that kind of stuff is to have done it and then it's kind of like a design
23 engineer. A design engineer ought to have to go to the field and use what it is he designs;
24 then, the design would be much different. I made a point now – I try to practice what I
25 preach – anytime I was working on building a bridge or designing something or
26 whatever, I always made a point of being out there with it, too, seeing how it was going
27 along and supervising it and dealing with changes as it came up, etcetera. But see, a lot
28 of these guys are sitting back at Aberdeen designing these weapons systems and paying
29 gobs of money to Olan Mathison and all these Colt all those people. The Stoner system,
30 the AR-15 which was a precursor to the M-16 was a magnificent weapons system that
31 this guy Stoner set up, but the problem was he didn't have the blessings of the Army, and

1 the Army was in bed with Olan Mathison and Colt and those people, so you had this
2 collusion going on, and I'm not just saying this from hearsay, this is documented stuff
3 and you can look in Corson's book on The Betrayal and you can look in this "M-16, a
4 Bureaucratic Horror Story," and a couple other of the articles which I'll send to you. It'll
5 be with my materials.

6 SM: That would be excellent.

7 JO: In fact, I'll send you that whole entire course and you can see a lot of the
8 actual stuff. So, all this stuff will tie in with it. I've got the documentation behind what
9 I'm saying.

10 SM: Now the AR-15, did you ever receive those in country?

11 JO: No, the Special Forces guys had gotten some of those and they came by and
12 showed us and demonstrated some of those because they were a complete weapons
13 system. You could break them down and have them as a single round firing weapon, an
14 automatic weapon; you could set them up to be an automatic weapon with a tripod or a
15 bipod so that you could get more consistent aim fire. You could actually have them on
16 automatic and it would almost act like a machine gun. It had a tremendous capability and
17 flexibility and the Marines loved it, but this was back in the days when the Army was
18 really politically the ones who were going to decide what the weapon was because they
19 were going to buy the most of them, and the Marines finally had to capitulate and go
20 along because I think McNamara and the guys said everybody would have the same
21 weapon kind of theory.

22 SM: Now the AR-15 didn't have a belt feed capability, did it?

23 JO: You know, I can't remember. I don't think it did.

24 SM: Or a drum feed?

25 JO: I think it might have had a drum feed, I'm not positive, but I think it had
26 some kind of additional capability that made it almost like a machine gun, and I can't
27 remember that. I apologize, it's been a while.

28 SM: That's okay, oh yeah.

29 JO: I do remember that...

30 SM: I hadn't heard of that. I had heard about the AR-15 but I didn't realize that it
31 had the kind of flexibility that you describe.

1 JO: They call it the Stoner Weapons System. I know that it had a suitcase that
2 came with some of the weapons. The suitcase reminded me of when I was a kid and I
3 played in the band, I played a tenor saxophone. There's a big, massive case I carried this
4 thing in; it was probably about four feet by about two feet by about a foot and a half
5 wide, so you have all these extra parts. So when they shipped the weapons over like that,
6 the Stoner System, you'd have all this other stuff with it, too; scopes and everything.

7 SM: And Stoner, that's stone with an R at the end?

8 JO: S-T-O-N-E-R, right.

9 SM: Well, what about other equipment problems or failures?

10 JO: Well, I think our pack systems, where we carried all our gear in and all, our
11 haversacks and things like that; they were old World War II things. We were still using
12 shelterhalves, camouflage shelterhalves from World War II, the haversacks were World
13 War II, most of the stuff we went in there with at that point were World War II and we
14 didn't really...in fact, our utilities fatigues we were using, we didn't have fatigues when
15 we first got over there. It wasn't until '67, mid '67, that we were going from anything
16 other than just the standard fatigues that we'd been using which we call utilities back in
17 the United States. So, those jungle fatigues started coming in and the first ones came in
18 and they had these slash pockets. I've got a couple of pairs and I'll send those to y'all,
19 too. The first ones had buttons on them so you'd go through the boonies and all the
20 shrubbery and all would get caught in the buttons, and if you had like a grenade and all,
21 you had to be real careful because the shrubbery would pop them off. So we ended up
22 having to, when we'd go through the woods, we'd have to take and tape our grenades
23 because of the undergrowth and stuff and that got to be a bit of a problem. You don't
24 ever see that on TV or anything where these guys are pulling the tape off before they
25 throw the grenades. It depended on the kind of stuff you're moving through, but there's
26 nothing more embarrassing than having a grenade pop off and the pin pop out and there
27 you are laying on the ground next to your troops. That's' kind of a bad day. But when
28 they first started sending those over, again, people in the rear designing stuff but never
29 figuring out and checking out what the deal is. So they came back the second time with
30 flaps over the pockets and then a little later they came back and they had camouflage
31 added to them because when we first got them they were just dark green. The other thing

1 they did on the trousers, they started off with the trousers they would have buttons on the
2 fly. The problem with that is you'd get these leeches from the streams that would get into
3 your underwear and all and be hanging all over you and its really bad news, so then they
4 went to zipping it up and that was much better when they did that. Then they had things
5 like on the boots, when they first sent the jungle boots over well that was a good idea was
6 cloth and then had two little holes on the inside of the arch and they had a little plastic
7 insert so anytime you'd step down it would act kind of like an accordion and it would
8 push the water or the dust or whatever out through those little holes. Also, though, the
9 problem is those little holes allowed everything to come in, so anything that goes out
10 comes in, you know. The biggest problem was, though, they hadn't thought about
11 stepping on punji sticks and stuff like that. Punji sticks were long toothpick like sticks
12 that were probably...most of them were about the thickness of your finger or a little
13 bigger and the VC would stick them in the ground in holes – they'd dig a hole – stick
14 them in the bottom of a hole and they would put buffalo dung on them and let it dry.
15 Then they'd cover the hole over and we'd be going on patrol, walking through, and you'd
16 step on one of those things and of course it would go through your foot. But it wouldn't
17 just go through your foot; it would go through your calf. Most of the time where guys...I
18 saw more than one guy where it went through his calf. Then when it would go through
19 into the calf and then rupture your Achilles and whatever, it would set up a tremendously
20 bad infection because you've got this buffalo dung on that thing. Its kind of like down in
21 South America, was it curry or whatever the poison was these guys put on their blow
22 guns and stuff? Same kind of idea, just poison people. What was that stuff called?

23 SM: I think its Kuraray?

24 JO: Kuraray, that's what I'm trying to remember, yeah.

25 SM: When did you get the boots with the steel shanks on them?

26 JO: That's what I was going to say – so what we had to do was they started
27 probably in about June or July of '67 we started getting the steel shanks and that was just
28 that same insert but they put an insert below it which would have a little piece...it would
29 be steel, and that helped, that really did help. That's one good thing, they kept adapting
30 the equipment. At least they had the flexibility to realize that when the guys sent back

1 information that said, "Hey, this ain't working," people did try to change it, and that was
2 good.

3 SM: But you never did get new canteens?

4 JO: Well, we finally got some canteens. We never got anything to replace those
5 plastic things; in fact, they're still using the plastic today.

6 SM: That's what I mean.

7 JO: Those things were awful.

8 SM: Yeah, okay. Now let's see, you mentioned a problem with grenades getting
9 caught and pins getting pulled and things like that as you're going through certain types
10 of brush.

11 JO: Right.

12 SM: Were you ever witness to any kind of experience like that?

13 JO: Where somebody got hurt?

14 SM: Yeah, or that happened and they had to very rapidly get rid of a grenade that
15 got pulled?

16 JO: Yeah, we had more than one occasion where that happened. On some of the
17 patrols I took out at night I'd get a rookie, some kid his first time in and you'd tell these
18 guys, "Don't do this, do this," etcetera, etcetera. Well, you know, a 17 year old kid, its
19 very difficult to tell them anything, so sometimes you'd have some yahoo who'd learned
20 the hard way. I had a couple of incidences where guys would be out on a patrol and
21 they'd be going through underbrush and stuff and their grenades would fall off, but
22 luckily the pin was tight enough where it didn't come out. I don't think I can remember
23 any instances right off where I lost anybody or anybody got hurt that way.

24 SM: How about with the punji sticks?

25 JO: Yeah, we had some people step on those things. I can remember one guy, I
26 can't remember who it is, but I can remember seeing his calf where he came back about
27 six months later and he had this big hole in his calf where it just totally messed him up,
28 but he was back to complete his tour. I've got pictures of some of those punji sticks and
29 stuff; too, I can show you. A lot of that stuff I've got illustrations of in my slide
30 collection.

31 SM: What about problems with wildlife on your patrols; snakes, tigers, all that?

1 JO: Yep, we had trouble with all that stuff. I've got some real interesting pictures
2 that I usually show, one of Corporal Knowlton I've got to find, William Arnold, K-N-O-
3 W-L-T-O-N, somewhere in the Ohio area or Pennsylvania but he was a Corporal and he
4 would be my point man on most of the patrols I'd take out at night. We had to do our
5 own security at night. One of the ways we'd go out is through the battalion area. A
6 couple of things we learned was that you go out early in the evening after dark and you
7 sit and you allow your visual pupil and your eyes to come into play and the rods and all
8 to stabilize, no smoking, no drinking for 24 hours before patrol, wear no kind of any kind
9 of perfume kind of stuff. See, one of the things that we had a problem with, these kids
10 would come over and in the States you'd shave with this shaving cream that has a sugar
11 base to it, and then they'd pop on some after shave of some kind and that's the way you
12 did it. Well, you couldn't do that over there because first the sugar drew mosquitoes,
13 secondly all the animals, especially water buffalo and everything else could smell you,
14 and of course the VC could smell you. So it took a while for us to start realizing some of
15 that kind of stuff. But, we'd go out early, we'd sit there, and we'd acclimate and then as
16 we moved out one of the ways I liked to go, and it was very dangerous to use the same
17 route more than once, you'd have to alternate back and forth through all different routes,
18 but there were only so many ways you could get out of a camp and get to where you're
19 going which is the dangerous part, and we had this one area we'd go out and I've got a
20 real nice picture of this, it was a stream and the stream was probably three or four feet
21 wide and as we'd move through it...I usually went the number two guy because I'd have
22 Knowlton at point and then I'd be number two, then I'd have my radio man, and I can
23 show you a whole design of how all that went, and we'd have like the system control
24 leader would be in the back and we'd have another radio man back there, and so we'd go
25 out there usually on combat patrols with somewhere around 40-45 men, sometimes 20
26 men. It depended on what kind of Intel I was told who I was going to be running into or
27 who was out there and what we were looking for. If we were going on ambushes we'd
28 take four or five guys and we'd go out, that would be different. We'd be in this one
29 particular area that we'd go down, of course it would be at night and dark, and on the
30 moonlight nights it was especially bad because I can remember to this day I can still see
31 Knowlton as he's moving through and the moon is coming in kind of in front of him so

1 you can see his silhouette and you can see the shrubbery and you can just see the snakes
2 dropping off the trees into the water and moving off and most of the snakes over there I
3 figured were poisonous. We ran into bamboo vipers, ran into something called the krait,
4 K-R-A-I-T I think it is, there were cobras. The one that scared me the most that I was
5 most worried about was king cobra which was Maja Hannah was its scientific name, it
6 had both neurotoxic and hemotoxic poison and the fangs were about two inches long.
7 They claimed that those guys had enough poison to kill an elephant, which wouldn't
8 surprise me, but a cobra will usually rise up in that hooded shape that they do, about a
9 third of their body length, and these guys, these king cobras would range from 12 to 18
10 feet. So now you've got something that's in the elephant grass there and that sucker's
11 going to be standing right there at your face. So that was the one that we were most
12 worried...and thank God I never saw one of them, but I heard reports about them and all.
13 The reticulated python, I ran into a couple of those suckers and they were over 30 feet
14 long. That was a little rough. One night on a patrol some of the guys, we were taking
15 five and taking a break, and the guys kind of leaned down and it looked like there was a
16 log and two of my guys sat down on the log and it started moving. We managed to...we
17 DD'ed out of there quickly – DD means get the hell out of there, fast, you know – but we
18 never did see which end of the snake was where but we didn't wait to figure that one out.
19 More than once I can remember coming back off of a patrol and I was sitting around kind
20 of airing out your body from all of the stuff that you'd done all day so I'd be in a pair of
21 shorts with no shoes on, maybe like flip-flops, sitting on a mortar – you put mortars in a
22 circle and you'd have a mortar pit – and in the sandbags you'd have boxes so that the
23 water would drain out of the pit. More than once I can remember sitting there and have
24 my feet hanging over the side and seeing a bamboo viper coming out of one of those
25 boxes. After a while you say, "I think I'll just wear my boots." It looked kind of weird,
26 guys running around with shorts with boots on, but that's the reason. Once...let's see, I
27 don't know how to tell this and clean it up, but I'll tell it and you can edit it however you
28 need to.

29 SM: Tell it like it is, we don't need to edit it. [Laughs]

30 JO: Okay. One incident I had, another one I'll never forget, was with scorpions,
31 and up on the DMZ they would bring in these four hole kind of outhouses and we'd put

1 them in the areas between...like in a valley between the mountains so that guys couldn't
2 shoot at the guys when we went to the bathroom. I can remember one night going into
3 what they had was a two or four holer, I think it was a two holer, and you sit down and of
4 course your butt hangs in through there while you're going to the bathroom, and I kept
5 feeling this tickling stuff and I thought, "What the hell?" So when I finished and wiped
6 off an everything I said, "There's something wrong here," so I got my pants back on and
7 I lifted the lid up and underneath there were two scorpions, one on either side of that hole
8 where I'd stuck my butt and everything was down there and I thought, "I could have been
9 the first Marine in orbit if those guys would have nailed me!" But that's the kind of
10 stuff...after that I would never, ever sit down in one of those things again. They used to
11 call that, "The land of the burning shitters," because what they'd do, they'd take 55
12 gallon drums and cut them in half and they'd put fuel all in the thing and then so people
13 would defecate into that and then they'd take it out and they'd burn it. We'd have this
14 black acrid smoke and I guess burning manure, which would settle on everything. It was
15 kind of like, "Yuck!" Nowadays you look at it and think that that was an absolute
16 pollution problem. That's one of the names they had for the place, the land of the
17 burning shitters. There was one funny incident – well, I guess it was funny, maybe not so
18 funny for the guy it happened to – but we had some young Marine private who was
19 dumber than a rock and see the guys who ended up putting the fuel in there and cleaning
20 those out were usually what we called the shit birds. They were the 10% that were
21 screwing off and that was kind of punishment to do that. Nobody wanted to do that job,
22 of course. This one particular yahoo pulled it out and when he put the new one in, rather
23 than putting fuel oil in he put gasoline in it. Well, a lot of times the guys would come out
24 there and they'd sit down and go to the bathroom and they'd have a smoke while they're
25 doing it, so you can imagine what happened; one of these staff sergeants, one of these old
26 codgers that had been around for years, went out, sat down, lit up a cigarette, and when
27 he got through he tossed it in there and it boom, blew up. So you know, half the time
28 there's another example of I'm not sure who the enemy was sometimes, whether we were
29 fighting the VC or the...like we said, we talked once before, you fight the animals, the
30 terrain, you fight the temperature and the weather, and then you've got stupidity on your
31 own people's part and of course these were non-combat casualties and I don't know what

1 the numbers on non-combat casualties are but I bet they're pretty damn high over there
2 because we had people run over by trucks and tanks and you had short rounds come in
3 and kill people and you have guys shoot people by accident and there was so many ways
4 to get killed it was just a miracle if you got back, I think.

5 SM: What happened to that staff sergeant? Did he actually get killed?

6 JO: He got severely burned and blown out of the place and manure all over him.
7 I mean, the hospital ship must have wondered, "What in the world happened to this guy?"
8 Just the clean up alone was terrible.

9 SM: What happened to the guy that made the mistake? Anything?

10 JO: Yeah, he was court martialed. See, the other thing was you court martial
11 these guys, like I relieved a lieutenant in the field at Khe Sanh, near Khe Sanh in '68 and
12 sent him to the rear because he wasn't taking care of his people and all and about half of
13 his platoon came down with trench foot. I sent him to the rear and the battalion
14 commander assigns him as the officer in charge of the officer's club in the rear area, so
15 that sucker didn't have anything happen to him except he sits back there and he mixes
16 drinks for the rest of the war while we're getting our tails shot off in the front, so its kind
17 of like, "Duh, that doesn't make a lot of sense." They should have put him on the point.
18 But it's crazy. Other animals, we ran into a lot of wild boars and stuff like that. Even the
19 domesticated pigs, and I've got some beautiful pictures of some of the domesticated pigs,
20 quote-unquote. One operation, [Atbon] II I think it was in April of '68 we hit this village
21 or this North Vietnamese training camp and we hit it with artillery a lot and they had pigs
22 in there and a mother pig with her little sows, a lot of them got killed and she'd been hit
23 with some shrapnel and as we're moving through cleaning up the bunkers with the
24 grenades and flame throwers I was with my command group and I'd just tossed a grenade
25 in a bunker and I dropped back and it blew and this mother pig came out of nowhere and
26 she had these huge tusks and she was charging right at me and I took a .45 and dropped
27 five slugs right behind her ear because she was just crazed by what had happened to her
28 and that pig's still coming, and Smitty, my radio man, had an M-16 and he unloaded the
29 entire M-16 magazine into her before she finally dropped right about four feet from me.
30 So, there were some animals. We had trouble with rock apes, too, that was another thing.
31 These damn things, they're like chimpanzees. I never saw one close enough to be for

1 sure. I've seen some pictures of them, but every one I ever saw was always at a distance
2 or they were kind of a shadow. But I remember one night on a patrol I stopped for a
3 break and the lieutenant who was in the rear of the patrol, my assistant patrol leader,
4 came up and said, "Skipper, we got a problem." I guess it wasn't Skipper at that time, it
5 was probably, "Lieutenant, we got a problem," and I said, "What's the matter?" and he
6 said - I forget who the guy was who was actually the last man in the patrol - said that he
7 thinks they were being followed. His hair was sticking up on the back of his neck. He
8 could feel the hair on the back of his neck because he was sure he was being followed. I
9 said, "Okay." I got a couple to go volunteer. I had three or four guys who were Native
10 Americans who...I'm part Cherokee, so I got a couple of my Native American guys and
11 what we did was we rounded this one particular area and we dropped off behind some
12 trees and bushes and rocks and let the patrol go on up and I told the patrol leader to take
13 the patrol on up about another click which would be about a thousand meters and, "Just
14 wait unless you hear a lot of firing, and if you hear firing, get on back and help us," and
15 we dropped down in the bushes and sure enough there was enough moonlight that we
16 could see what was happening; that dang rock ape was following us, and just before we
17 could get him in our sites and nail him he smelled us and bolted. But it was really
18 interesting because those guys really got a lot of...it really scared the hell out of the guys
19 on the patrols and all. The guys would rather be the point man than be the last man on
20 the patrol a lot of times.

21 SM: How large was this rock ape, first of all?

22 JO: I think they were around three or four feet. They're not that big, but the guys
23 up in the place called the Rockpile which is up north, there were some Marine
24 observation guys up on top of that thing with artillery, observation scopes and all, and
25 they used to hear noises down below when they first got there and they'd toss grenades
26 over and these guys would throw the grenades back at them, and that was kind of terrible.
27 There were a lot of incidences where we ran into those guys. We ran into one tiger
28 situation. Most of the tiger situations were with recon people and all being way out in the
29 boonies. One night we set up in an area where a mother tiger and her cubs would go
30 down and get water from the jungles and that was way up on the DMZ and we had an
31 incident with a tiger there. The nice thing about it was after that incident we took the

1 troops out and showed them the paw prints and all, I didn't have any problems with
2 people falling asleep on post for a long time because you just see teeth and eyeballs from
3 then on because these guys were really afraid because that tiger tried to drag one of our
4 guys off.

5 SM: It tried to drag one of your men off?

6 JO: Yeah.

7 SM: The guy had fallen asleep?

8 JO: Yeah, he'd fallen asleep in the foxhole right on the path where she was
9 taking her two little guys down to get water.

10 SM: What happened to him?

11 JO: She grabbed him by the arm and jerked him out of the foxhole and was
12 dragging him off down the hill. But, he had luckily had his M-16, he had the strap of it
13 around his arm and he had fallen asleep over it, so he was dragging the M-16 behind him
14 while she was dragging him so he was able to somehow sling out at her and either hit her
15 or scared her enough she dropped him and backed off, and he picked the weapon up and
16 somehow managed to fire it and in the process of firing it scared the hell out of everyone
17 around him so everyone was shooting at him.

18 SM: Did he get hit?

19 JO: No. Marines can't hit the broad side of a barn at night. One of the things that
20 happens is...

21 SM: If you want to edit that out later, I'll understand! [Laughs]

22 JO: What happens if its really dark like that and all you tend to fire high and to
23 the right, so you literally have to grab the weapon and your hand has to go down on top
24 of the weapon and pull it down to the left, and that helps you keep the weapon more in so
25 you shoot more straight ahead.

26 SM: Now he didn't hit the cat, he just scared it away?

27 JO: Yeah, and she and the little guys ran and the next morning the gunny and I
28 went out and we found the footprints. I could take my fist, put my other hand on top of
29 it, and stick it down in the hole, so it was a big cat.

30 SM: Yeah, and to pick up a man and start dragging him off, that's a sizeable cat.

1 JO: Well, I've got some pictures in some of my stuff of sea tigers and all of some
2 of the tigers, and they're large. I need to take just a break to get a little water.

3 SM: Let me go ahead and stop this CD because we're probably almost out. This
4 will end CD one of interview two. [Pause] This is Steve Maxner continuing the
5 interview with Mr. James O'Kelley on CD number two. All right, Mr. O'Kelley, would
6 you please continue with the discussion about wildlife in Vietnam?

7 JO: Okay, one of the other things that I thought might be of interest is the fact that
8 when we went out at night on patrols and stuff and even during the day we had a
9 tremendous amount of trouble with the insects and mosquitoes and things like that
10 especially, and of course we were taking all the different pills for malaria and all. We'll
11 talk about that in a minute, but right now what I want to mention is you see these pictures
12 of guys going out on patrols and all and they've got all this paint all over them, all this
13 combat paint, war paint, whatever you want to call it. We never had any of that stuff. I
14 don't know who had it or where it was, but what we used was we took carbon paper from
15 like in the old days - now these kids and people won't even know what this is probably,
16 and that's why it's good to mention - used to have typewriters, manual typewriters, and
17 you had carbon paper between the...so you can make copies of things. Well we'd take
18 that carbon paper and we'd take bug juice, and this old bug juice was insect repellent
19 from World War II again, and we'd take the bug juice and put it on our hands and we'd
20 take the carbon paper and we'd put the bug juice on and we'd take the carbon paper and
21 smear it all over our faces. So what that would do, that would darken out all our features
22 and that everything, and actually your skin at night kind of glows or has a glow to it
23 anyway from the oil so that would kind of reduce down the sheen from the light hitting it
24 and stuff like that and break up your facial features. So, we'd use the bug repellent and
25 that sometimes would help to keep the insects down, too. That would be the biggest
26 problem in an ambush; when you go out and sit for long periods of time the two things
27 that worry you the most are the bugs and the snakes when you're sitting there for long
28 periods of time and you can't move, you can't do anything, and of course your life is at
29 stake if you do, in some cases. The biggest problem you have is not smacking some bug
30 that was biting at you, so when you go back and you see these movies like Jack Webb
31 had a movie called "The DI" and in there there was sand fleas down at South Carolina at

1 our major base down there, training base for the troops, and one of the things they'd try
2 and get them to do is not hit the sand fleas. Well, there's a reason behind that but you
3 never know it in basic training. But, when you get into an ambush environment if you
4 smack one of those things the smack could be heard for miles. The other thing was with
5 malaria being so prevalent over there and all, we were taking the little, white pills that the
6 Army had and the big, orange pills that the Navy had and of course you take those once a
7 week I think is what they had us taking and they would just make most guys sick; you
8 could end up with diarrhea and sometimes nausea and fever, but the guys still got
9 malaria. I got it, and most of my guys got it, and so they come back with the cold chills,
10 the fevers, the shakes, the whole nine yards. I had one guy die from malaria up on the
11 DMZ when we were taking both of those things and I know he was taking the stuff. He
12 was a kid from Georgia and he got his fever started going up and he was shaking and
13 throwing up and everything and we got him to the battalion aid station and we were
14 socked in with the fog. It was in the rainy season and this had to be January of '68 or
15 something like that. Emergency Medevac, a Huey helicopter Medevac with the Red
16 Cross on it came down Route 9 and that was a dangerous road because the mountains just
17 come right down to it, got almost on the deck of the road, came right down the road, and
18 came in and got him, and on the way back out he died. But the heroism of that Marine
19 Corps helicopter pilot coming in there to get him is just unbelievable, and then to go back
20 out. The ceiling couldn't have been more than 30 or 40 feet and they were for sure taking
21 their lives in their hands going down that road anyway but not just from the terrain but
22 also from the VC and everybody shooting at them – well not VC, but in that case it was
23 NVA. So anyway, the malaria was really a scary thing and the insects were terrible. The
24 other thing was you have tents and when we were in tents early on you have flaps where
25 you can roll them up in the mornings and during the day to try to get air in there, and at
26 night when you unroll those things you've got to be real careful because there are either
27 lizards or snakes in the dad-gum flaps. It's because they get in between the flaps of the
28 thing because I guess it was cooler or something and you open those things up and you
29 never knew what was going to be rolling out. We did sleep on cots in the rear areas and
30 on the cots we had what they called rubber ladies which were like these little blow up air
31 mattresses and then you had stakes for the cots that you put on the side of the cots and

1 you build this little frame and you put this mosquito net over it and we slept under those
2 things for the first six months I was there when I was back in the rear area. Of course out
3 in the field you don't do any of that. But they did have - one thing that I remember that
4 was very helpful - inside our old pots, steel helmets, there was a cover that went over
5 them that was a World War II cover with the old kind of camouflage. But, it had a
6 mosquito net on it so you put this camouflage cover over your helmet and you had this
7 mosquito net that would fit around your head and all because I guess out in those Pacific
8 Islands they had the same problems we had, and that was fantastic. A lot of times when
9 we'd go on patrols at night we'd just take our soft cover which is just a baseball cap kind
10 of thing and we'd take that with us and we'd put that over us like on ambushes and stuff.
11 The only problem was that your vision was somewhat impaired because you couldn't see
12 very well through the netting sometimes. But boy, when you're trying to keep the
13 varmints off of you, that was good.

14 SM: Another question about the mosquitoes and the use of the carbon paper and
15 bug juice, as you put it, was there any concern about...you mentioned earlier a guy that
16 would shave and use after shave and deodorant I guess and other things, and you can't use
17 that stuff before you go out on patrol? What about the smell of that bug juice, any
18 concern over that?

19 JO: Well, we figured it was worth the risk in that case. There wasn't much smell
20 to it. It tended to be pretty neutral, at least as far as we could tell. I think the biggest
21 problem with the smell issue was the fact that we were meat eaters and when you sweat
22 the water buffalo could smell that and they would charge us a lot. They didn't...most of
23 the Vietnamese were fish eaters and vegetables and I don't think they ate that much beef
24 ever, but we tended to eat meat so I was told more than once that was the reason we were
25 having trouble. We had buffaloes charge us on several occasions.

26 SM: Anybody get hurt because of that?

27 JO: We killed a sucker, but in killing the thing then we ended up having to pay
28 \$500 for it.

29 SM: So they would charge you anytime during the day?

30 JO: Sometimes, yeah. They didn't like Americans.

1 SM: What about...but did it ever happen that the buffalo got to the person before
2 he was put down?

3 JO: No, not to my knowledge. Well, it might have, but not to my knowledge, not
4 in my experience. I don't remember but about one or two being killed. The kids tended
5 to take care of the buffalo, and most of the time unless we surprised them or they didn't
6 see us, they would grab the buffalo by the ring of its nose and control it. So a little bitty
7 fourth or fifth grader could control this 2,000-pound animal by just twisting the nose ring.

8 SM: And let's see, can you talk about some of the engagements that you did
9 experience when you went out on night patrols, ambushes that you set up where you
10 actually were able to catch some Viet Cong?

11 JO: Our results, see, we weren't infantry so a lot of times we would be out there
12 in these patrols and we'd spring ambushes or something and then we wouldn't find any
13 results afterwards, and I'm not sure why in a lot of cases. We had some contacts. We
14 had a few where we killed a few people. Primarily, the one that I remember the most,
15 though, was one night we were in an ambush and I heard...just before we were ready to
16 spring ready for ambush because we could hear this movement of people through the
17 woods, I heard some giggling noise and I called cease fire and I called for a loom and it
18 was about 25 kids from a local village who somehow the people had taken them out into
19 town miles away and they were walking back to go see some kind of a movie or
20 something. I never did get all that kind of straightened out who the hell they were or why
21 they were out there, but they were all going back in these villages back in the woods and
22 we had an ambush set up back in there because we had heard there was some VC going
23 to be in the area. I can just imagine how close that came to being a Calley kind of
24 situation, because if I'd have waited ten seconds more the guys would have opened up on
25 them with machine guns and everything else and killed them all. So, that just scared the
26 fool out of me when I heard that or saw that and was involved in it, and I had to call back
27 and get six bi-trucks and we loaded these kids. We got back to a road, loaded them up,
28 took them back to the camp, and kept them there overnight because there were other
29 ambushes set up out in the area with 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, and other people, so they
30 were going to walk into something.

1 SM: Now just out of curiosity, how much thought was given to the possibility
2 that you guys were set up to do just that by perhaps a Viet Cong informant who wanted to
3 depict Americans as killing kids in Vietnam?

4 JO: It could have very easily happened that way, very easily happened that way.
5 More than once there was situations where things like that could have happened. One
6 incident that stands out in my mind, especially where that might have been a set up, was
7 in this one particular fishing village that we'd drive through on a regular basis. I think it
8 was the 5th Marines were going through there and they were all in these trucks and they
9 were in what we call tactical where you're facing outboard all around the truck and
10 they're driving through this village and this young girl runs out of a hut between two
11 trucks and there was a pretty good distance between trucks so that if you got hit, one
12 truck got hit, it didn't blow the other one up and she threw a grenade in the back of the
13 truck. Well, the guys opened up and killed her, of course, and it was a dud grenade.
14 Now what's happened there, now, you've killed a teenage girl in a village you've got to
15 go through on a regular basis. The grenade was a dud, but that didn't matter. The fact
16 that she ran out into the road and tossed it into a truck full of troops doesn't matter,
17 because now we're "baby killers" again. So, you can't win in that situation, and to me
18 there's an example of what could have been a set up or she could have been given a dud
19 grenade by the VC.

20 SM: And she could have been threatened if she didn't throw it, something would
21 happen to her family.

22 JO: That's right, yes, so you've got those kinds of situations. One time on a mine
23 sweep I can remember going down the road and running into...seeing this mass laying
24 out in the road and when we got up there it was a momason, an old lady, and a water
25 buffalo, and a little boy, and they were planting a mine in the road and it blew up on them
26 and killed them. So, you never knew who to trust and who not to trust. It was a 360-
27 degree perimeter defense and it was to be alert all the time. There was no rear area you
28 really relax in around where we were, and I don't know...a lot of these pictures of these
29 soldiers back in these very remote, rear areas down south and all, not even carrying
30 weapons and all, I didn't see that. The only place like that was maybe Danang, but even

1 then you had terrorist guys come in there and dropping stuff in on people that were sitting
2 in a café. [Coughs] Excuse me.

3 SM: Now were there any incidents, or what happened when you guys started
4 going back through that village where that young girl was killed?

5 JO: We got sniper fire every time we went through there.

6 SM: Really?

7 JO: Yeah, they'd shoot at us. I remember rounds...I was with the major and
8 myself. I was in the backseat, and then my driver, and then the major who was the S3
9 and I was in the backseat of the jeep and a round came between us; same village. Then
10 there would be places along the road where we would receive sniper fire on a regular
11 basis and we were convinced that some of the guys worked in the PX down at Chu Lai
12 and on their days off they'd come up and snipe at us. So on one hand they're real
13 friendly to you in the PX and working with you, and on the other hand...and they're
14 being paid to work, and the next thing you turn around and they're firing at you. So, it
15 was crazy.

16 SM: Real quick question; you mentioned earlier losing that gentleman to malaria.
17 Any other diseases cause casualties while you were in Vietnam?

18 JO: Trench foot. We had a lot of problem up on the DMZ with the trench foot
19 during the rainy season. Guys had to get in the habit of taking their boots off and airing
20 their feet out, and they wouldn't do that; they'd keep the same wet socks and wet shoes
21 on and in three or four days they'd get real spongy and you couldn't walk. Now Master
22 Sergeant LaDuke who was my master sergeant, he landed...I'm having trouble talking
23 again, let me just get a little bit of water.

24 SM: Yeah, that's fine.

25 JO: Just one second. [Pause] Sorry, Steve, my voice is kind of going on me a
26 little bit here.

27 SM: That's okay.

28 JO: I was going to tell you about Master Sergeant LaDuke, he was my company
29 construction chief. He'd landed at Guadal Canal with a 1st Raider Battalion in 1942, had
30 gone through specific campaigns, and then had gone through Korea. When I had this
31 problem with trench foot, and that's where I relieve a lieutenant and send him to the rear,

1 Duke said, "Now Skipper," he said, "Let me tell you something you can do." At that
2 time he probably...let's see, if he'd have been 18 or 19 in '42, that makes him...so he'd
3 have been, what, 42, 43, 44 somewhere around there. So, he was a mature individual and
4 here I'm a young 20 something, half his age, probably. He said, "When I first tell you
5 this, you're not going to believe it, but," he says, "I want you to try it and see." He said
6 what they learned in the jungles when they had trench foot and athlete's foot and all this
7 stuff they have as foot diseases, what they'd do is take the guys out and have them stand
8 in the woods in the mud right next to a stream, and everybody had to take their boots off
9 and they made them piss on their feet and the uric acid would actually clear up the feet.
10 They'd piss on their feet and they'd stand there a couple minutes and then they'd wash
11 their feet off and they'd go dry them out. He said, "I promise you, if you do this for a
12 couple of days, we won't have those problems." It worked; absolutely worked. To this
13 day, nobody knows this, but to this day when I go in and take a shower, once or twice a
14 week I'll go in and piss on my feet, let it set on my feet for a few minutes, and then I'll
15 wash it off and I have never had any problems with any kind of athlete's foot or anything
16 and I work out in the gym everyday and everything, and my dad had athlete's foot so bad
17 that his toenails were coming off, eaten off. I got him to do that and it cleared it up. I'm
18 not kidding, it's like a miracle. But you know, over in India and places like that they use
19 uric acid for all sorts of things, and urea and all that stuff. What is it? So your
20 body...you know you talk sometimes, and people say your body has the chemicals in it to
21 fight off most anything; well, there's a good example of it from my point of view.

22 SM: What I understand is there's a very similar technique to deal with spitting
23 cobra venom in the eyes.

24 JO: What? Put...

25 SM: They use it in India and other places.

26 JO: Oh, they do put...

27 SM: They basically have someone urinate in their eyes.

28 JO: To get it out of there.

29 SM: Yep. Well, that's pretty interesting. Well what about other communicable
30 diseases or things like cholera or dysentery?

1 JO: We had a lot of dysentery. I was in the hospital a couple of times with...let's
2 see, what was the term they used, non-specific gastroenteritis or some kind of crazy term
3 which means they don't know what the hell it is, but you're shitting like a goose - pardon
4 the expression - but its just amazing because there would be blood in your stools and
5 everything and a lot of that was from going through all that water and the rice paddies
6 and the jungles and all that kind of stuff and getting those leeches on you and everything
7 else. I know I've got scars on my body where the leeches attached to me, and you'll
8 never lose those places, I guess. A couple of times I was in the hospital with extremely
9 high fevers. Once they Medevaced me out to the Repose because there was a lot of blood
10 in my stools and stuff like that and I couldn't...I had severe intestinal cramping and all
11 that. There were a lot of guys with those kinds of problems, as well. It seemed like we
12 were trying to adapt to heat, humidity, all the other stuff we've talked about, plus the
13 disease problems. Then, they were giving us all these shots. One I had, I remember
14 taking a thing called the black plague shot, and that damn thing knocked me unconscious
15 the first time I took it so when I had to get a booster shot I had to have a doctor sit right
16 there right when they gave me the shot, I guess to watch me die or something, but he was
17 right there with whatever it was they were going to shoot into me to bring me back or
18 something.

19 SM: This was a bubonic plague shot?

20 JO: Yeah, I think that was what it was called; black plague, bubonic plague,
21 yeah. We called it the plague shot I think. We took that. Cholera, I don't remember any
22 cholera problems but God, there had to have been problems because we were drinking
23 rice paddy water sometimes. Thank God I never had to drink it, but a lot of the guys up
24 in some of the areas on patrols and all; they couldn't get water so they ended up taking
25 this stuff and putting halizon tablets in it and trying to purify it. Water was also
26 dangerous because if you're out on an operation and you need water and you go down to
27 the stream, you send some guys down to the stream, well they can ambush you there real
28 easy and more than once I've read stories about guys being ambushed trying to go down
29 to get water. I was trying to think of the other diseases. They had us set up for polio, we
30 took polio shots. We had so many shots it was just unbelievable when we got over there.
31 They were giving us those gamaglobin shots which later we found out doesn't do any

1 good. I think they're talking now, I read an article in the DAV magazine – Disabled
2 American Veterans Magazine – where they're talking about they're finding that most of
3 the Vietnam veterans came back with hepatitis C and they didn't even know it because of
4 the blood transfusions and all, and another thing was - boy, I'm losing my voice bad – the
5 needles that they would give us, these air guns. When they would give us a shot they
6 wouldn't wipe them off so if you had some guy that had some kind of problem and the
7 gun hits it and it has a little bit of blood on it, the next guy gets it. So, there was that kind
8 of stuff and I guess some of the sanitary conditions weren't that great. We tried to make
9 it as sanitary as we could but there was a lot of times it wasn't.

10 SM: Do you need to take another break to get something to drink?

11 JO: I've got some water right here, I'm just starting to lose it real bad, I'm not
12 sure why.

13 SM: Well speaking of sanitation, from an engineering standpoint, in particular
14 your training as a civil engineer, what did you think about the shit burning?

15 JO: I thought it was terrible.

16 SM: As an engineer, I'm sure you must have been thinking of other ways to get
17 rid of this waste other than burning it.

18 JO: Yeah, that was the most...of all the ways to do it, it seemed like you were
19 just putting junk in the air. I built septic tanks. I started trying to get them to build septic
20 tanks so when we put this Dickey Chapel memorial in for her up at Chu Lai it was like a
21 dispensary and a church, I built a big septic tank to put in there. But then I'm not sure
22 that the Vietnamese knew how to use one of those things.

23 SM: But for the units at the base camps, was it technically or tactically feasible to
24 use that type of a waste system, the septic tank versus the burners?

25 JO: It probably wasn't. Nobody would do it. They didn't want to fool with it.

26 SM: It seems like it would have been...that you would have had an up front investment
27 of time and energy in building the septic tank and it would have been time and money
28 well spent because you don't have the signature of smoke columns going up everyday.

29 JO: That's right, so you know exactly where everybody is and everything else. I
30 don't know why people didn't become more conscious of that and deal with it but they
31 didn't, and of course what we were doing was we were trying to get clean water. We

1 were trying to do all the other operational things and the other 10,000 things and that just
2 didn't get high on the priority list, probably.

3 SM: Could you describe some of the issues and problems that emerged during
4 your daytime activities; building roads? You mentioned that you worked on Highway 1.

5 JO: Yes.

6 SM: In actually constructing the highway, or just in repairing it?

7 JO: Well, most of the time it was repair work. We would blow up culverts. We
8 would have floods which would mess it up pretty good. We would have accidents and
9 people would tear up the highway. We would have to...I did one diversion of a road
10 around an area so I could extend the airfield out. During the daytime there was very little
11 VC activity except for occasional sniper fire most of the time. Those guys tended to own
12 the night and they didn't particularly...and I think – looking back on this – I think maybe
13 they weren't as worried about us engineers as they were the infantry because usually we
14 were repairing things and whatever we repaired they used as well as we did. So if we
15 were repairing a road or something, they'd maybe blown it to keep the infantry from
16 getting through but after we repaired it back, they're using it, too. So there was a real
17 catch 22 on some of that stuff. I don't remember a whole lot of problems. We had a few
18 guys get dinged during the day, but not badly. Most of the time you just hit mines and
19 booby traps, occasional snipers. Now my relief took a round through the chest, the
20 captain who relieved me. He got ambushed coming back down from a mine sweep. But,
21 it was an area I told him about and he wasn't wearing his flak jacket correctly and to this
22 day when I see him or talk to him I say, "Butch, you crazy idiot, I told you what to do! I
23 told you Tuesday afternoons at 5 o'clock," or whatever day it was, "this guy's going to
24 fire at us and there you were." So, he knew better.

25 SM: Did he survive?

26 JO: Yes.

27 SM: What kind of round went into him, do you know?

28 JO: No, I don't; probably a .30 caliber round. I never have asked him that much,
29 I just kind of kid around with him a bit.

30 SM: Has it had a serious long-term impact on him?

1 JO: You know, I don't think so. I think it messed up his lungs and stuff a little
2 bit, but I saw him at the reunion. His name Butch Rizzo, R-I-Z-Z-O. I didn't talk with
3 him as much as I probably should have.

4 SM: The bridge building activities that you assisted with and gauged in; what
5 was the most difficult thing about building bridges in Vietnam, both from an engineering
6 standpoint and from a tactical standpoint?

7 JO: Of course the tactical point would be providing security and the second part
8 would be having to provide security to protect the bridge. Once you built it, that's one
9 thing – building its one thing – but keeping it up is the second part. The other part would
10 be the fact that when you got this thing, we would have trouble getting materials. So,
11 we'd have to order stuff from Japan, Okinawa. It would take a long time; it would come
12 over by ship. The other problem was having the heavy equipment available to drive the
13 piles, having the cranes available to lift the I-beams, having the technical training for the
14 troops who normally didn't get that kind of training and we'd have to train them in the
15 field on reinforced concrete design, steel beam construction, all that kind of stuff. A lot
16 of that had to be done right there in the field, and that's not stuff that was actually taught
17 normally at engineer school. But, we did well, and most of the senior staff NCOs and
18 some of us junior officers knew enough about it where we could get it done. I've got the
19 blue prints I'll give you for the seven bridges north of Chu Lai.

20 SM: Oh great! Now what would you use to cut heavy steel and stuff like that?

21 JO: Torches.

22 SM: Okay, acetylene?

23 JO: Yes.

24 SM: Okay.

25 JO: Most of the time we didn't have to do much cutting. We had to do some
26 welding, but that service company crew, they were really good and they had their own
27 welding systems and all and if we were like doing...when you put the I-beams in side by
28 side you would put beams in to connect and to hold them which are called spreader
29 beams to keep it spread apart. All that would be done by bolts and by welding.

30 SM: Typically what type of welding would they do?

31 JO: Why? I don't even know.

1 SM: Tig welding, stick welding?

2 JO: You know, I can't remember. I just let them do it.

3 SM: Did they have the arc welding?

4 JO: Yeah, they did. It was arc welding, that's what it was. I'm not a welder and
5 I don't even remember that much. I would design the bolts and I would design the wells
6 and I would tell them what I want done and they would weld it and put the bolts in.

7 SM: Now when you designed bridges, did you design them with military use in
8 mind, in particular especially when you're looking at the kinds of stresses that the bridges
9 would be under and the weights and things like that, possible tanks going over them and
10 things like that?

11 JO: Yes.

12 SM: So they were over engineered for Vietnam?

13 JO: Absolutely, they were like four to one what they should have been.

14 SM: I bet some of those bridges are still intact.

15 JO: I hope so. There's no reason for them to be down unless they blew them up.
16 Now they did blow some of them up when I left; that's what I heard, but I never knew for
17 sure.

18 SM: And did you mark them, the bridges that you built? Do they have some kind
19 of a plaque or some kind of a stamp that you guys put on them to identify them as a 9th
20 Engineer Battalion bridge?

21 JO: I don't think so. I didn't do it. The guys in some of the companies might
22 have, but I don't remember seeing that, though.

23 SM: It just wasn't practice?

24 JO: Yeah, we didn't do that kind of stuff.

25 SM: What kind of feedback...you mentioned that it was a catch 22 for the VC
26 because they were using this stuff just as much as you guys are, the bridges and the roads,
27 and the other part of the negative side of the catch 22 for them is its also winning the
28 hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people; Americans building infrastructure that is then
29 useable by the civilians and that creates a degree of goodwill.

30 JO: Absolutely.

31 SM: Did you guys experience much of that in interacting with the Vietnamese?

1 JO: Oh yeah, they really liked us doing that, and young kids would come up on
2 bicycles trying to sell our guys cokes and Popsicle's and talking with them and then the
3 young girls would come up and the guys would bring their dirty clothes up and they'd
4 take them down and wash them and of course they'd take them to wash their clothes and
5 all, and then they'd bring up little things to sell and the guys would talk to everybody. Of
6 course being in the Marines, these young girls would come up there and there were other
7 things they wanted to do, too, so I was constantly trying to keep that from being a
8 problem.

9 SM: What was the official policy regarding that type of activity for your unit?

10 JO: Nothing; you were not supposed to do that. You were not supposed to "mix
11 with the natives" so to speak.

12 SM: What was the unofficial policy of your unit?

13 JO: Well, I don't think there was any...I think things happen sometimes, and I
14 would...one of the things that kind of slowed down that kind of stuff was some of the VC
15 got some girls and they had these brass ring things that they put in their vaginas and they
16 put razor blades right across the middle of the brass ring. Some of our guys went in there
17 and entered these girls and cut their penises in half and bled to death.

18 SM: Did that really happen?

19 JO: That's what they said.

20 SM: Now who said?

21 JO: We'd get messages down like that, lessons learned and stuff. Now whether
22 that was propaganda, whether it ever happened, I don't know, but it sure got some guy's
23 attentions, I know that; I don't know for how long.

24 SM: That's pretty wild!

25 JO: But you know, these kids at that age are like animals anyway sometimes.
26 The sex drive takes over. Hell, we'd have them sometimes going...I'd catch them...I
27 could be coming back off of patrol at four in the morning and hear some giggling in the
28 village and go up there and catch some Marines in a damn village with some girls. So I'd
29 grab those suckers and treat them just like prisoners and take them back. I caught a
30 couple of master sergeants one night doing that; that was fun.

31 SM: How did that go over?

1 JO: I just took them back and turned them over to the colonel and let him take
2 care of it.

3 SM: Do you know what he did?

4 JO: No. I didn't want to know, it was one of those kind of things. I think what
5 he did was he reduced them both one rank and confined them to the camp area, but hell,
6 that didn't do any good because the guys...then they're safe. The thing to do is put them
7 on the point and make them work harder, but we didn't quite think that way. But there
8 was some issues like that that I'm sure the more you're in the rear, the worse it was. But,
9 we weren't in the rear like some of these Army guys. They had actual prostitution rings
10 and drug rings and I never saw that kind of stuff because we were out active every day
11 working our buns off. I don't remember a lot of that now. This book on the 9th Engineer
12 Battalion, '69, '70, '71 I think there was some of that kind of stuff going on from the
13 looks of the stuff in the book. But in '66, '67, '68, we were working our tails off night
14 and day and most guys were too busy to do that kind of stuff. The most they did, they
15 weren't allowed but one or two beers...I think we were allowed two beers a night or
16 something in the rear area or if we were out in the field sometimes if we were really
17 lucky a helicopter would bring in a pallet of beer but it would be warm beer. But, the
18 guys would drink one or two. In that kind of sun and all you couldn't take more than that.
19 Of course they were working so hard they'd sweat it right out anyway. But, that was
20 always a treat; it didn't happen very often.

21 SM: What about the use of marijuana?

22 JO: I never saw that. I don't think...I bet there wasn't two or three incidences
23 that I know of in the three years I was over there. But that was unique because that was
24 with the Marines up north. Now I read a lot of stories about that kind of stuff and I don't
25 know how much of it is BS and how much is true. It just seems that there must have
26 been a lot of it going on, especially after '68. But prior to that, I swear I didn't see that
27 kind of stuff and maybe I'm naïve but there didn't seem to be much of it because my
28 guys, we were working our tails off. We worked some long, hard hours and then when
29 we weren't working we were on patrols. When I wasn't working I ordered a bunch of
30 courses from the Army Engineer School and I was taking correspondence courses on how
31 to build drainage systems and airfields and roads and everything. It was the Army

1 Engineer Construction Officer Advanced Course and I took that by correspondence every
2 chance I got. My theory over there was that I wasn't going to be wasting time. I was
3 preparing for the future. But also, I needed those skills so everything I could learn was
4 helpful, and I've got those courses still. I'll give those to you, too.

5 SM: Excellent!

6 JO: The other thing that I made appeals to on several occasions was that when the
7 guys aren't working and we're not on stuff they'll read anything because it was just like a
8 captive audience. Well, special services, those guys would always send over these trashy
9 books to read, shit kickers we called them, I guess they were western novels and stuff like
10 that, and I sent a note back to my mother and to the people at our church and said, "Look,
11 we've got a captive audience over here. Send us some good material to read like novels,
12 things like that because they'll read anything," and sure enough they send me about a
13 couple hundred books that were really good books, you know; novels that you'd read in
14 high school English and stuff like that. These guys just picked them up and they were
15 reading the stuff, and the neat part was they'd come back and talk to me about them and
16 of course I'd graduated from college so I was able to work with them on it. So that
17 worked out pretty good.

18 SM: And did you find that the involvement in reading like that spanned the ranks,
19 from private to master sergeant?

20 JO: Yeah, everybody was reading. Sometimes, in the rainy season when you
21 couldn't work out in the road or something or if you had a situation where you had a
22 major attack going in an area and they wouldn't allow us into areas or something, we
23 couldn't get out to any of those areas or whatever, we'd hunker down. What do you do?
24 Its hours and hours of boredom interrupted by moments of stark terror kind of theory.
25 I'm going to have to stop for a little bit I think, Steve. I'm losing my voice.

26 SM: All right, let's go ahead and stop. This'll end interview number two with
27 James O'Kelley. Thank you.

28 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. James O'Kelley. It
29 is the 15th of December, year 2000 at approximately 9:15 central standard time. I am in
30 Lubbock, Texas and Mr. O'Kelley is in Vienna, Virginia. Is that correct?

31 JO: That's correct, yes.

1 SM: Would you please begin, sir, by continuing our discussion about what kinds
2 of recreational activities were available for you and the other Marines you served with?
3 You mentioned before that you'd read a lot, but what about USO shows and other
4 services?

5 JO: I think that the Marines, from my perspective, didn't see much of USO
6 shows and things like that. I can only remember a few times when we saw any kind of
7 entertainers because most of the time with the exception of Da Nang and maybe the
8 interior part of Chu Lai, we were on the outskirts of Chu Lai, there was not an
9 opportunity for people to come out there and it was pretty dangerous. So, very seldom
10 did you get anybody out to entertain us. What we had, they built these little what they
11 called clubs, one for the enlisted, one for the staff NCOs, and one for the officers, and
12 more or less you just go in there and drank at the bar kind of routine and that was about
13 it. I remember one time Martha Rae came to our battalion. She came to Chu Lai and she
14 came out and she was really cool because she had been an Army nurse I believe and all
15 and she had come around to the hospital to visit people and stuff like that and my
16 understanding was one time when she was there at the hospital a lot of wounded came in
17 and she actually put on a uniform and dug in with the rest of them and helped out. So
18 that was very interesting and she was a very interesting lady to talk to and all. She came
19 with a small group of Marines and literally came out into our camp, which was amazing.
20 One other time I think I can remember I think they had some Korean musicians that were
21 down at the Korean camp and came up and played at the enlisted club and stuff like that.
22 Most of the time it was reading, it was professional training. Sometimes we finally put
23 up a basketball court, we played a little basketball. I, for recreation, have always lifted
24 weights so I made a little bench and got some concrete, poured it, put it on the bar and
25 made a little barbell so I'd lift weights and we'd have little competitions with that kind of
26 stuff. I think that was about it. The major recreation for most of us, sometimes we'd go
27 down to the beach but that was kind of scary because they had a lot of what they call sea
28 snakes in there, and they were extremely dangerous. If you get nailed by one of those,
29 you're dead, there's just no question. In fact, there was an Army nurse that was killed
30 down at that beach much later, I guess it was early '68 probably when they finally
31 brought the nurses and all down there to work with the hospitals and one nurse was out

1 swimming and she got bit by one of those snakes and I think it killed her if I remember
2 correctly. A lot of times what we looked forward to is you were allowed I think it was
3 one R&R trip, rest and recreation trip, every six months you were eligible for one.
4 Sometimes we were able to take it, sometimes we weren't. I was very lucky; I was able,
5 after the first six months, myself and another Marine, we went to Bangkok, Thailand. I
6 spent about four or five days there. Then about six months later I had an opportunity to
7 go to Hong Kong and then I reupped to stay in for another six months, went home, came
8 back, and about maybe December of '67, I'm not exactly sure, I think I went to Australia
9 for a week, so I was lucky enough to get three trips to see three different parts of the
10 world. That was good.

11 SM: What did you do in Bangkok?

12 JO: Pretty much we toured. It was like a lot of us, we'd get together and just like
13 kids. We went around and toured the city and went out, they had places they would take
14 us. The Army had this all organized, and they had places for you to stay and you brought
15 enough money for meals and stuff like that and we went around touring all the different
16 areas. I went up to see the jungles and to see the animals, cobras and all these different
17 kinds of animals and cock fights. Then we saw all the temples and we floated down that
18 river. I forget the name of the river now. It's kind of like tourism primarily, and at night
19 we'd go to the bars and the clubs and stuff like that. I got a hold of...I ate some shell
20 fish, some what they call soft shelled crabs one night and ended up with what they call
21 Bangkok Belly, it was food poisoning probably. I ended up in an American hospital
22 there for out of my five days or six days, I spent about three in the hospital so that was
23 kind of crazy. I was trying to eat the indigenous food and understand the culture a little
24 better, and that was crazy. So that tour was kind of messed up to begin with. A lot of
25 guys went out chasing women and doing all that stuff, but they'd warned us ahead of
26 time about all of the problems with diseases and stuff, so be careful. I did meet a
27 stewardess who flew for Lufthansa and we went out and had dinner a few times, and that
28 was about the extent of it. So, it was okay. It was no big deal. Most of the time it was
29 just a couple of us guys going around and sight seeing more than anything else.

30 SM: What about Hong Kong? Was it a similar experience?

1 JO: Yes, same kind of stuff. The difference there was when I went there I was a
2 little bit more mature. We went up to the Chinese communist border, the border with
3 China, and looked into there. You couldn't go in there, obviously. We toured around.
4 There was a lot of areas like Hong Kong had a lot of beautiful scenery and places to go
5 and things to do. We stayed at the Hilton there, and we ran into some British Marines
6 who were on board a British aircraft carrier, HMS something or another, but it was
7 anchored in the harbor there and so they invited us down and we went on board ship and
8 we were there with them for a couple of days and just partying and just generally looking
9 over things and going through the carrier and then went out on the town and looked
10 around and all that stuff. I think there we met some American girls and all. We partied
11 with them a lot, mostly just going out dancing at night and stuff. I was pretty good there,
12 I wasn't very sick. I think we made a trip down someplace where you went gambling, I
13 forget, it was like MACAV or something like that. A lot of guys went down there but
14 they weren't supposed to so I didn't do that one because I figured, "Well, I don't want to
15 take a chance at getting in trouble," but that was a big gambling area where a lot of guys,
16 I think the British Marines, were going down there. But, I decided not to go down there
17 because that was supposed to be off limits for us. That was kind of a scary place because
18 flying out of there, about a few months before we got in there, a C-130 full of Marines
19 coming on R&R were going back to Vietnam and a C-130 crashed off the end of the
20 runway and killed most of the guys. One of the guys in that crash was a friend of mine
21 from high school and so that was kind of stuck in my mind for some reason while I was
22 over there and it was kind of a little bit tough remembering that had happened. The
23 Australia tour must have been during my extension and I went down there with a flight
24 surgeon by the name of John Giddings and we went out to Bonsai Beach I believe it is
25 and places like that and then we went into the back country some and we went on all sorts
26 of tours and then we went to dances at night and partying and all that kind of stuff and
27 Giddings was crazy. He got drunked up pretty bad one night and about 10 o'clock at
28 night he was all mad and upset so he pushed the mattress of the bed out the window, and
29 so he got arrested for that, so I had to get him out of jail and get all that squared away.
30 He's a funny guy, but he just got a little too carried away with the program. It was just
31 really just trying to get release. A lot of times you just crash and burn, just sleep, just

1 tired, just exhausted, and get back and be able to take a hot shower and be able to rest
2 without somebody shooting at you or thinking you're going to get scorpions on you or
3 snakes coming up at you or any of that kind of stuff. It's just nice just to be back in kind
4 of a safe area. I remember also down in I think it was in Australia, in Sydney, what's that
5 basketball team from the US that's always on tour? The Globetrotters, the Harlem
6 Globetrotters were there. We saw them play and that was kind of cool. They were there
7 in the middle of downtown Sydney in the streets there kind of promoting the fact that
8 they were going to be playing basketball there that night someplace, so we were all
9 around that and looking at that and everything. I remember flying into Sydney and the
10 first thing John and I did, we went down to the hotel, we went down to the cafeteria or to
11 the place where they served dinner and all, we went right in there and ordered
12 champagne, steak, and eggs because we both figured we weren't going to make it back
13 home and we might as well enjoy it while we could, so we did.

14 SM: How important in terms of your ability to function in Vietnam were those
15 breaks?

16 JO: I think for the infantry they were a whole lot more important than they were
17 for us support troops because the chances of us in the support troops getting into combat
18 on a regular basis was not as great. We still had that pressure over us, the fact that you're
19 never safe anywhere you go, even in your own camps so to speak, but we didn't have the
20 intensity of the combat all the time where we'd be dealing with under constant pressure,
21 being shot at and that kind of stuff. Do you understand what I mean in kind of a little
22 different way?

23 SM: Oh yes sir.

24 JO: So I think for the infantry it was extremely important. In fact, I can remember
25 in Australia several of the fellows there who'd been up at Khe Sanh in the fall of '67
26 were on R&R before the big siege occurred, and you could tell when they first came they
27 would come in and they had this kind of red mud look to them because that laterite up
28 there was real red and it just got caked into all clothing and everything. In some cases, a
29 lot of those guys went AWOL in Sydney and so the military spent a lot of time, the
30 military police spent a lot of time trying to round these characters back up, and I can
31 understand that because you look at these guys and they come out of hell and then they're

1 sent right back into it, and it's just unbelievable. For those guys, it was especially
2 important. For us, I think it helped, and I looked at it more from a point of view of seeing
3 different cultures and seeing a different part of the world that I probably would never get
4 back to ever, and I look at it as kind of a learning experience. I look back now and I'm
5 really glad I did it because those are places I probably would never go back to; maybe
6 Australia, but certainly I have no desire to go back to the Far East and to Vietnam and to
7 Bangkok and those areas.

8 SM: Now when we had stopped, on our last interview, we had discussed a few
9 combat operations and then a few other activities that you engaged in, that is the bridge
10 building and things like that. Was there anything else in your first tour that you wanted
11 to discuss that we haven't covered yet?

12 JO: I didn't get that last part read. I've got about 45 pages into the transcript.
13 One of the things, the patrols that I had to take out every night were really significant to
14 me and I look back now and I think about it. From my first nine months there I was
15 taking out patrols I'd say three and four times a week, maybe more, I can't remember
16 exactly. But, that was very important to do from two points of view: One, you had to
17 work all day and then at night we'd be taken on patrols and they'd give us a break for a
18 couple of hours in the morning. We'd come back in at three or four in the morning and
19 then I wouldn't have to be at work until nine or ten so I could catch a little bit of sack
20 time usually, depending on what's going on tactically. But that was really a big deal
21 because I ended up being, as a young lieutenant, I ended up being the battalion security
22 officer, so doing that also responsibility was get out and keep our perimeters safe, and
23 that meant taking patrols out and searching out the areas and making sure the area was
24 safe, and one of the reasons you do that is because the Vietnamese, Viet Cong especially,
25 liked to mortar our positions, and a mortar being an indirect fire weapon, they'd stand off
26 at a good distance and fire rounds, lob them over trees, and stuff like that, and so unless
27 you were out there patrolling further out than your actual line of wire and your line of
28 defense, you were very susceptible of that indirect fire and of course to sniper fire as
29 well. But we took care of the sniper fire thing because people when they first came in
30 there built this large sand berm all the way around our 9th Engineer Battalion
31 encampment and the thing was huge, and the berm was about ten feet high so indirect fire

1 weapons going right into the camp wasn't that likely...I mean the direct fire, excuse me.
2 But, the indirect fire weapons still could get in there so that was one of the reasons we
3 had to get out there and patrol and link up with the other units around and things of that
4 nature, and also interdict any movement of Viet Cong and later North Vietnamese forces
5 in and around our area because we would get intelligence information that a platoon of
6 NVA would be moving through the area at such a place and so we'd take and set up an
7 ambush in areas like that or that would be a patrol, that would be an ambush patrol, and
8 then we'd go out on a combat patrol where we expected to contact them or we'd go out
9 on a reconnaissance patrol. Most of our patrols were just search and recon and look for
10 things, look around to see if anything's been disturbed and sometimes you would find if
11 you got used to an area enough where you could see things, you could see where there
12 were problems. Found a cave one day where they'd stashed a lot of stuff and we came
13 back and blew that up. We found positions where we were trying to set up a mortar one
14 night and we sprung and opened up on them and they ended up leaving and leaving a lot
15 of their weapons and stuff behind. Later on they came back into similar areas and
16 actually did mortar our positions back in '68 after I'd left. I don't know how
17 aggressively our guys were patrolling out there, and I assumed they were. Down around
18 that area a lot of places you'd go there was a lot of water, so going out on patrols meant
19 that you had to deal with leeches and snakes and wild animals and stuff like that, too
20 because you really were in jungle terrain. So, you had all that kind of stuff to deal with
21 as well as trying to make contact with enemy and trying to maintain the integrity of your
22 defensive perimeter and of your unit, too. Of course all those guys back at base camp
23 were depending on us to keep those guys from coming in on top of them as well, so there
24 was a lot of different reasons for doing this. The amazing part was I never had problems.
25 We never had to go out and order people to go out on these patrols. I had volunteers
26 standing by that wanted to do it. These kids were really...the word we used is gung-ho
27 but they were dedicated, they knew there were things that had to be done, and they
28 wanted to do them and they were good at them. So that part of it, those patrols became
29 very important. Also, it sounds funny, but almost like a morale builder because we'd
30 spent an awful lot of our time in the camps building things or out on the roads building
31 things. We wouldn't have any contact with the enemy or anything, and these kids were

1 trained to be Marines and all and they were trained to fight and all that. Well they didn't
2 get all that many chances sometimes on the road unless we got ambushed and stuff like
3 that we'll talk about later, but primarily these patrols gave them a chance to go out there
4 and make contact with the enemy and be a real Marine as opposed to being a Marine
5 engineer kind of thing, Marine infantry kind of thing. So they got a chance to practice
6 being that too, occasionally. A lot of those guys it was a real change of pace for them
7 and it was adventuresome and exciting and very dangerous and all that, but they enjoyed
8 that and they liked that opportunity. I guess enjoyed might not be the right word, I'm not
9 sure enjoyed is right, but it was something different for them and it was a change of pace
10 and it was exciting and they had a chance to feel like they were contributing to the effort
11 in a little different way. I can remember this one picture that stands out in my mind, I
12 guess a couple of things about patrols, when we'd go out, it would be at night of course.
13 We did some day patrols. Early on when I first started organizing and getting these
14 people going out on patrols, and I don't think they'd done much before I got there. I was
15 kind of a young, gung-ho, 2nd Lieutenant. So, I started taking these patrols out and we'd
16 have to coordinate with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines who was in front of us and we'd
17 have to coordinate with the 1st Field Artillery Group which was on our left flank and
18 we'd have to coordinate with the ARVN, which is the Army of the Republic of Vietnam
19 which was on our right flank, and so I had to do all this coordination and stuff and I'd
20 take the patrols out. I did several during the day first off when I first got there just to
21 kind of get familiar with the ground before we started going in at night because the
22 difference between daytime and nighttime, of course, you know, is just amazing. Where
23 you might be familiar with an area during the daytime, when you see it at night it's totally
24 different and when you're seeing it in a situation where you're under intense pressure
25 because of combat possibility, it's even more of a problem. What we found was that it
26 was really important if the guys were going out on patrol that right after, just as it became
27 dark, there's a couple of things they had to do; if they were going out on patrol, they
28 couldn't smoke for four to six hours before hand and they couldn't have any alcohol
29 because sometimes we'd have what they'd call a slop shoot and they could go over and
30 enlisted people could get beer and they were allowed two beers a night or something like
31 that when they had it. But, before they go out on a patrol there's no drinking, no

1 smoking, because it was really important for two things; one, to make sure they're
2 extremely alert, but also smoking tends to effect the visual peripheral in your eyes for
3 your night vision so that could cause a lot of problems. So it was really important to get
4 those guys acclimated and also to make sure they get set up properly. The other thing
5 you had to be really careful of when you go out on patrols and all is I didn't want guys
6 shaving because of two things; a lot of times their parents would send them over
7 Noxzema or some kind of shaving cream, and all that stuff had sugar in it and it also had
8 perfume in it. So, if you'd shave when you get out in the bush, two things happen; one,
9 mosquitoes see you as cake and ice cream time. They just nail you. Of course
10 mosquitoes carried malaria and everything else. The second thing that happened was the
11 animals, especially water buffalo and all, could smell you, and they not only could smell
12 your perfume, the scent from your aftershave or the shaving cream itself, but they could
13 also smell the fact that we were meat eaters, because when you're sweating and giving
14 off your body odor. So we had to really be careful of those two things. The other thing is
15 if you smoke and you've got smoke on your clothes, people can smell that, too. You'd be
16 amazed how far you can smell stuff like that. So if we're hiding in the bush and some
17 Vietnamese are walking down the trail and they smell either smoke or they smell after
18 shave lotion or shaving cream or stuff like that, they know you're in the area kind of
19 thing, especially if you're trying to be quiet and observe or whatever. So we had to make
20 sure that was taken care of. We also went out and after I had the patrol warning order
21 and I'd have the order and I'd tell them who's going to do what and how we're going to
22 do it and I'd line everything up, we had a little thing in the Marine Corps called smeac, S-
23 M-E-A-C, and that stood for situation, mission, execution, administration and logistics,
24 command, control, and communications, and that's how we put together what we called
25 the five paragraph orders and that's how we presented the information to the men on
26 who's going to do what, here's the enemy situation and the friendly situation – in other
27 words, the people surrounding us – here's the enemy and what we expect to happen and
28 intel reports and all that. Then we'd go through after that situation we'd go through the
29 mission. Our mission is to go out and usually missions were always put in a verbal way
30 to set up and ambush a particular group of Vietnamese there are supposed to be coming
31 through the area at such and such time. It wasn't really North Vietnamese early on, it

1 was usually Viet Cong and the Viet Cong had two groups, there were irregular force and
2 there were regular forces. The irregular forces ran around in the black pajamas and the
3 M-1s. The regular forces tended to be a little more organized, have some kind of
4 uniform, and they tended to have better weapons like the AK-47s. Early on it wasn't as
5 much North Vietnamese influence one on one against us. They were more up on the
6 north on the DMZ fighting against some operations up there, but that's when they were
7 really starting in '66 and '67. They really started infiltrating and coming south, coming
8 down the Ho Chi Minh trail and all. So we'd get these people ready to go and we'd give
9 the warning order. We'd set up the order of march for the whole entire platoon, I would
10 have an assistant platoon leader and we'd have com people, we'd have a corpsman with
11 us. We didn't normally wear helmets at night. I didn't like wearing helmets in the jungle
12 for a couple of reasons; one, at night, especially, they were very hot and very bulky and
13 they also gave off a very definite silhouette and one thing at night you want to do is break
14 that silhouette up. So what we'd do is we would wear soft covers or a lot of times we'd
15 take...inside our helmets we had a kind of a camouflage cover that we would pull out that
16 would pull down over the helmet and it also had netting on it to protect – it was a World
17 War II thing really – that would protect the head and face and neck from mosquitoes. So
18 a lot of times we'd carry that. If we were going to be there a long time we'd use that and
19 that would break up our outline. The other thing that was interesting was back in those
20 days we didn't have this camouflage paint. We had it, but you see all these guys with all
21 this green camouflage on them now?

22 SM: Yes, sir?

23 JO: We didn't use that. Number one, we couldn't get it, but what we did, we'd
24 take...they would issue us bug juice we called it, which was insect repellent, which was
25 useless. It didn't work that well, but it may have did some good. We'd take that and we'd
26 get carbon paper because back in those days we were still using typewriters. So we'd use
27 this black carbon paper and we'd take the bug juice and we'd rub it in our hands and
28 we'd take the black carbon paper and then we'd rub that all over our faces and all, and
29 that's how we'd darken ourselves so we wouldn't just be...it was funny, it's not that you
30 do it as much for the white color, but it's so you break down the shine that your face
31 gives off at night. It was always funny with the black Marines because they'd be putting

1 on this stuff, too, and I'd be like, "What in the world are you doing, Bailey?" and he'd
2 say, "Oh, I'm getting myself ready too, sir!" So we'd always be kidding around about
3 stuff like that but it was really important because you take that and it would cause
4 different kinds of shadow effects, too, on your face. So we'd put this stuff on. Another
5 thing that was critical when you'd go out in the jungles at night is sounds. You had to
6 make everything very quiet and the first thing that happened is you're wearing these
7 jungle utilities, these trousers, and these trousers would be kind of loose, the cotton
8 material, so when you're walking you could hear the movement between as the pants
9 rubbed against each other, and that would be a dead giveaway and you'd be amazed how
10 loud that is at night. So what we would do is we would take a tape, like not masking tape
11 but duct tape kind of stuff and we'd tie that and tie our pants real tight, wrap that around
12 our legs and then we would have to quieten all of our gear and that sometimes meant like
13 with the canteens, you would take the canteen cup out because it was metal and the metal
14 on metal would rattle and you would just put the canteen back in the canteen holder
15 without the cup in it. We would tighten everything down all over our bodies and we
16 would jump up and down and make sure that nothing was rattling or shaking or anything.
17 Then we would take our weapons and we would blacken the barrel of the weapon. This
18 was M-14 in those days, and we'd take the straps off and double check the metal part of
19 the strap and actually put tape around the strap. The other thing we found we had to do
20 was when we were going out in the jungle...could I take a break for just a minute and get
21 some water?

22 SM: Okay, sir, go ahead.

23 JO: One thing, also, I do have pictures to illustrate all these things I'm telling
24 you. I've got pictures some people took when we were actually getting ready to go out
25 on patrol and everything and it would be nice to put those in with this interview,
26 somehow.

27 SM: Yes, sir, absolutely.

28 JO: A lot of these things I'm talking about I've got some really good pictures of
29 them because I carried this little camera in my flak jacket pocket. I bought it over in
30 Okinawa. Every now and then when we had a break I'd just take a picture. I don't have
31 any pictures in actual combat for obvious reasons because I was too damn busy to be

1 taking pictures, but I have some stuff, and I never did take pictures of dead bodies. I
2 didn't think that was appropriate and I didn't want to remember it, to be honest with you.

3 SM: I can imagine. If you have those that you would like to...one of the things
4 that we can do in terms of integrating them into the interview transcript, when we put
5 them online, we can scan some of them in and you can help us place them in appropriate
6 places and stuff like that which would really make the online version of the interview
7 quite interesting.

8 JO: Yeah, and I think within that context, too, at some point what I want to do is
9 come down there with you and I want to give you guys those 1800 color slides, but I'd
10 like to do a narrative with you on each one of them.

11 SM: Oh excellent, yes sir.

12 JO: I have information to tie in with each one of them, and they're all color, but
13 we've got to do something pretty soon because I think some of them are starting to go
14 bad on me. But, I can figure out a way to come down there sometime and sit down with
15 you guys and actually put the narrative to each one of them. I did some of that when Ron
16 was up there at our reunion and some of the guys...the nice part to do it is to do it at the
17 reunion and have all the other guys remember what they remember about them, too,
18 because they remember stuff I had forgotten. So, it's really nice that way and it would be
19 very helpful to you guys for your archive I think, too. But this stuff, I hope this is
20 interesting about trying to get ready for patrols because this kind of stuff people just don't
21 think about. Another thing we had to do, when we first got over there the jungle fatigues
22 they give us, we call them utilities, they started off, they had just on their pockets they
23 would just have a regular pocket with a button on each side of the pocket to hold it in
24 place. Well, those buttons were exposed so if you're moving through the brush and you
25 get hooked on something you can get tangled up in the brush and in the jungle especially
26 that's bad. So they came along and they put flaps over the pockets and that really helps.
27 But, at the same time you see these pictures where you see these guys with grenades
28 hanging off of them and stuff like that. Well that looks good on film but you never, ever
29 do that in combat because if you're carrying those things along like that and you're going
30 through some heavy brush and stuff and you hit something and it snaps and pulls and
31 somehow the pin comes out, you've got a big problem on your hands. So what we would

1 do is we'd always tape the grenades and we'd put them in our pockets because we did
2 have one incident where some young Marine went through an area and a grenade fell off
3 and he wasn't sure whether the pin was pulled or not. So everybody's hauling ass to get
4 out of there to get away from the grenade, which creates a lot of noise and everybody
5 knows where you are. Of course luckily in that case the grenade didn't go off, but that
6 was a quick lesson learned in, "Thou shalt put tape on the grenades." Now we would use
7 masking tape in those days for that and then we'd put that black...we'd take the carbon
8 paper and kind of put it around it so you couldn't see a white piece of masking tape or
9 something like that, but that was enough to hold that spoon in place and then when you'd
10 put it in your pocket you were okay then. The grenades back then are not the ones that
11 you see where they look like a pineapple kind of thing. They were I think what you call
12 Mark 26 grenades. They were just kind of round like a baseball almost and I think they
13 did that to make it so you can throw them a little better, more like kids throwing a
14 baseball. But anyway, we'd tape those down, too. We didn't carry...you see pictures of
15 Army guys especially carrying flashlights. I don't remember ever but one or two of us
16 would carry flashlights and we'd only do that for an emergency situation. We'd carry a
17 poncho with us, and that way if something happened where we had to look at a map for
18 some reason we'd get under the poncho and then put that light down and shine it on
19 things real quick. But, the problem with it, if you do that then you mess up your night
20 vision and it takes about 20 minutes to get your vision back. So you never wanted to be
21 using a flashlight if you could help it, and back in those days we didn't have the ones with
22 the red lenses on them, which is what you really needed, but they didn't have those for
23 us. In fact, we didn't even have those real nice flashlights like you see these guys with
24 where it's like that 90-degree curve and that kind of thing. We never had any of that kind
25 of stuff. I don't even remember what we had but it wasn't anything like that, that's for
26 sure. Another thing you'd have to do before a patrol is you'd have to get your
27 communications squared away so we had these radios and we'd have a couple of radios.
28 Now over there the biggest problem with the radios were the ones we had were not that
29 good. They were called PRC. We called them PRC, and I forgot what that stood for but
30 it was an AN/PRC-10 was what we started with and they were big and heavy and tough
31 to carry around, big antenna on them and everything. Later we came up with the

1 AN/PRC-25. We called them Prick 10s and Prick 25s. The 25 was a better radio but we
2 didn't even get it until sometime in '67. When I first went in there I was using those old
3 handset kind of things, what we used to call walkie-talkie radios for our patrols and all
4 and that was really tough because I think they were World War II vintage at least, and
5 had been in Korea probably, too. The big problem over there with radios was batteries.
6 The moisture and the heat just tore batteries up, and especially in the rainy season you
7 could imagine what would happen with the batteries. So trying to carry spare batteries, a
8 radioman would have another man with him just carrying the spare batteries and stuff for
9 the radio. We'd try to carry two radios in case one of them crapped out on us, which
10 crapped out means went bad on us and stuff like that. The other thing you always did on
11 patrols and all, we always had check points and I'd have to put in a patrol order ahead of
12 time and I'd have to lay out on a map, I'd have to put out an overlay and that would be
13 where my patrols was going and I'd have checkpoints. Now checkpoints were important
14 because of two things. We always assumed the Viet Cong, whoever the enemy was, was
15 listening into our radio transmissions and had our frequency. So what we would do, we
16 would have checkpoints set up and you would never use the actual coordinates, like
17 bravo tango niner 17236 or something like that. You'd never use that. You'd have like,
18 "I'm at checkpoint Alpha 1," or, "I'm at checkpoint fox," or, "Checkpoint dog," those
19 kinds of things, but you would never use the actual coordinates because if you did that
20 and you assumed they knew where you were, then they could track where you're going
21 and what you're doing and they could ambush you, or they could drop some mortar
22 rounds on you or anything else. So it was always important to assume that they knew as
23 much as you did and try to find ways to try to follow what you were doing. The other
24 thing is trying to make sure that when the troops went out, they understood how
25 important it was to be quiet. First couple of times when guys go out sometimes they're
26 nervous and they'll cough and stuff like that. You learn right away you can't cough
27 because if you're out there in the middle of nowhere and it's dark and quiet and
28 everything, a cough can be heard for miles. Another thing is we wouldn't let them
29 smoke, either, and you see pictures of people smoking and all that. The really good
30 troops never did that because of two things; one, messed up their eyesight, and second,
31 smoking caused them to cough which caused more problems, thirdly you could smell it,

1 and then another reason for it is that at night you could see a lit cigarette for miles. So
2 there's a lot of reasons for those things. Now sometimes-actual troops would get picked
3 off when they were trying to smoke. If they were in a bunker and the Vietnamese are out
4 there with a sniper rifle, they find a cigarette and they can see the fire from that cigarette
5 and they would just, with the telescopic sight, they would nail the guy smoking. That
6 was something else we had to always be aware of. Let's see, I think we've talked about
7 the gear, clothing. Another interesting thing, we'd go into water a lot and out in the
8 jungles it's full of leeches and stuff. When they first came over with the utilities the
9 pants themselves had a button fly for the crotch. The problem was when you got in the
10 water and you're moving through you would get leeches on you and they would get on
11 your private parts and they were awful. These thing would be longer than your fingers
12 and that big around. Of course they sucked the blood out of you. So, that was a real
13 problem with the troops so they readapted the trousers and they put zippers in them, the
14 second round they sent by, and they put a flap over it, double flapped them, too. So that
15 helped some. But, you'd still like on your waist line and all you would find leeches
16 would still get on your in places like that and on your arms and on your face and hands
17 and everything. So that was really awful, and guys really hated those things. So we'd get
18 everything ready to go. The boots would have metal in the bottom of the boots. The
19 punji stakes were those stakes that they put in the ground that looked like large, huge, 60-
20 penny nails or something? Usually they would put buffalo dung on them and dry them
21 and then stick them in the ground and put them in say a two by two by two foot deep
22 hole, wide enough for an American where if you stepped on it as you're walking along
23 you'd fall in it and that would impale your foot on one of those things. So we learned
24 early on it was important to have those steel shanks in the boots. Let's see if there was
25 anything else I was thinking. In the legs, on the sides of the thighs we'd carry things like
26 flares. Flares are real important in combat. You had red ones and green ones. Usually
27 when a unit is coming back into the wire or friendly location they'd pop a green flare to
28 let them know we're coming in. If you're into a combat situation and you're getting hit
29 or something, sometimes you'd pop a red flare to let people know you're under attack or
30 whatever's going on. Sometimes in operations when you go out and you're going to have
31 an attack or something at night, you'd pop a red flare and it means to attack and things of

1 that nature. I carried a whistle with me as well. What we'd use that for sometimes, if we
2 were in an ambush or fight, and we opened fire, I'd blow the whistle real loud; that was
3 the theory, I never did do it. I was always so damn scared I couldn't get enough air
4 together to do that. Usually the way that we triggered our ambushes was I would fire and
5 then everybody else would fire as well, and that took some coordination of course as you
6 can imagine. The patrols also, the important thing for most of the guys to remember
7 when they got out there was to stay together. At night it's so different than during the
8 day. In the daytime you want to be spread out so that if a mortar shell drops in, it's got a
9 radius of say 25 meters for shrapnel to hit people. You want to be separated a good
10 distance so one round doesn't get everybody. At night though, because of the darkness
11 problem, you have to stay fairly close and bunched up so that creates a little different
12 tactical situation. So, you've got to be very, very careful and very, very quiet. Something
13 that you do at night that's a little different than during the day, although you do do it in
14 the day sometimes, is when you walk you walk heel-toe rather than the ball of your foot
15 back to your heel and when you put that heel down as you're moving across to touch the
16 ball of your foot down you touch it real carefully first to be sure you're not on a stick or
17 something, because sticks tend to break and cause problems as well. I don't know if my
18 voice is going to hang in here or not. So, there's a lot of maneuvering. The other thing at
19 night that you'd always do we learned is you never look directly at something. You look
20 at it from the side, and that helps your peripheral vision and also helps your vision
21 understand what you're doing. I'm sorry about the coughing business. I hope I don't
22 mess up the lady that's doing the transcribing.

23 SM: That's okay. It'll be fine.

24 JO: Is this helpful stuff?

25 SM: Yes, sir, absolutely. Let me go ahead and ask you a couple of questions.
26 Now you mentioned that during your first tour a lot of times you'd come into contact
27 with VC. You also mentioned that in the briefings you'd get word that there were NVA
28 units in the area. During your first tour, was there a lot of contact with NVA or was it
29 predominantly Viet Cong?

30 JO: Mostly Viet Cong. We knew that there were North Vietnamese moving
31 down the Ho Chi Minh Trail which was just a few clicks west of us and they would say

1 there are North Vietnamese units suspected to be out at such and such a point, which a
2 click was usually 1,000 meters and a click is usually...you'll hear people, especially
3 Marines talk about that, and infantrymen. A click is just one click on a mortar, or on an
4 artillery piece, and that just means every 1,000 meters. So, if you got out, if you found a
5 North Vietnamese unit was further out, we would kind of change the way we went out.
6 Sometimes there if we knew that there was a possibility that there was going to be
7 contact, we would wear helmets, for instance, where as normally we wouldn't wear
8 helmets because of the profile and all. When you get out there against those regular
9 units, they're using mortars on you and everything else and the helmet served a purpose.
10 Guys tended to cause the heat and all, not to button their flak jackets up, and that was a
11 big mistake because what would happen then shrapnel would hit them in the chest and
12 stuff like that, but that's how they were trying to keep cool because they were sweating
13 so much, so that was kind of a catch 22. The North Vietnamese, I think it was like I
14 came in there like August of '66. There wasn't even any mention of North Vietnamese
15 until spring of '67. They were starting to come in through the DMZ which is further
16 north of us, and they were tending to infiltrate down the Ho Chi Minh trail which was not
17 really one trail but a whole series of trails and that was to the west of us, and I went out
18 there one time and set up a position on a hill called 707 and Ho Chi Minh Trail went both
19 ways around the hill. But, they weren't actually as actively involved in fighting one on
20 one against us. They still left that up to the VC and those forces. By late '67 and '68,
21 especially after Tet, we'd pretty much wiped out the Viet Cong. That was a success of
22 Tet was that the Viet Cong came out of their holes and took us on one on one and we
23 cleaned their clocks. The bad side was the publicity that went with it wasn't consistent
24 with what happened because of the anti-war sentiment and all. But, at that time it was
25 just all North Vietnamese and I think from Tet of '68 on it was North Vietnamese all the
26 way to the end of the war.

27 SM: Now so you could definitely tell the difference when you went out and made
28 contact the difference between an NVA unit and a VC unit?

29 JO: Yes, yeah. The NVA units normally were dressed in their pith helmets and
30 they had distinctive kerchiefs, kind of like the Boy Scouts wear, with colors on them and
31 everything, red and blue ones and red and yellow ones and all sorts of stuff, and those

1 guys always had AK-47s and the latest weapons and all. When you go out against the
2 VC, they were usually in pajamas or something to that effect and usually they were in
3 what I called indigenous clothing, the clothing of the area. The North Vietnamese
4 usually had uniforms of some kind, some kind of khaki uniform and stuff, too, so that
5 was a difference. Also, the tactics were different. They'd take you on one on one and
6 come after you.

7 SM: Who?

8 JO: The North Vietnamese. The VC tended to do more ambushing and mines
9 and booby traps, stuff like that. They weren't as interested in taking us on one on one.

10 SM: What was the typical size of the patrol that you would take out; that is, your
11 unit?

12 JO: Well, when I would take out a patrol it would usually be squad size, which
13 would be about 15 or 16 people. There would usually be three fire teams of four men
14 each, and in each fire team there would be an automatic rifleman, an assistant automatic
15 rifleman, and then two riflemen, so that's 12. Then I would have two radio operators,
16 that's 14, a patrol leader and assistant patrol leader, that's 16, and a corpsman would be
17 17. So, somewhere between 15 to 20, depending on if I was taking out another lieutenant
18 to train him or taking out a staff sergeant to train, or I might have a few other people, or if
19 I knew...sometimes I'd taken out larger ones. Sometimes I had up to 40 men. If it was a
20 combat patrol then you were expecting contact. If it was a reconnaissance patrol, it
21 would be smaller because a reconnaissance patrol you're not supposed to contact people.
22 You're just supposed to look and listen. If it was an ambush situation what I'd usually
23 do, we would take out a different group of people. I would take out a patrol and it would,
24 say, have 20 people, maybe 25. At some point on that patrol, a group of four to six to
25 ten, depending on what size the ambush was set up to be, would actually drop off as we
26 were moving out and they would stay out there and set up an ambush and the rest of us
27 would continue on to finish up the patrol, and then those guys would come in the next
28 day. The reason you did that is because you never knew who was watching you and the
29 villagers, if you went through a village or anything else at night and it was all quiet,
30 who's actually looking out the door and checking on you and all? But we found if we
31 worked that way it was a better technique to drop people off and just keep moving. Then

1 if those guys, when you drop them off, they would never stay right where you drop them
2 off. They would try to move to another location. I've got to get more water here, all
3 right?

4 SM: Yes, sir. What was the typical size of the enemy units you'd make contact
5 with? That is, discuss the differences in size between VC versus NVA units.

6 JO: It was hard to tell what you were running into because the times when we
7 came into any kind of contact, you couldn't always tell...first of all, it was chaotic. Most
8 of the time it was at night, and most of the ways you could tell was by the blood trails and
9 the stuff left behind and muzzle flashes and all that. You never could be sure whether
10 you're fighting ten or whether those ten were trying to draw you in and there was another
11 50 waiting for you. So, you had to be real careful because the Vietnamese had a game
12 they played called Q I think it was, kind of like our checkers game but rather than moving
13 forward they were always moving back until they trapped you and they would trap you,
14 the idea was to entrap the other person and take all their checkers so to speak, something
15 like that. So that whole theory carried over to their way of fighting as well, knowing that
16 they were outnumbered usually and especially in terms of fire power. A lot of times what
17 they would do is they would have four or five guys open up on us and we'd kind of just
18 open up everything we had at these guys and then when they'd stop firing, our tendency
19 was to fire and maneuver to contact with them. Well, sometimes what they would do is
20 they would have a larger unit waiting on one of the flanks, and then they would ambush
21 you. So, we always had to be very careful of what we were doing and had to be aware of
22 the possibility that we were being drawn into a trap sometimes. I think American Indians
23 used that too, against those white guys especially out west. It was just you can be too
24 aggressive and get yourself wiped out just as much as by not being aggressive enough.
25 So, it was a tough situation to know how to do some of these things, especially at night
26 because, again, you don't know how many people are just lying awake for you. Usually
27 with the Viet Cong you're talking about snipers, you're talking about numbers under ten
28 probably. With the North Vietnamese they worked kind of like we did. They're smaller
29 size of like a squad maybe. You always saw them working in larger numbers so you're
30 talking greater than ten. That's about the best I can do on that. Luckily, we never ran

1 into real large numbers. I think I ran into a platoon-sized unit one time. For us to talk
2 platoon, we're talking about maybe 40 people.

3 SM: And you mentioned that in one of the patrols, you came across some cache
4 that was located in a cave. What was in that?

5 JO: It was weapons, and ammunition. They had some of our stuff. We found
6 grenades, American grenades. We found American weapons. At that time it would have
7 been M-14s and M-1s, stuff like that. They had SKS Russian rifles. I don't remember
8 seeing any AK-47s or anything like that, it was mostly weapons and ammunition.
9 Sometimes medical supplies would be in there with it, and a lot of times that's stuff
10 they'd stolen from the United States, too, and I think the way they got that is they didn't
11 steal it as much as our corpsmen would go out into the villages and hold what they called
12 Med CAPS, Medical Combined Action Platoon Activities, and they would go out and
13 treat all the people and give them medicines and everything, and they'd have a clinic.
14 We built a thing called the Dickey Chappell Memorial Clinic up north of Chu Lai, and
15 we put medical supplies in there and the Viet Cong would come in there and take it all.

16 SM: Well, was there anything else you wanted to discuss with regard to your first
17 tour?

18 JO: I think that was mostly it. I think that the trips back and forth to a lot of the
19 bridges that were blown and trying to replace those and putting in rafts, keeping up
20 Highway 1...oh, I did want to talk about going out onto Hill 707 with the 1st Recon
21 Battalion, the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. They airlifted us off the top of this big
22 mountain and it was kind of like a volcanic peak, and what we did was we just...they
23 dropped us over there and we blew the top off the mountain and squared it away and built
24 an emplacement and put a bunch of reconnaissance Marines up there with artillery
25 sighting devices and radios and stuff like that and it was kind of crazy because that was
26 right in the middle of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Trail went on both sides of it, and
27 the guys, when I got there, they had all these bunkers and I noticed they were really very
28 careful to carry their gas masks with them and all because apparently the Vietnamese, the
29 VC or North Vietnamese or somebody had hit them with gas several times, and I'm
30 talking about CS gas, the stuff like we use for crowd control and riot control devices, no
31 poisonous gas to my knowledge. But, they had gassed them with that other stuff and that

1 stuff is pretty tough on you so they were very aware of wearing that stuff. The interesting
2 part, also, a helicopter had been shot up, laying off over down the hill there a ways, and
3 we had to take water in to them, we had to take food in to them, we had to take
4 ammunition in to them, and then they had artillery out further east that would protect
5 them as well, plus air. Their job was to observe that trail and observe things moving up
6 and down it, especially at night. So, they had the night vision devices and stuff like that,
7 which were really primitive back in those days. I've got one at home now that's
8 generation three that you can see just like daylight. It's just amazing. Those things had a
9 green tint to them and it took you a while to get used to what you were looking at and
10 what you were seeing with them and how far you could see, as well. Then they would
11 launch patrols out from there down the mountain and they actually had these little
12 devices, they'd sit on the trails and count trucks and bicycles and stuff like that. So that
13 was sort of an interesting part of a tour to see all that, see how it worked. We came in,
14 we took some rounds coming into that position and leaving that position. So, the North
15 Vietnamese had 12.7 millimeter anti-aircraft weapons they'd fire at us, so I remember
16 flying in there and sitting in that CH-46 helicopter. They'd taken the windows out
17 because obviously they didn't want plastic or glass splattering if hit by a bullet. But, I
18 can remember guys with a .50 caliber machine gun firing back at these guys so that was
19 kind of exciting. Exciting is probably not the right word, but it was rather anxious
20 because you could sit there and that's like going into the hot LZ, hot landing zone, same
21 thing, and rounds coming up, and you've just got to sit there and try to hope that you get
22 on the ground. The guys a lot of times would take their flak jackets off and sit on them
23 because they were so afraid when you're flying through there you don't want a round
24 coming up and shooting you in the rear end, so to speak. The pilots had that same
25 problem; they put metal plates in there, they were so afraid of that. That was kind of an
26 interesting, different kind of tour being out there with those guys because they're out
27 there alone and they're in what we called Indian Country; they were by themselves, and if
28 something happens, if it hits the fan, they've got big problems and you just hope you can
29 get them out of there. So sometimes we'd lose a lot of people trying to extract a team in
30 places like that.

31 SM: How long did you spend with them, again?

1 JO: Just about two days, I didn't stay up there very long. I went up there to do
2 some engineering work for them, build some bunkers, clean off some area, clear it up, try
3 to set up some alliances, fight for them, and try to build some fortifications and put some
4 mines in for them.

5 SM: Where was that base located, do you recall?

6 JO: Yes, it was west of Chu Lai. It was Hill 707.

7 SM: Hill 707 west of Chu Lai?

8 JO: Yes.

9 SM: Now was Chu Lai in your general area of operations, the Chu Lai area?

10 JO: Yes, Chu Lai was Operation Starlight in '65, fall of '65. They went in there
11 and landed on what was called the Batangan Peninsula I think they called it, B-A-T-A-G-
12 A-A-N (actually spelled BATANGAN) or something like that. They landed on that
13 peninsula and they drove out most of the Viet Cong, some major fire fights. It used to be
14 real Indian country but they pacified that pretty fast and cleaned it up and then they came
15 in and they built an airfield. Chu Lai's really not a Vietnamese name, as I understand it.
16 I read somewhere that the general who was in command of FMF Pac, that was how the
17 Vietnamese pronounced his name, so that's how it came about. It was C-H-U L-A-I. I
18 know something else and some spellings and I'll check on them, and I'll straighten them
19 out in the transcript, but in the transcripts they're using South Vietnamese, North
20 Vietnamese, and they don't capitalize south or north, but just Vietnamese. Of course
21 when we were over there we capitalized South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese
22 separately. That's an interesting little aside because south and north doesn't mean
23 anything to people anymore. But, let's see where we were talking, pretty much about
24 Chu Lai itself. That was a base. By the time I got there in August of '66, they had the
25 PSP planking down. They had A-4s on it. That was a Marine aircraft. Pierced steel
26 planking was the runway, and sometimes they had to use a catapult to get the aircraft off
27 if they had a heavy load of bombs and all. By the spring of '67 I had moved a complete
28 channel change of a river, gone in with heavy equipment and changed a river so that we
29 could extend out the length of the airfield and the Seabees came in, the Mobile
30 Construction Battalions from the Navy, and in that the transcriber spelled it Seabee. It's
31 not that, it's Seabee, you know, it's a term they have, but those Navy Seabees came in

1 and they actually built a concrete runway that we can land. You see, the F-4 aircraft was
2 a more sophisticated jet aircraft than the A-4. The A-4 was a very small aircraft. It could
3 land on that Pierced steel planking but the F-4 needed a bigger, longer runway. It was a
4 bigger jet and it carried more ordinance and stuff. The A-6s carried more ordinance as
5 well and some of the larger aircraft. So, they became a very large base; probably the
6 second largest base in the northern I Corps area. I built, along with a guy named Ted
7 Zeeley, he designed them and then he and I worked on these 50-foot tall guard towers
8 that we put around the air base and put .50 caliber machine guns on them to protect the
9 air base. That was an interesting engineering job because getting something 50 feet in the
10 air, surrounding it with sandbags, then putting a .50 caliber machine gun, which has a
11 tremendous vibration effect to it, up in the air, and designing that would hold all that plus
12 people, plus withstand possible mortars or whatever else comes after it was a real
13 challenge, and we had to do a lot of special work and we had to put guy-wires on it and
14 everything else to keep it up there because of the high winds because of the monsoon
15 season and everything else. I've got some pictures of those, too, that I'll show you that
16 are really neat to go with it. So we did channel changes, we did roads, we did those, we
17 helped with the airfield, we did water supply, distribution systems where we had to
18 supply all the fresh water for the entire area.

19 SM: What about projects similar to these, especially the irrigation, road building,
20 and maybe other building projects that were beneficial for just, say, a Vietnamese
21 community or a group of Vietnamese people?

22 JO: A lot of times we'd go out and we'd put in a water supply point for them as
23 well. We would build little medical centers for them, like a little hospital kind of thing.
24 We did one of those for Dickey Chappell who was a famous woman who was a
25 photographer and writer and she was killed somewhere up in there around Chu Lai so we
26 put up this big hospital for her. It was a pretty good-sized place. It was a clinic and
27 everything like that, and we would go in and actually help them with like roads, build a
28 nice road for them to get back into certain areas, things of that nature.

29 SM: And you mentioned that the night vision devices and the generation that you
30 personally own yourself now compared to what you had in Vietnam, when you were out

1 setting up an ambush, would anybody in your patrol ever use something like that or was
2 there fear that that would distort your night vision and that would be worse?

3 JO: We never had them.

4 SM: You never had one in the rear?

5 JO: The recon folks I think was the only people that ever had them. I don't know
6 if the infantry guys had them or not. I don't think the infantry had them at that point in
7 time at least. Some of the Army folks had some of those things. Later on when I was
8 with the 175-millimeter guns, putting those things down at Binh Son for the Korean
9 Marines, those guys would have some night vision devices and it was awesome for us to
10 see those things because we hadn't seen them of course. I saw them with that recon
11 battalion that one time I was like, "Whoa, this is cool!" I thought, "Man, that could really
12 help at night." The way that you normally do those things, you look through one eye with
13 night vision but you close the other eye so that you protect your vision. Another thing
14 that I just thought of that had been helpful...I'm going to take a break real quick and get
15 some water but let me come back and I'll talk to you about mortar shells and the actual
16 flares coming out. Let me take one quick break. One thing that I remember is at night a
17 lot of times the Marines...I guess Americans really don't like the dark and it took a long
18 time to get used to it but we used a lot of flares. The mortars and the artillery would fire
19 these flares up and it would kind of light everything up. But if you're out on patrol and
20 you're going to fire these things, you absolutely don't want to be looking at them. The
21 first thing you want to do, anytime there's a flare, the first thing you do is drop to the
22 ground and get down quick. So, you had to be really alert because you could see...the
23 thing about flares, you could always hear the mortar rounds going off. You could hear
24 this kind of, "Thunk!" and you knew there a was a mortar round coming out. Then, when
25 the flare would hit, it would go, "Bop!" So the minute you heard the, "Thunk!" you hit
26 the ground already. But, for some reason, if sometimes the guys would look up it would
27 just blind them and now you've got 20 minutes before you can see and you're back in
28 pitch dark and it's usually darker than before kind of theory. You always put your head
29 down. Occasionally what we'd do if you were really in a bad situation and you were
30 worried, you'd have some guys cover one eye and be looking with the other eye just to
31 make sure nobody's coming up on you or something. But the other thing is the shell

1 casing from those flares was a huge piece of metal, and when they'd pop the flare and it
2 would come out, then you'd hear this, "Whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop,
3 whoop, whoop, whoop, splat!" Most of us were more worried about getting hit by one of
4 those darn things than we were a lot of other things because they were dangerous.
5 Sometimes when the flares would come in over you, those things wouldn't land too far
6 from you. So that, "Whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop," sound, I'll never
7 forget that. That was a danger sign, for sure. There are noises that you learn, and you
8 could tell friendly versus enemy, too. AK-47, you can tell the difference between the
9 sound of that and then an M-14. You could tell mortar shells, you could tell incoming
10 rocket fire. To this day, my family is always amazed; a helicopter comes over and I can
11 tell them whether it's a Huey, a CH-46, or just what's flying over. I can tell a C-130. I
12 guess these are sounds that you absorb into your memory that can save your life, maybe,
13 so they tend to get etched in a little deeper than normal. With the flares, especially, it
14 was always important, and at night around our perimeters they would drop flares in on
15 occasion. Sometimes, if you're out in a situation and you think you're getting lost or
16 something or you're not sure of the territory or you hear a noise, you might call for flares.
17 That's a little different situation. But, we'd always try to have a couple of guys that were
18 told that you've got to protect your night vision. So, they would always kind of cover
19 their eyes, and that was a real big deal. So, we had to kind of be aware of that, too. I
20 think that covers it. But, those noises, to this day, I can still hear, and they're so
21 distinctive.

22 SM: At what point did you come to realize that you wanted to extend or that you
23 were going to extend for an additional six-month tour?

24 JO: I have a hard time. I was back trying to read some of my mother's letters,
25 letters I sent to my mother. Not too long ago she gave me all the letters, which I'll turn
26 over as well. She was of course saying, "Get out of there and don't think anything about
27 that. You're crazy to be there to begin with. Nobody in their right mind would do that!"
28 For some reason, I kind of...I was doing well and I'd worked in the headquarters area
29 and the colonel called me in one day and said, "Look, we've got this six month extension
30 program." I really liked...this colonel I was working for at that time was Colonel Babe,
31 George Babe. He was really a squared away, sharp guy. He said that I was doing well

1 and everything, and he said that since I was an engineer he kept me in the headquarters
2 area for a long time and I'd been trying to get out and get a company of my own and all.
3 He said, "You extend for six months and I'll guarantee you that you'll get a company,"
4 and I thought about that and I thought, "Well, what am I going to do when I get back?"
5 and I didn't have any plans or anything and nothing really to come back to except my
6 family, I don't mean that in a negative sense, it's just like I was doing well over there, I
7 was learning a lot, getting things done, I really liked the idea of having a company. So,
8 somewhere about June of 1967 I guess June or July I walked in and signed up for another
9 six months. Part of the incentive was they'd give you 30 days to go back home and you
10 could come back. Well that sounded great, turned out like we talked about when we first
11 started that that was pretty tough. It was great until I got home, and then I wasn't so
12 sure...that was a really tough thing to go back that second time, especially when things
13 were really starting to heat up at home and overseas. But, I did it.

14 SM: Why don't we discuss that for a little bit. So you decided you were going to
15 extend, you got a 30-day pass to come back on leave to the United States to visit family
16 and whatnot. What was it like upon your arrival? Where did you come in through? Why
17 don't you discuss the process of getting home? Anything that happened? Any events or
18 anything like that?

19 JO: I'm not sure exactly of this, but I think we came in to El Toro, California
20 which was a Marine Corps base. They flew me from Chu Lai to Danang, to Danang to
21 Okinawa, from Okinawa to Tokyo, Tokyo to El Toro. I think in Japan we went into
22 Kadena or some place like that which was near Tokyo, a Marine Corps airbase there.
23 Then we went up to LA airport and came home. I'm trying to remember, I think it was
24 like August of '67 I got home and there was still pretty positive...I don't remember any
25 of the stuff. When I came home in '68 I had some really bad incidents occur. But in '67,
26 it was pretty nondescript. I flew home, flew to I think it was Atlanta, and then took a
27 plane into Ashville. It was pretty quick. No anti-war sentiment, as a matter of fact I
28 think I was in uniform. When I got home the local TV station wanted to interview me
29 and all, and a lot of people were very interested. In fact I was invited over to University
30 of North Carolina at Ashville at the time, I think that was the name of it, and some of the
31 history professors got my name from the TV interview and called and asked me if I'd

1 come over and talk to them about Vietnam and talk to their students and all, and
2 everybody was very, very positive and supportive. I didn't have any problems. Of
3 course, Ashville was in the mountains and was a little different than Berkeley and those
4 other big colleges where they were having all the anti-war protests and stuff. I think they
5 were somewhat isolated from it. But, it was a pretty positive experience, the things I did
6 at that time. I remember one time I went up to pick up some girl for a date and she lived
7 up on a mountain in North Carolina there and I'm driving up through there and it was at
8 night, and I'm going up this mountain road and there's just nothing but trees on each side
9 and a car coming off the other side backfired and I just about lost it there. There were
10 some incidences like that that were pretty tough because I tried to readapt back, get back
11 into the civilian world and all. Later on it was even worse after my second tour because
12 my second tour, that extension was really a whole different way of looking at the whole
13 Vietnam process. But I came out of there and when I went back, just a quick fly. I flew
14 straight from Ashville to Atlanta to San Francisco to Travis Air Force Base to Okinawa
15 and boom, I was right back in country. I don't remember that much about the tour, the
16 home thing. Of course my mom and dad were really upset I was going back for a second
17 tour. It's not a tremendous amount of memories about that. It seemed like maybe I
18 suppressed it, I don't know.

19 SM: No anti-war, significant anti-war activity where you went?

20 JO: I didn't run into any at all.

21 SM: Did you wear your uniform very often while you were back on leave?

22 JO: A few times, yeah. I wore it to church on Sunday and I wore it to this TV
23 interview.

24 SM: But primarily it was a pretty positive response?

25 JO: Yeah, I think most people were pretty much very positive about it.

26 SM: Wow, that's great.

27 JO: Which was unusual, now that we look back on it. In that time period, like in
28 August of '67, I think still most of the country was behind what we were doing, and I
29 don't think we had...we had incidences occurring, but they were pretty much on
30 campuses like Berkeley and places like that.

1 SM: Well just out of curiosity, at that point while you were at home, maybe you
2 had a little bit of time to reflect on what you had done for the previous year in Vietnam.
3 Do you remember if at the time you felt like you had been accomplishing anything in
4 Vietnam as an engineer and as a Marine?

5 JO: Yeah, I was very positive about the whole experience. If I hadn't been, I
6 don't think I'd have gone back anyway. But, I felt I was doing a lot of good. I had
7 grown up as a person. See one thing I think every young man does, he has to test
8 himself. That was a test. I felt like I passed it pretty well, from my perspective anyway.
9 I got out of it, I hadn't gotten injured. I had gotten sick a couple of times. I think I got
10 dysentery and some of the jungle fevers and stuff, been in the hospital a few times, twice
11 I think. That was mainly from all those patrols and all, some of the areas that we were in
12 and stuff. But, pretty much I think it was a positive experience then. Also, I felt my
13 brothers, I was concerned that they were going to have to go over there after me and they
14 were going to get drafted and all. I also felt that I knew how to handle myself and I had
15 been real lucky and things had gone well and it was better for me to be back over there
16 because they had this business about not more than one family member. What was those
17 five brothers that got killed, you know?

18 SM: The Sullivan brothers?

19 JO: They had something like the Sullivan brothers act kind of thing that said
20 unless you sign a waiver, that you don't have to have more than one family member in
21 there at the same time. I felt that by maybe being there for another six months, maybe
22 my brothers would not have to go over there. So that was in the back of my mind as well.
23 I never told them that because it didn't make any difference to them anyway, but I knew I
24 could handle myself and I knew what I was doing over there, and I was looking forward
25 to having the company.

26 SM: Did you have any idea exactly what company you would be getting?

27 JO: No. In fact, it was when I got into that second tour it was really much
28 different. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Babe left. I got back, there was
29 a lot of disarray. The new battalion commander hadn't come in. There was a major
30 acting. He wasn't quite sure what to do because he was just about to be relieved and he
31 was relieved and a new man came in and he and I had an immediate personality conflict

1 of some kind. To this day, there's still a problem when I go to reunions. He wasn't
2 going to give me the company.

3 SM: Why?

4 JO: I don't know. To this day, I never could figure out what it was. We got off
5 to a bad start somehow. I'm not sure what happened. But I went in and I said, "I'm
6 going to request a mast to the commanding general because I was told that I was going to
7 get this company," and he wasn't going to give it to me, but he finally conceded and did,
8 and I went down as the XO first for a captain by the name of Bud Weederhold. I was his
9 XO for about maybe a month, and then when he left he did give me the company but he
10 didn't want to do it, and that kind of set the tone for that second tour and it seemed like
11 he and I were always at odds. The funny thing was I was the youngest kid there. I was a
12 1st Lieutenant and all the rest of the guys were senior captains. So, that might have been
13 part of it, I don't know. I found out later that he didn't even know I'd come back from a
14 previous tour. But, I guess I must have explained it to him, I don't know. But, we got off
15 on the wrong foot for sure. I think that's why later when it came time to pick a company
16 to go north to the DMZ he sent my guys up there. He sure put us in harm's way and he
17 did not want to come up there and visit us or even be around us! So, it was a different
18 situation there.

19 SM: Were there harsh words between you during this first interaction?

20 JO: See, I was brought up in a Catholic family, yes ma'am, no ma'am, yes sir, no
21 sir, and you don't question authority in Catholic schools. Then I went in the Marine
22 Corps and yes sir, no sir. So today, if I were in a similar situation with him, we would
23 have had different words. It would have been a lot more forthright. But, at that time I
24 tended to not...he was a major, he hadn't quite made lieutenant colonel but I think he
25 made lieutenant colonel while he was there after he shipped us up the DMZ I think. But
26 at that time, I was intimidated by his rank, I guess, so I wasn't as strong as I probably
27 should have been or I would be now, of course, but that's hindsight.

28 SM: All right, so why don't we go ahead and discuss, then, the beginning of your
29 second tour. Where did you arrive in country and how did you receive your assignment?

30 JO: I went back in the same way. They send us back to Okinawa, States back
31 into Danang into Chu Lai because my orders were straight back to the same battalion I

1 was in. Then, I reported into this new colonel. By that time many of the older folks that
2 I'd been there with for a year were gone. Most of them had rotated, so everything was
3 really different. Just 30 days was amazing with the differences because in that period of
4 time a lot of the Army troops started coming in and they were moving in mass into Chu
5 Lai and most of the Marine infantry units were heading north. So immediately it was like
6 50 million helicopters out of nowhere with all these Army troops and all their gear and all
7 this stuff and we ended up supporting the Army all of a sudden rather than the Marines.
8 By then I was a 1st Lieutenant and I was not taking patrols out anymore, but I became the
9 executive officer of the company. We were building bridges and doing mine sweeps and
10 all that kind of stuff. All of a sudden in October I get this warning order that...well, first
11 thing that happened, the battalion commander that came in was different from Colonel
12 Babe in that he was a staff officer and he'd been out at, or at least we were told, that he'd
13 been the FMF Pac, Fleet Marine Force Pacific inspector. So he was kind of more into
14 inspecting things and all, and I don't think he had an appreciation for, "This is combat
15 and things are not going to be like they would be in a garrison situation." So he comes on
16 board and starts having all these inspections and everything and just chewing people up
17 one side and down the other because there was rust on stuff and dirt on stuff and he
18 hadn't been through the rainy season and seen all the crap we'd had to go through and all.
19 He was just giving us a fit. So, everybody was just happy as hell at the idea just to get
20 the hell out of there and go to war, although we didn't realize it was out of the frying pan
21 and into the fire until it happened. So, we had this underlying constant inspection stuff
22 going on. He was treating us like we were back in garrison and we were in the combat
23 environment. There was a lot of tension, I thought, built up, and a lack of appreciation
24 for what we were really involved in at that time. We get this order to move out, and I
25 can't remember exactly up until the time we moved out. But I remember my company
26 going over and getting on C-130s, it took two C-130s to take my whole company. A
27 Marine engineer company is a little over 200 people, and we had equipment and all that.
28 But, they sent us up to Dong Ha, flew us up there, and then we stayed there for a few
29 days with the 11th Engineer Battalion, we were attached to them. We went out and first
30 we started helping them build Alpha 3. There was this McNamara's line, and we were
31 working on that. I'm going to have to get a little more water, hold on just a second. I'm

1 starting to lose my voice again, just a second. I've gone through a Diet Coke and two
2 things of water and I'm trying to keep my voice up!

3 SM: Okay, go ahead.

4 JO: I'll probably do another 20 minutes and then we can finish up...it will
5 probably take another time if you want to do it around?

6 SM: Absolutely. So you're up into the DMZ area working on this McNamara
7 line?

8 JO: Dong Ha.

9 SM: Dong Ha.

10 JO: There's kind of an intersection, I think it's called the Cua Viet River or
11 maybe it's the Dong Ha River. There's a river and then the Route 1 went north, south,
12 and all throughout Vietnam there's this one highway, Highway 1, and it tended to be...I
13 think in here I read it, I called it like an interstate highway. It was really more like a two
14 lane road. Most places it wasn't even paved. The French had paved it at one time. It did
15 have some fairly nice bridges and all, but there was also a railroad that ran parallel to it
16 from one end of the country to the other, I mean from South Vietnam all the way up
17 through North Vietnam kind of thing. The coastal side of that country was pretty much
18 the developed area. As you went further west of course it tended to be jungles and
19 extremely high, rugged mountains, so it wasn't as populous. Between the seacoast towns
20 and all and the coastal towns and the mountains, there was this very fertile, lush area
21 where they grew rice and that kind of stuff too, which was kind of nice. So anyway, we
22 got up into Dong Ha and that was a big base where they built it up and there was an area
23 up in there called Leatherneck Square. I think by that time most all the Marines, with the
24 exception of our battalion and a few artillery units and some air wing stuff and all were
25 pretty much all heading north. The Army was heading in behind us and filling in the
26 lower part of the I Corps area and we kept moving further north, and by the time I came
27 back out of there in '68 after Tet and after the Khe Sanh Siege and all we had two
28 divisions up there and most of our air wings were both up there, everything that had to do
29 with the Marines were all up there. My battalion was still down at the other end
30 supporting the Army at that point. I never could quite figure that one out, as much as we
31 needed help and all why they left them down there, but it was such a big unit and heavy

1 equipment that they probably thought it was not worth trying to move, probably. We got
2 into Dong Ha, assigned to a Lieutenant Colonel Perry who was the head of the 11th
3 Engineer Battalion. Somewhere later I want to talk about the fact that when we left there
4 he gave us a letter of congratulations that never got to my troops. It went from him to the
5 Commanding General of the 3rd Marine Division, and he worked under the Commanding
6 General of the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force, back down to Commanding General of the
7 1st Marine Division supposedly to my battalion commander, never ever got to the troops
8 and it's real important to know about that because it was a very, very nice letter and
9 showed the amount of work we'd done which was significant and I think the troops
10 should have at least been presented that. They never heard from our battalion
11 commander on that at all; again, I think it was some of this tension, but I'm not sure.

12 SM: So you don't know exactly why but you think it was the personality
13 conflict?

14 JO: I think so because I've asked him about it and he just said, "Well I never got
15 that." He was kind of blunt about it so I was like, "Oh, okay." I've written him two
16 letters and sent him copies of it and all, and he's never even acknowledged or responded
17 to any of my letters. I've tried to also an incident that occurred in '68, two of my men
18 were put in for silver stars and I've tried to get him to tell me what happened to that, and
19 it was written up in the newspaper and everything. He just won't respond to me, to this
20 day, and I can't figure out why. It's crazy.

21 SM: That's really strange.

22 JO: It is, it's real strange, and I can't figure out what in the world I did that
23 caused all this. But, I know at one of our reunions he made a kind of an off-handed
24 comment; he finally had tears in his eyes, and said maybe he was wrong about me. But,
25 it didn't last long. Must have been as a weak moment. Anyway, we got up there, they
26 assigned us first...one of the things we had to do was McNamara's Wall was a line, or
27 wall, and actually the idea was the Bin Hai River kind of separated North and South
28 Vietnam. Dong Ha was, you could see, it was a big high hill. You could actually see
29 almost into North Vietnam on a clear day kind of thing. It was the most prominent
30 terrain feature. Of course in our typical fashion, we'd take the higher ground, scrape it
31 clean, and then say, "Come find me," routine. It was crazy some of the ways we did

1 things, but we had this massive base and off of that what they were going to do, they
2 were going to put Alpha positions and Charlie positions and then they would have supply
3 points behind it. So you would have Cua Viet, Gio Linh, Cua Viet is spelled C-U-A V-I-
4 E-T and Gio Linh is spelled G-I-O L-I-N-H I believe and then there was going to be Con
5 Thien, C-O-N T-H-I-E-N. These were all separate names. Then, there was going to be
6 Khe Sanh, K-H-E S-A-H-N (actually SANH) I think. Those were going to be the Alpha
7 positions. Behind that you were going to have Charlie positions which were going to be
8 like supply points to back them up. There was Charlie 1, Charlie 2, etcetera. Now
9 between Con Thien and Gio Linh, there was a long strip that kind of faced into the DMZ
10 and you could actually see into North Vietnam. They wanted us to go out there and help
11 put in an intermediate position to clear this long strip of land that was perhaps a mile or
12 two wide and I don't know how many miles long, I can't remember now, maybe it's 20
13 miles long. It was very long. So they put all these engineers out there and we were
14 clearing this land and getting shot at by long-range artillery, mortars, snipers, and it's
15 crazy. But, he wanted to clear all this land and he was going to put this Alpha 3 position
16 in there which was going to be between Con Thien and Gio Linh. So, we had most of my
17 company out there working on that and then some of my company was down there at Con
18 Thien which was a major base that had come under a tremendous amount of fire and a
19 big hill that you could look across into North Vietnam and controlled a lot of prominent
20 high ground. It had two fingers on the OP 1 and OP 2 if I remember correctly and then
21 there's a command post in there, and this place, I'm talking about now this is real
22 combat, dug in deep stuff, because they received artillery, mortars, and rockets all the
23 time. So, they had even taken the point when they made the roads, the engineers, the 11th
24 Engineers and the 3rd Engineers and all that, to keep from being ambushed they scraped
25 across all the vegetation away on both sides as far as 50 to 100 meters on either side so
26 that you go up this road, it's just like right in the middle of the pathway but you're clear
27 on either side so people couldn't hide in the bushes and throw grenades in trucks and
28 stuff like that, which they did. But, so I had these guys working at Alpha 3 and we had
29 people at Con Thien and I think it was November 28th, '67 I'm in a jeep and going up
30 with my gunnery sergeant and a warrant officer I believe, to inspect the minefield I just
31 put in on OP 1. We put a whole bunch of mines in. It was a mean, nasty area. We had to

1 go through Charlie 1 and Charlie 2 which were like checkpoints in those backup places.
2 One of those places had been overrun and one of my classmates named John Bobo was a
3 lieutenant and his platoon had been overrun at that point and John had got his leg shot off
4 during the battle and stuck his leg down in the ground and continued to fire because his
5 position had been overrun by the North Vietnamese and he called in artillery on his own
6 position had been overrun by the North Vietnamese and he called in artillery on his own
7 position and everything. So I saw that position and he later got the Medal of Honor. I
8 think there's even a ship named after him now. I got a picture of him with us all out in
9 bivouac one day. It was a really intense area and this Leatherneck Square, it was Camp
10 Carroll, Con Thien, Gio Linh, and Dong Ha, and that made up the Leatherneck Square
11 area; a tremendous amount of operations in there and all of them against North
12 Vietnamese Regular Forces. There weren't any Viet Cong around there at all. We're
13 talking about main force units.

14 SM: Yes, sir. With your company spread out to these different areas, how would
15 you maintain appropriate contact and control with them? Did you have a helicopter? Did
16 you just drive around?

17 JO: A lot of times it was jeep, point to point, and we all came back at night to
18 Dong Ha except for a few elements that stayed with the infantry actually in sites where
19 they were working. Command and control got to be a real big problem; hard to get a
20 helicopter. Sometimes I could get a helicopter on recon outsites and all, but it was very
21 difficult because that was hot contact, constant contact, constant battles, North
22 Vietnamese regulars, artillery fire coming in all the time, it was heavy combat.
23 November 28th I was in a convoy and we were going up to inspect the minefield and
24 check on my troops and all, and that's what I had to do was get out and check on my
25 troops and get them from point to point and get them the supplies they needed, check in
26 with them, all that kind of stuff all the time. I was on the move all the time. I moved in
27 up there and that was a scary place because the whole area was under constant fire it
28 seemed like. So, I was moved out to go out on this OP to check on the minefield. We'd
29 put in this minefield and what we did, we took 60 penny nails and we put what's called
30 com wire which is communication wire and it's like two pairs of wires twisted together
31 and you use that as like the center line of where the mine field's going to be and you tie it

1 around the nails and that's how you lay it in place and then the dark wire, after it grows
2 over you cant see it now. Off from there you put mines in clusters and this was like a 0-
3 2-4 minefield. There were no anti-tank mines, two anti-personnel fragmentation, and
4 four anti-personnel blast mines. Anti just means against personnel, most of them
5 are...anti-personnel mines were of two types, either fragmentation or blast. This was on
6 this OP we put a tremendous number of mines in there, we're talking thousands of mines
7 in there, and it would take in the better part of a couple of weeks I think to put them in.
8 So I was out, and the gunny, who was a mine and demolition expert, and the gunner was
9 behind me, were checking the mine field and I was walking down the center line of this
10 armed mine field and we kind of looked over, and it's all jungle terrain, and you could
11 actually...I remember even looking up and my vision lifted a little bit. You could see the
12 river, Ben Hai River. You could actually see over North Vietnam. You could see the
13 blasts from the artillery over there as they were firing. Luckily they were firing away
14 from us at the time, but you could see the smoke and the rounds going off. We were out
15 in this minefield and we had passed by this observation post on this OP what's called
16 Observation Post 1, OP 1, and it was kind of like this finger and there was this bunker in
17 there with a 106 recoilless rifle on top of it and Marines in there, and they saw us and
18 they knew what we were doing and checking it out, we were going out there. Just as we
19 get out to the end of the finger, and to this day I can hear this, it was like, "Chai, chai,
20 chai, chai," and it's like this Vietnamese talking, and it's like, "Fire, fire, fire, fire," I
21 guess is what they were saying, and I hear this, "Thunk! Thunk, thunk!" And that was
22 the mortars. They were zeroing in on us and the mortars were coming in and I turned to
23 the gunny and the gunner and I said, "You guys turn around and start moving back, fast!"
24 and the rounds started hitting in this live mine field and you cant run in a live mine field,
25 because you've got to be very careful. So the two of them started and we started moving
26 back, and the rounds started – they really had us zeroed in – they started coming in, and
27 as we were moving back I heard one of these Marines say, "Fire the 106!" The 106
28 recoilless rifle is a direct fire weapon. They're firing down into a ravine, standing up. If
29 they'd have fired it right at me it would have taken our head off so we had to hit the damn
30 deck in the middle of that minefield with rounds coming in from mortars, these guys
31 firing out, and we were trying to get back out of that minefield. The gunner and the

1 gunny got out. Just as I was about to get out a round landed in front of me and blew a
2 huge hole, and then a round landed behind me and blew me into the hole. I landed in this
3 hole where a mortar round had just landed before me and when I hit the ground and all I
4 got all this red hot metal penetrated into my legs and my arms and my hands and
5 everything; tore the heck out of my everything. Somehow, through the grace of the Lord
6 it didn't kill me but it messed me up pretty good, mostly in the leg and all. They got me
7 out of there and we literally got back into the command bunker and they, Doc, there, put
8 some bandages on me, dressed me up a little bit, noticed that I wasn't going to die on the
9 spot or anything, and then we got back in the trucks and got the hell out of there. I'd seen
10 all I needed to see and we knew this thing was in there so we got our people out of there,
11 and I guess they came under some intense fire and there was a big battle going there for
12 quite a while. But I went back to the rear area and got back to the position and then got
13 back to some relative safety at Dong Ha and all, and then my corpsman and my battalion
14 there, I went over to see him because I was having some trouble with the bleeding in my
15 legs and my hands and all and he started digging the shrapnel and stuff out of me and all
16 putting it into a little tin can, or not a can, but like a little saucer kind of thing, dropping
17 these little pieces of shrapnel in there. I thought, "Holy Cow!" He said, "You realize you
18 get a Purple Heart for this, don't you?" and he says, "I've got to Medevac you out to get
19 the rest of this stuff out of your knee," and, "Oh, good Lord." So I ended up going out
20 to...I've still got the tag he had to put on me, the medical evacuation tag, I've got that at
21 home for you guys, too. They medevaced me out to some hospital ship, I can't even
22 remember. I think it was the *Repose* but I'm not sure, it might not have been. I don't
23 think it was the *Repose*, it was some other ship. I was on the *Repose* earlier, I never told
24 you about that. We'll talk about that later. They took me out there and they dug all the
25 shrapnel out and they brought me back and I kind of limped around for a few days and I
26 had bandages on me and stuff. Then I had to get up and take my company out to Ca Lu.
27 You know this movie, have you seen *Rules of Engagement*?

28 SM: Yes, sir, I have.

29 JO: Well you know they talk about Ca Lu, the first scenes that open up in there?

30 SM: Yes, sir.

31 JO: Well that's the base I built.

1 SM: Oh, wow!

2 JO: Yeah. So, it's kind of interesting that Ca Lu, the name they're using, and all
3 that scenery there, I built that base. It started out as a small French fort. I took my
4 company out there and we expanded that into a major base, kind of a C-type base, you
5 know that sea concept, and it was going to be a backup to Khe Sanh. It was five miles
6 away from Khe Sanh. So we were there during the siege and everything else. Maybe we
7 do that next time. Let's just stop with the fact that we're about to go out on a helicopter
8 recon in a 34 to check out the area. I did a recon of the area, and then we had to set up a
9 convoy and move out there and there's a lot to tell about the convoy and moving out
10 there because that was a big area with a lot of ambushes and then we had to set up and
11 there's a lot of stories to tell about that. There's another couple of hours worth.

12 SM: Just out of curiosity, could you tell me what you said Repose? What is that?

13 JO: USS Repose was a hospital ship.

14 SM: It was a hospital ship? Got you.

15 JO: Yeah, I think its USS, United States Ship, R-E-P-O-S-E.

16 SM: Repose, yes.

17 JO: There was another one of there, too, and I can't remember the name of it but
18 I ended up on the hospital ship there. It was really kind of a guilty feeling going out there
19 because I look back and I was so frustrated, at first they medevaced me. First I was
20 ambulatory; in other words, walking and all. They were bringing guys in with parts of
21 hands and arms and stuff in boxes, and I'm like, "Oh crap, I don't need to be out here,"
22 so I got off there as quick as I could. I didn't want to be there.

23 SM: I would imagine not.

24 JO: But it's interesting, it took me a few days to get off. They wouldn't let me
25 off. They treated me for some intestinal problems I was having and malaria and
26 everything else, so it took me a while to get back to my company. It took me a few days
27 to get back. I was back before Christmas but I ended up going through Hue/Phu Bai, and
28 then I had to hitch a ride from there back up to Khe Sanh to Dong Ha to get out to my
29 company. It took me a while to get back. It was tough. That was the build up for Tet
30 and everything else was starting to happen, so it was pretty rough. That's something we

1 can get into, because that's the other side of the war that really gets into something much
2 different than...totally different war from what I was dealing with down in Chu Lai.

3 SM: Let me go ahead and end this recording officially and then we can schedule
4 when we can pick up again. This ends the interview with Mr. O'Kelley.

5 JO: Was this information helpful?

6 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. James O'Kelley. It
7 is the 20th of December, year 2000, at approximately 9:15 Lubbock time. I am in
8 Lubbock, Texas and Mr. O'Kelley is in Vienna, Virginia. Okay sir, why don't you go
9 ahead and describe the helicopter recon story and convoy story?

10 JO: Okay. We moved into Dong Ha. At one point, I'm pretty sure of it, I had
11 written down to one of my folks in my company to check on was I'm pretty sure when I
12 left Chu Lai my company mounted out with about 225 Marines and we flew and I think it
13 was two C-130 aircraft from Chu Lai up to Dong Ha. We carried with us mostly all the
14 gear we could on our backs and all but the heavy equipment and the dumb trucks and the
15 kind of engineer equipment which was back then about a half a million dollars worth of
16 equipment. I think that we borrowed equipment from the 11th Engineer Battalion because
17 we went up there in support of the 11th Engineer Battalion and we became attached to
18 them for this operation we were working on. I think the operation initially was called
19 Dye Marker, D-Y-E M-A-R-K-E-R. It was really that was the operation, remember we
20 talked about earlier, where we went in and put in the strip, part of McNamara's wall,
21 across and kind of parallel to Ben Hai River. In fact, I think Ben Hai River is B-E-N H-
22 A-I I believe. We flew in there and landed at Dong Ha. Dong Ha was kind of a hill and
23 it was one of the prominent pieces of land. We always seemed to take the high points,
24 scarify everything off the top and build a base camp there, and it's kind of like, "We're
25 here." I'm sure if I was a North Vietnamese artillery observer I'd think that's the greatest
26 thing going because all I have to do is just point at the hill and just blow something up. I
27 never quite figured out that logic but that's the way we did things back then. Another
28 logic thing that I've never quite figured out is why we always went out on patrols all the
29 time. There's a certain pattern and there's only so many ways you can go into some of
30 these places. We had some of the tactical ways we did things were subject to some
31 question. Some of the reading I've done recently, some other people have been doing the

1 same, and questioning why we did some of these things like we did. But anyway, it was
2 kind of a World War II mentality I think more than anything else. We got into Dong Ha;
3 we were attached to the 11th Engineer Battalion. My company was Delta Company, 9th
4 Engineer Battalion and became attached to them and first assignment was to go out to
5 Con Thien and build a minefield out on OP 1, Observation Post 1, which is kind of like a
6 finger out on this Con Thien which was the most prominent feature looking into North
7 Vietnam right on the strip. The second thing was the help out with this Alpha 3 where
8 they cleared all this land on the DMZ and they were building another Alpha position
9 there. These positions were under constant artillery, rocket, and small arms fire just on a
10 regular basis, and in fact Dong Ha was kind of an interesting place. We didn't have as
11 much incoming artillery and rocket fire at Chu Lai when I was there. We'd pretty much
12 pacified that whole area back in '66 and '67 when the Marines went in there and just
13 pretty well cleaned the place out. But Dong Ha was a different ballgame because again
14 now we're really starting to see North Vietnamese troops and that's all; there's no Viet
15 Cong left up in that area. These guys are, like I mentioned before, closer to their supply
16 lines than we were to ours in most cases, especially when you get out to Khe Sanh and Ca
17 Lu and places of that nature. So, when I got in there, that was like in late October, early
18 November of 1967, probably November of '67. We moved in and the weather was
19 starting to sock us in pretty good because the monsoons were coming through and we
20 started doing our work and I guess last time we talked about going up to Con Thien on
21 that recon and checking out the mine field and I got wounded up there. Somewhere, I'm
22 not sure exactly when it happened, but somewhere in that period we moved out to Ca Lu.
23 Now the movement out there, the best I could remember we got our vehicles and some
24 heavy equipment, I'm talking about bulldozers and things like that that we put on lowboy
25 trucks to carry out. We've got this huge convoy together and we left Dong Ha and we
26 went out Route 9 which is the east-west, west-east main route, in the old days would have
27 been called a main supply route or an MSR. Normally the north-south route was Route 1
28 and this one here intersected right near Dong Ha and it went out through a lot of the
29 major bases, like there's a place called Cam Lo, C-A-M L-O, which is a big Vietnamese
30 resettlement base where they put a lot of the Vietnamese from the villages and all, and it
31 was Camp Carroll which is a major artillery base where we had our 175 and eight inch

1 guns that could cover most of the region of what's called Leatherneck Square we talked
2 about last time. Then we went on out to a place called the Rockpile. The Rockpile was a
3 huge, jagged mountain. In the top of it we had some OP's, observation posts, and they
4 could only be resupplied by helicopter. Those guys were up there pretty much for
5 observing movements of enemy troops and stuff. From there we moved on out. We went
6 through an area until we came to a small French fort that was called Ca Lu, C-A and then
7 capital L-U. Actually, in the movie The Rules of Engagement, the opening scenes of that
8 they're talking about these Marines at Ca Lu which was kind of interesting because I
9 built the base there, and it's like, "Whoa!" That's not one of the places most people
10 would have known about. That was the furthest point west that you went. You ran into I
11 think the river was called the Khe Sanh River, I forget the name, but it was a river, a
12 major river that drained out from Khe Sanh. There you would take a right turn, a 90-
13 degree turn, and head straight up beside the river to Khe Sanh. So Khe Sanh was
14 probably, as the crow flies, no more than five miles away. So during the siege there in
15 the spring of '68 we were hunkered down at Ca Lu. In fact, we not only were hunkered
16 down there, we'd built this huge base and all, but we had to have air raid sirens
17 established because Mike Company, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, and my company, Delta
18 Company, 9th Engineers, were the two companies manning this perimeter. The IL-28
19 Ilyushin bombers were coming out of China and they were flying down right towards
20 Khe Sanh and all that area and our area, so we were continually having air raid drills, and
21 couple of times bombers were on the way. We got radio messages bombers were on the
22 way and people were taking cover down in like a Navy ship, in a general quarters kind of
23 idea, which is something I don't think many people knew about that we actually had that
24 threat. There was also something that I thought was rather unique and that was we got
25 intelligence information several times that the North Vietnamese commanders were using
26 helicopters to move down around the Ho Chi Minh Trail and going right down to the
27 border of Cambodia and Laos and all that stuff, and you never hear much about that
28 either. Apparently those folks were using those helicopters, and when they attacked in
29 January...was it January or February? Maybe it was 31 January when the North
30 Vietnamese attacked Khe Sanh and we were just south of there, they came in there with
31 armored personnel carriers, and again, our folks had not seen armor or air coming against

1 us so that was kind of an escalation of the war from our point of view. When we moved
2 this convoy through, there's several books out now that have talked a lot about Route 9,
3 how vulnerable convoys were to ambush mainly because these huge, steep cliffs would
4 come down right next to the road and the French had built this road and put in concrete
5 culverts and stuff like that along the way. But, the road was fairly narrow, very difficult
6 to get more than one large vehicle, like a low boy with a bulldozer or something like that
7 across. Nobody could be passing them on the road; you'd have to literally pull off the
8 road to get those trucks by so it was not a wide road, maybe at most 12 feet wide and 6
9 foot on either side of the ditches. Of course every road has to be built up to a certain
10 degree but in some parts you weren't able to do that because this jungle growth would
11 come right down to the edge of the road and you would have, if I remember correctly, as
12 you were going down on the left side, was these major mountain sides and on the right
13 hand side were these large fields of elephant grass, and that stuff was kind of like going
14 through a corn field. It would just cut you up real bad and some of it was anywhere from
15 six to eight to ten to twelve feet high. So that stuff was terrible to get through, and of
16 course you lose any possibility of communication with your troops when you get into
17 situations. Later I'll tell you about an ambush that occurred on the 13th of January where
18 we reacted to the fire and very difficult because you can't communicate and you can't
19 keep control of your troops and that kind of stuff. But moving down that road, there'd
20 been tons of times when they'd had ambushes on the convoys, so the convoys were called
21 rough riders, and I guess riders is R-I-D-E-R-S. But, we went down there. We were
22 loaded for bear and everybody expected to be hit. We had these trucks and we'd take the
23 bed of the truck and then actually inside the truck where the driver and everybody sits
24 and we'd sandbag the floors of all of them and we'd take all the wooden stakes off the
25 sides and we'd all be in firing positions and I've got some good pictures of M-60
26 machine guns on these ring mounts and stuff like that, actually .50 caliber machine guns
27 in those cases. We got from Dong Ha; it took us forever it seemed like. We must have
28 left real early in the morning and we moved in right behind the mine sweep teams.
29 Sweep teams would be sweeping the roads before we went down it and then we moved in
30 sometime during the day, and we got to the Rockpile. I'm not sure how far that is, it
31 can't be very far. I bet it wasn't 20 miles, maybe 30. but it was raining and pretty messy,

1 but at the Rockpile we picked up an escort of M-48 tanks and some things they called
2 Dusters which was Army twin 40 millimeter anti-aircraft gun they put on a tank, a light
3 tank, a chasse, those things were great because they could fire those 40 millimeter rounds
4 out at a sustained rate of probably 1,000 rounds a minute or something like that, just
5 unbelievable amount of fire power they could put out. Later those things helped us, too,
6 more than the tanks, actually. Then we picked up this escort and we moved on into Ca
7 Lu. Ca Lu, the biggest problem once we got in there was where to put everything
8 because it was a pretty small place and we had to turn part of the convoy around and get
9 them back out and that took a couple of days just to do that because the road was such a
10 mess from the tanks would go through there and they'd just churn up the mud and just
11 turn it into slop and some cases it would be knee deep or deeper. So vehicles became
12 very difficult to...wheeled vehicles, it was a mess. But we got in there and in a couple of
13 days I think they offloaded most of our stuff just right off the side of the road and we
14 kind of had a perimeter there and it was a French fort up on the hill that had been there I
15 guess during the period of the French occupation in the '50s, and the South Vietnamese
16 had taken that over, and this was a critical road junction and also a junction right where
17 the river went through, too. It actually was at the north end of the A Shau Valley. I don't
18 remember how you spell A Shau right off, but it was...

19 SM: We've got it, sir.

20 JO: Okay. That particular valley was very difficult to work in. I know they
21 found some hospitals in there where the VC had like 1,000 bed hospitals and they had
22 major encampments and everything else, so that whole area was later on in the war,
23 probably '68, '69, '70, became very hot area to work in. In fact, I think a couple of books
24 I read recently said that the North Vietnamese had sophisticated anti-aircraft weaponry
25 with radar guided, etcetera, all in that valley, so our guys really got into a lot of trouble
26 with that. But, that was another reason why Ca Lu was fairly significant. They took us
27 in there and then they offloaded all our gear, and I've got this letter that I wanted to
28 mention to you. It was written 19 January from the commanding officer of the 11th
29 Engineer Battalion to the commanding officer of the 9th Engineer Battalion, appreciation
30 for services rendered, and it's not very long so I'll just tell you a couple of things so
31 you'll get a feel for what went on here. "I wish to express my appreciation for the efforts

1 and accomplishments of the officers and the men of Delta Company, 9th Engineer
2 Battalion, during the period 28 November, 1967 to 19 January, 1968 when they were op
3 con,” meaning operational control, “To this command. Company D reported this
4 command on 28 November, ’67, was assigned a high priority mission involving
5 installation of a wire and minefield obstacle for the protection of the combat operating
6 base at Ca Lu, Quang Tri Province, RVN. The construction problems were compounded
7 by our inability to use surface transportation whenever we desired to do so, necessitating
8 the use of helicopters to transport wire, mines, and other support items. The weather was
9 typical of monsoon season, creating the worst possible conditions for maximum effort.
10 Careful planning, hard work, know-how, and excellent leadership, Company D
11 successfully accomplished the following: Cleared and stripped 225 acres of jungle, 4550
12 meters of four strand warning fence were constructed, 3,200 meters of 0-2-4 mine fields
13 containing 16,683 mines were laid.” A 0-2-4 minefield means zero anti-tank, two anti-
14 personnel blasts or fragmentation, and four anti-personnel blasts. So what we put in there
15 was an anti-personnel minefield and two of them were the M-16 A-1 what they called
16 Bouncing Betty’s which has the fragmentation just like ball bearings. The other four
17 were little small plastic mines. There were 16,683 mines were put in, “3,875 meters of
18 split, double apron fence with two or three concertina between aprons, and 4,075 meters
19 of standard, double apron fence.” So we built this huge fence all the way around this 225
20 acres we cleared and stripped; inside that of course was also the French fort, and we built
21 bunkers and everything else which you’ll see in a minute. “In addition to it’s assigned
22 mission, Company D responded to continue to request assistance from the infantry unit
23 at Ca Lu,” simply because we all wear the same uniform and I had the capability, in
24 Captain O’Kelley’s words. “Examples of these actions are clearing for 81 millimeter
25 mortar pits, constructing a water point, pioneer road to a nearby river, preparing the
26 internal road net, utilizing engineer equipment to assist convoys when road become
27 impassible.” Sometimes we had to take a bulldozer to push trucks out because they get
28 stuck. “Constructing two 18 foot by 24 foot living bunkers for the infantry, providing
29 primary reaction force for the base defense,” and we also had security duty, “Assuming
30 sectors of the perimeter of defense when requested. Number four, the full list would be
31 long, however, the above slices show that the Company D performed in an exceptional

1 manner displaying determination, courage, high professional skill, and devotion to duty.
2 My congratulations for having such an excellent combat Engineer Company under your
3 command, B.A. Perry, Lieutenant Colonel commanding 11th Engineer Battalion.” That
4 never got to my troops.

5 SM: What?

6 JO: No, it was never presented to them by my commanding officer at all.

7 SM: What a shame!

8 JO: Well, that’s what I thought, and I’ve tried. He’s alive and well and I’ve sent
9 this to him and talked to him about it and tried to get him to do something and he won’t
10 deal with it. I don’t know why. But it was from the commanding officer, 11th Engineer
11 Battalion to the commanding officer, 9th Engineer Battalion, via the commanding general
12 of the 3rd Marine Division, commanding general of the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force,
13 and the commanding general of the 1st Marine Division. So I know that sucker got to him
14 and it was like 19 January when this was mailed. But, he just won’t deal with it and I
15 don’t understand.

16 SM: A couple of quick questions about some of the work that you did that you
17 just described in the letter.

18 JO: Okay.

19 SM: With the minefields, how complete and detailed were your maps of
20 minefields that you created?

21 JO: Absolutely amazingly complete. We had surveyed in every entire...the
22 whole mine field was surveyed in with a transit. The details of it, we would have to do
23 that and then we’d have to certify it and that’s why I was walking the center line up there
24 in the OP-1 up in Con Thien when I got wounded. We had to certify it and then we took
25 that and put the originals with the 3rd Marine Division G2 office. So when we left that
26 country, and later on, I hope that those folks were able to get those copies of those
27 minefields to get those things out of there, but I don’t know of course. I’ve got blueprints
28 of the bridges I designed and built down near Chu Lai, seven reinforced concrete steel
29 bridges, and I’ve still got a copy of the blueprints which I’ll give you guys.

30 SM: Oh great!

1 JO: Yeah, but that will show you the kind of...see, the thing that's so amazing
2 about engineers in this war is on the one hand, we're acting just like infantry and getting
3 our tails shot off or we're attacking bunkers and stuff like that which I'll tell you about
4 later at Hill 63, LZ Baldy, we went after it with flame throwers and satchel charges. The
5 other side of things, I'm building mess halls, I'm building roads, paving the roads, I'm
6 building reinforced concrete and steel bridges so you had to have...in my case I was
7 lucky because I was a school trained civil engineer but you had to have a wealth of
8 abilities and understand a lot of different things and that's why I think the infantry did
9 their things and they had a hell of a job, but the engineers were building infrastructure for
10 them all the time or destroying the enemy's infrastructure, so a lot of times we'd be out in
11 front. One time back at Chu Lai I went out, they were going to move into Mo Duc, Duc
12 Pho area for...I think Mo Duc is M-O D-U-C and Duc Pho was D-U-C P-H-O, right on
13 the I Corps-II Corps border. They were going to start Operation Deck House IV I think it
14 was called. In fact, I've got a note right here. Let's see, I can tell you when that was.
15 No, it doesn't show it in here. A lot of my operations I don't even show in my book.
16 That was sometime in '67 and I had to make a complete reconnaissance with a personnel
17 carrier and two jeeps, one being a mark-38 radio jeep from the I Corps border all the way
18 north to Danang in order to see if the bridges and culverts would sustain the tanks and the
19 trucks and all the gear the infantry was coming in for this major operation with. So
20 effectively what that says is we're out there in front of those guys, making sure they can
21 get through, and we did that several other places like every day we were going out and
22 doing the mine sweeps for them on the roads. So some of the stuff got pretty hairy. It
23 was some fairly scary work occasionally when you got out doing that. Anyway, to get
24 back to where we were, anyway, that particular reconnaissance, I've got some great
25 pictures that are in that book, the 1st Marine Division, 9th Engineer Battalion in Vietnam.
26 There's a series of pictures in there that shows some of the work we had to do going out
27 on those engineer reconnaissance type efforts; some pretty nice pictures there, too.

28 SM: Quick question, you mentioned that you were wounded? I guess you were
29 certifying a minefield? Is that what you were doing when you were wounded?

30 JO: Yes. I was actually walking the centerline and actually in this particular case
31 I went back and checked, that was not the time I was sent to the Repose. I was sent to the

1 Repose a previous time back in '67 earlier on my first tour. But what happened was I
2 guess I gave you the story last time about getting hit by the mortar shell and getting
3 blown almost literally out of the minefield. I got shrapnel in my leg, my left leg, and my
4 hand and my arms and my leg. I was just really lucky as the dickens because the other
5 two had gotten out and I'd gotten blown into this other shell hole where a mortar shell
6 had just come off, the one behind me. It kind of had me bracketed; the other one just
7 blew me into it. But, I went to the medical people right there in Con Thien and they
8 patched me up. The name of the game was get the hell out of there as fast as we could
9 because they were coming under artillery and mortar fire and everything else. So we got
10 back, we had finished the recon pretty much anyway. I was out at the far end of it. We
11 knew what we'd seen and what was going on and got back to Dong Ha, I don't even
12 remember how we got back to Dong Ha. I must have been kind of dazed or something.
13 But, I got back there and the corpsman, I think his name was Kenny, hospital 2nd class or
14 something like that, Kenny, it's on the tag, I've got the tag I'll give you, too, which it's
15 kind of like a Medevac tag? He went in there and started digging out this shrapnel and
16 stuff, and he says, "With all this shrapnel you got in here and all this stuff, you know
17 you're a candidate for a Purple Heart?" and I said, "Whoa, you sure?" and he said,
18 "Yeah, no sweat," he says, "I'll put you in for it," and I said, "Okay, cool." So I never
19 thought anything more about it, but then afterwards when I started thinking about it I
20 thought, "Whoa, this isn't much of a wound. Probably maybe I shouldn't have taken that
21 Purple Heart," but he'd already put the thing in and everything and three or four days
22 later I was hobbling around and hurting. But when you see guys that get a Purple Heart
23 for dying, it's kind of different. So I had some thoughts about that, but I guess I did the
24 right thing by going ahead and taking it, because I guess one way of looking at it, you did
25 earn it, take it. So that's where that stood. I guess they call them...that wasn't even my
26 million-dollar wound because it didn't get me home, but it was just kind of an
27 aggravating wound. The hard thing was over there in that rainy weather and everything
28 was getting things to heal because it just festered and everything. So it was a couple of
29 weeks, I was able to...as long as I kept moving, all right, but every time I'd stop moving
30 like to sleep at night or something it would stiffen up on me again. It took a long time to
31 heal because it couldn't dry out. So you'd pay it all sorts of salves and stuff they'd put on

1 it and he kept giving me antibiotics for a couple of weeks I guess. But that's more or less
2 that one. Let's see, where do you want to go from there?

3 SM: Well I was also curious; you mentioned earlier that the 40millimeter dusters
4 were better than tanks?

5 JO: Yeah.

6 SM: Can you elaborate on why you felt that way at the time?

7 JO: Well the tanks were huge, big, monstrous targets. They were loud, they
8 were noisy. I think the guy told me for every one hour of operations it takes eight hours
9 of maintenance on the suckers over there. They were just cumbersome. The terrain, if
10 they got off the roads, they'd sink in the swamps and all that other stuff and they were
11 very difficult to deal with. Most infantry you talked to, one the one hand, those things
12 had some nice firepower if they're set up in a static position. But, the problem was, if
13 you're trying to go on a sweep operation or something you know every Vietnamese
14 within 20 miles can hear you coming with those tanks. So most guys felt like they
15 wanted to be away from them. The main problem is that when a tank goes out in a field,
16 the number one thing you got to remember is they've got to be protected by infantry
17 because they've got a lot of blind spots, and it is a big target. Well the North Vietnamese
18 were very good; they'd take these RPG-7s which were rocket propelled grenades, and
19 they would just blow those suckers up one after another and knock the treads off,
20 whatever, so now you've got a platoon of Marines who all of a sudden were supposed to
21 be operational in an offensive form are suddenly in a defensive position trying to protect
22 the damn tank; same kind of problems we ran into with the darn helicopters. Every now
23 and then a helicopter goes down in an LZ. One time you have maneuver elements. Now
24 these maneuver elements become static defensive elements, and that created a real
25 problem. That's just like the North Vietnamese had a theory that we found out about;
26 they would prefer not to kill us, but to wound us, because if you kill a Marine then he's
27 down there. If you've got a wounded Marine it takes two other Marines to take that
28 wounded Marine out. So effectively you've taken out three rather than one. So that's kind
29 of an interesting thought I guess; it was pretty smart on their part. January 13th of 1968, I
30 had a convoy coming in for resupply. We'd had a convoy come in about a week earlier,
31 and they'd taken a lot of sniper fire but nothing really serious and they'd gotten back out.

1 I'd sent one of my troops back on that, he'd kind of screwed up; I don't remember what
2 he did. It wasn't anything big, but his name was Lance Corporal Malassi and so he was a
3 truck driver, and so I'd send him back to Dong Ha along with some of the others to pick
4 up some resupply stuff. One of the convoys had come in a few weeks earlier, maybe
5 somewhere in the December time frame, had been hit and some of the trucks had been
6 blown up and we lost some mines that we were trying to bring across. That's when you
7 noticed in that letter, he said, "Sometimes we couldn't get across the roads because they
8 would interdict the fire," and everything. We lost at that time my Purple Heart certificate
9 was coming in from headquarters Marine Corps which was crazy, but also the XO on the
10 13th of January was bringing the payroll. Craziest thing was, here we are in the middle of
11 no man's land, and they have to bring the payroll out and pay us in military payment
12 certificates, we call them MPCs which other people call funny money or monopoly
13 money, because they didn't want you dealing with Vietnamese piasters, P-I-A-S-T-E-R-S
14 I think is what it was called, it was kind of like their dollars. But they didn't want us
15 dealing in that because the tendency was we would inflate and destroy the economy I
16 guess or something. But, they paid us in this MPC. Well here my XO comes out from
17 Dong Ha and his name was 1st Lieutenant Dick Matteson, M-A-T-T-E-S-O-N, had a
18 master's degree from University of Texas in nuclear engineering or nuclear physics and
19 had real thick glasses; I don't know what in the world he was doing in the Marine Corps.
20 He should have been working with NASA or somebody. He was in Dong Ha and he was
21 my rear area, had rear area folks, and he was sitting in a right front seat with the truck
22 with Malossi as they came back out on 13 January and we had at Rockpile they picked up
23 the tank escort and the Dusters and they moved out and about halfway between Rockpile
24 and Ca Lu, and actually probably closer to Ca Lu, the North Vietnamese had set up an
25 ambush. This area where they had set up an ambush later became LZ Vandergrift I think
26 that's where the 1st Air Cav came in to help relieve the pressure on Khe Sanh and all. But
27 this particular day, and I have a newspaper article to substantiate all this, they hit our
28 convoy and the lead tank, there was a 2nd lieutenant was in the turret and the first thing
29 that happened is the first truck behind the tank, they let the tank go by and then they had
30 what appeared to be a claymore mine up ended in the road so it would fire straight up,
31 and they detonated that and took out the first what we called six-by truck. It was M-51

1 trucks or something like that; they were these four-wheeled drive, large trucks that you
2 see in the military. They blew that one up and then they got the last truck on the other
3 end of the convoy. So now they had us sealed in on that road and they started raking the
4 entire convoy. They had .50 caliber machine guns up on a hill and they had mortars up
5 and down the area, S2 millimeter mortars that walked up and down the road. We had
6 infantry, we had a lot of my company, we had a lot of wire obstacle material, we had
7 mines, we had all sorts of stuff on those trucks, all sorts of supplies, we had troops,
8 Rough Rider convoy had all these troops with him. Well, the first tank, the lieutenant
9 was still standing up in the turret when an RPG round reflected off the turret and ripped
10 off his left arm I think at the shoulder. The young driver panicked and headed straight for
11 Ca Lu with the tank, so suddenly where's our fire support? Luckily the 40-millimeter
12 dusters turned and started firing directly into the fire. It was off to the...if you're coming
13 from Rockpile to Ca Lu it would be to your right because it was going from east to west,
14 coming out of the north which made sense because a lot of times that's close to their
15 supply lines. But this is a very sophisticated ambush. A few weeks before that one of the
16 trucks, we'd lost a lot of mines, got blown off the truck and everything and we couldn't
17 find them. We went back to sweep and clear it up. What happened was these guys had
18 even taken those mines and set them up into mine fields in the external parts and edges of
19 the ambush sight. So, any reaction force coming up, which did come up, would end up
20 right in the minefield. So, one of the things we had a hard time teaching troops, but we
21 really spent a lot of time with, was called immediate action drills, and that's where when
22 you get into a situation where you've being attacked from one particular position like
23 that, the thing you do to get off the trucks, the natural tendency of most people intuitively
24 is get the hell away from the fire and run away from it. Well, that's exactly the wrong
25 thing to do. They've proven over time that running away from things, what happens is
26 the individuals that are shooting at you can shoot at you all day long with no fear of any
27 problems. If you turned and run directly into fire, you're going to save people's lives in
28 the long wrong, and that's totally counter-intuitive of course, but it's called immediate
29 action drills and that's the hardest thing I think that is to teach somebody in combat is
30 when you're receiving fire in an ambush type environment, you lock bayonets, you move
31 in there and you just move straight into it. Of course we had to run straight into elephant

1 grass and salt grass, and so the guys got online and started moving inward, except some
2 of them had gotten blown out of the trucks into ditches and stuff like that. We ended up
3 with 22 Marines dead that day, if I remember correctly. The problem was, as we started
4 moving in toward the fire in this elephant grass, the North Vietnamese had gotten
5 themselves down into spider holes and had this camouflage over them, so our guys, as
6 they moved right into them, suddenly found that they had North Vietnamese behind them
7 and they had North Vietnamese in front of them. It's got to be a tremendous battle. The
8 40-millimeter Dusters, by the time I got there with the reaction force, they had the whole
9 entire roadway covered in brass shell casings where they just fired everywhere. The
10 reaction force comes in there and the first thing the reaction forces were going to do was
11 they would come in from the flanks and of course standard tactic, North Vietnamese
12 knew that and so they had set up this minefield so the 1st Platoon hit that and took major
13 casualties right off. That's one of the problems; you're trying to be aggressive in a fight,
14 but on the other hand, they suck you right into situations which can really nail you.
15 Finally we were able to get some helicopter gunships in there and relieve the pressure,
16 but the ceiling was so low we couldn't get aircraft in to help us out. So, it was really
17 whatever you could do with the weapons that you had at the time, and like I said, the
18 Dusters helped out a lot. The other tanks stayed in there but it got nailed a couple of
19 times and it was fairly ineffective because it couldn't come off the road and go into that
20 elephant grass because it would sink and you'd lose the tank then. But Matteson,
21 Lieutenant Matteson, my XO, was bringing out the payroll, and the mortar shell landed in
22 the back of the truck and it had the canvas cover over the truck and it killed Malassi and
23 blew the back off of Matteson's head if I remember correctly. It opened up, and you
24 could see his brain, they said. He stumbled out of the truck and we lost that payroll,
25 \$40,000, which was the funniest thing. They were more concerned about that than they
26 were the 22 Marines that were killed from the way headquarters Marine Corps came
27 back. They sent a colonel out from headquarters Marine Corps looking for the money
28 and the whole works, but it was in an ammo can, and about three weeks later another
29 similar ambush, some guy rolled over into a log and the log kind of moved and he found
30 the ammo can underneath there. So somebody had buried it under the tree I think with
31 the intent of coming back and getting it I guess, I'm not sure. We never did figure that

1 one out. But they finally broke contact. I think we killed a whole lot of them. I don't
2 remember the numbers, I'll have to go back and look for sure, but it was a terrible
3 ambush and some of the guys that were coming out from Dong Ha for replacements to
4 my company. They didn't have weapons for them so they'd give them a flak jacket,
5 helmet and two grenades. Some of those guys got blown off the truck and one guy in
6 particular I can remember was just laying there just shaking and just totally gone, blown
7 up. He only had his two grenades and holding one in each hand and he was just shaking
8 like a leaf and he couldn't do anything because he didn't have anything to fight with.
9 That's when we had problems getting weapons and our supply lines were screwed up and
10 they told us, "Don't cannibalize weapons from one to another. Try to get a good
11 weapon," and all this stuff. Well hell, that sounds good but when you get in these
12 situations and you've got to have weapons, you cannibalize, you do what you have to.
13 What's the word I want to use...some officer who's in the rear there decides to hold your
14 foot to the fire on some of these things, then lo and behold, you're going to get nailed for
15 just trying to survive and that happened in one incident, I was clearing some land and one
16 of my bulldozers got caught and sunk all the way up to its tracks and I couldn't get it out
17 and the colonel wanted to charge me for the damn thing. I was like, "What do you mean,
18 charge me for the thing?" But, that kind of stuff because people in the rear don't realize
19 what's happening with the guy's up front so to speak. But that was 13 January, '68. that
20 was probably the worst day, one of the worst days up in that area for us.

21 SM: And this major ambush, this was PAVN, this was NVA?

22 JO: Yes.

23 SM: That whole operation, you lost 22 Marines?

24 JO: Yes, 22 killed.

25 SM: How many wounded?

26 JO: I don't remember, but it was probably 30 or 40. we had a hard time getting
27 casualties out of there of course because it was locked in and we couldn't get the
28 helicopters in, and of course it was just total confusion. I've got some pictures when I
29 came back where we had the dead bodies on one of the Dusters and we had the tank, they
30 finally medevaced out one of the lieutenants. Another lieutenant the night before I'd
31 loaned my field jacket because it was cold to a lieutenant and he was coming back with

1 the group and we couldn't find him and couldn't find him and finally a couple of days
2 later, he was a big football player for University of North Carolina, they found him a
3 couple of days later. We were still sweeping back through there trying to find that money
4 and trying to find the troops and still missed a few Marines that we couldn't find in the
5 dark at night and everything else, and as we swept back through we finally found him and
6 he had about three or four dead North Vietnamese, one in his hands where he choked him
7 to death and they killed him. But, we brought him back and I'll never forget, they had
8 him on a cot and they had a body bag on him and he still had my field jacket on and all,
9 and I can remember walking up and just looking at him like, "Oh man." They just had
10 him sitting there until they could Medevac him out because we couldn't get all the
11 casualties out of there because of the weather and everything; pretty tough scene.

12 SM: Well one quick question; you mentioned earlier that the maps that you guys
13 would make of the minefields would be very complete, very accurate. How much
14 reference material was there on the maps as far as grid coordinates, to what level of grid
15 coordinates, was it six digit, eight digit, ten digit, that kind of stuff so that it wasn't a tree
16 in a particular location, it was actually a location that could be verified?

17 JO: Actually, we even went to the point of driving iron stakes or iron pipes in the
18 ground and locating them according to certain major features. We didn't have GPS back
19 then but what we would do is we would have like we would try to go to six or eight digit
20 coordinates, probably eight in most cases, because usually your maps are 1:50,000 scale
21 so you could get down to eight digits on each one, on lat and long real easy. It actually
22 wasn't lat and long, it was UTM, universal transverse Mercator grid system, if I
23 remember correctly. It was the standard stuff we used, and we were able to...we would
24 set up, we would try to get a couple of iron pipes from different directions and actually
25 establish them in the ground so that we would have what we would consider to be a
26 benchmark, and that way we'd take off, you'd set your transit right over that particular
27 point, and you'd start working through your minefield and that's the way we did that and
28 I had to of course certify the sheets and everything else. So, you would actually have
29 quite precise. I would not have felt uncomfortable sending my Marines back in there to
30 disarm the field if necessary. Now the difference would have been when all that elephant
31 grass and jungle growth that we had put in there starts growing back, the roots and all

1 may move the mines around a little bit. The Marines have had a lot of experience
2 working with active minefields down in Cuba especially. If I'm not mistaken, one of the
3 largest active minefields in the world today or was until recently I think was the
4 minefield down near Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I went in there in 19...when was that
5 Carter went in there with that show of force, '82 or something like that? I went down
6 there as an advanced force with that, as an engineer officer looking at surveying the
7 minefield and whatever else we could do to reinforce that place where they thought the
8 Cubans were going to come through the wire. But, if the North Vietnamese after the war
9 had gotten those sheets, they wouldn't have had any problem taking those things out I
10 don't think. They were very good anyway, even without the sheets.

11 SM: You said the copy was kept at division?

12 JO: I think it was at 3rd Marine Division in the G2 section which is the
13 intelligence section.

14 SM: There was not a copy left with the local commander?

15 JO: See, the problem was local commander not necessarily makes sense because
16 units will come and go out of there. We would have like a command post, but there was
17 such a flurry of activity. After we left, Delta company, 11th Engineers came into Ca Lu
18 and moved north and I think they came in on a lot of our equipment and moved north all
19 the way up to Khe Sanh and opened Khe Sanh up because that's right after that big siege
20 at Khe Sanh. I think it was like March of '68 when they went up there. When they did
21 that, everybody behind them, the 1st Air Cav and everybody came into that area where
22 that ambush site was and they just landed and set up a camp in there and made this huge,
23 massive place which we never saw because we'd been pulled out by them, which was
24 crazy, but we were gone at that point. But, there wasn't any commanding officer to leave
25 it with. The only stable command element was back at the division headquarters, 3rd
26 Marine division, in Dong Ha so there really wasn't anybody to leave anything with. To
27 be honest with you, I can't remember. Intuitively it seems like I should have left
28 something with like the infantry company commander that was there, but I can't
29 remember that, and Gunnery Sergeant Cunningham who would have known that just died
30 here in April and Master Sergeant LaDuke who would also have known that died last
31 November, both from complications due to Agent Orange. So, I've got one other fellow

1 that might remember that, it's a corporal by the name of Mickey Ryan who's down in
2 Lynchburg, Virginia, and I'm close to him. In fact, I sent him an email this morning to
3 ask him about some of the stuff that we were going to talk about today and he hadn't
4 emailed me back today yet, but he's a good man to talk with.

5 SM: That would be good to interview him.

6 JO: Absolutely, because he could substantiate some of the stuff I've been saying.

7 SM: Yeah, get as many 9th Engineers as we can.

8 JO: See the other thing you do, you get a different perspective because you're
9 talking to a captain with one perspective and now you get down to a corporal who's down
10 on the ground and another perspective, too. That's why this book, The 9th Engineer
11 Battalion, 1st Marine Division in Vietnam, of course they did the 35 different interviews,
12 is interesting because it takes so many different ones of us from different perspectives on
13 how we looked at the war.

14 SM: How long was the interview conducted for that book, do you recall?

15 JO: I wrote most of it, and it took over a year's time. But the problem is, it only
16 covers my first tour, it doesn't cover my second tour because I got sick with this
17 melanoma stuff and I never got the second part written before she went to press.

18 SM: All right, is there anything else you want to talk about before we cut this CD
19 off?

20 JO: No, I think that's a good point to stop.

21 SM: All right, this will end the recording on this CD.

22 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. James O'Kelley on
23 the 20th of December. Alright, why don't we go ahead a talk about the action at LZ
24 Baldy?

25 JO: Okay. Let me get out of Ca Lu first.

26 SM: Okay. I'm sorry.

27 JO: What we did, somewhere at the end of January and I've got different dates,
28 I'm not sure exactly when, but it was right near Tet. We, for some reason, they decided
29 to move us back out of Ca Lu where we were established and ready to go and send us
30 back to Chu Lai. I don't know why they did this because the turn back around and few
31 weeks later the sent Delta Company 11th Engineers back to Ca Lu and ran them right up

1 the road to Khe Sanh and we could have done that ourselves. I think there was some
2 political stuff going on there. That's the only thing I can figure because it didn't make a
3 lot of sense to me from a logistical standpoint or tactically, either one... because the first
4 problem was getting us out of there, which was tough, because we'd had that ambush on
5 January the 13th and all the things that I've talked about. But we ended up going out of
6 there in two phases, they took my company... I was down really low in people by that
7 time; I don't think out of the 225 somehow I've got some figures here around 60 or 70
8 effectives left. There was like first platoon I had 25 and about 39 in the second platoon,
9 24 in the third platoon and about 24 in the fourth platoon. So I was down to probably to
10 75 or 100 people, including the officers. So there was a lot of folks that had gone out one
11 way or the other. So they took us out and we'd come in on the convoys and mostly went
12 back out on CH-53 Alphas which was the big transport helicopter. I don't think it took
13 many helicopters to get us out of there to be honest with you. I think they can hold about
14 20 a shot so in about four runs we had everybody out of there with exception of the rear
15 echelon party who stayed back. What they did, they had an, I think it was a LST that
16 came up that river, beached in the area there, or mike boats I think the were called, the
17 were pretty shallow draft boats and they off loaded some of the heavy equipment on to
18 that and brought it back. Now Mick Ryan, who was Corporal Ryan, was one of the rear
19 area party and he was reminding me about that not too long ago when we had our reunion
20 in D.C. and I had forgotten about all that stuff. So he's got some good information on
21 that, you can interview him later. So we came back to Dong Ha and we kind of got our
22 bearings back and... I can remember being back there and getting, coming under a rocket
23 in artillery fire a couple of times while we were waiting to get out of there. Finally the
24 C... I was trying to think of the four engine aircraft that we used that came in to get us
25 out... 130s, KC-130s, Hercules. Hercules came in to take us back to Chu Lai and I think
26 we got just about everybody on one aircraft, were it had taken two to bring us up. I
27 remember having to sit right behind the pilots and I've got some real nice slides of taking
28 off out of Dong Ha and landed down in Chu Lai and the way the pilots flew an airplane,
29 which was quite interesting. We got back to Chu Lai and they had trucks to meet us and
30 they took us back to our base camp there and within a week, we'd hardly had a chance to
31 rest at all, the Colonel had reassigned us to go to LZ Baldy, which is hill 10, which was

1 north and west of Chu Lai. You go up route one, past Tam Ky, T-a-m K-y, which is a big
2 city, provincial capitol I think, on up past a place called Thang Binh,
3 T-h-a-n-g B-i-n-h and you kind of make a left turn up there into this base camp where the
4 Marines had been there initially because it was a base of operations, kind of combat
5 operating base to launch the Marines out into what was called the Que Son Valley, Que
6 Son is Q-u-e I think it's S-o-n. Those guys would work out of there for an extended
7 period. What they'd do, they'd launch from there to go into firebases and then go into
8 the valley there. That place was in many cases worse then the DMZ in my opinion
9 because mines, booby traps, conventional forces, he dealt with the whole nine yards. We
10 went in there and took over a base camp were some other unit had been there, I think it
11 might even been the Alpha Company 9th Engineers who had a platoon or some people
12 there. So we took over a fairly interesting base camp and we built it up real fast, of
13 course like everything else we were out on the perimeter again. We started immediately
14 being assigned, the first thing to do was to keep Route 1 open, north south, and I think it
15 was Route 22 west. Oh by the way, something that just came to my mind a few minutes
16 ago...the units we were fighting up on the DMZ was the NVA304B battalion I think it
17 was, but I'm not positive. They had red and blue bandanas they'd wear around the neck,
18 kind of like Boy Scout bandanas. Anyway, went back down at Hill 10 LZ Baldy, the
19 Marines called it Hill 10, the Army called it LZ Baldy... so a lot of times I think we call
20 it Hill 10 or I think it was...no, no it wasn't the Hill 10 it was Hill 63, excuse me, Hill 10
21 was a little further south, it was another operating area. This is Hill 63 LZ Baldy. The
22 Army Americal Division was working out of there, some of there folks by then, because
23 what had happened when we moved up to Dong Han, most other Marine units with
24 exceptions of my battalion moved out of there in the air wing. Move out of Chu Lai and
25 the Army came in back filled across there and all the Marine units, the two divisions of
26 Marines and all their support troops were pretty much north Da Nang and further north.
27 Third Marine Amphibious Force, which was a big headquarters area was in Da Nang and
28 everything else was north, first marine division I think was still at, it might have been at
29 Hue/Phu Bai and the third marine division was at Dong Ha by then if I'm not mistaking.
30 But everything was gone because the whole idea was to back fill in with the Army 1st Air
31 Cav...all those folks came in. So, there we were supporting the Americal Division there

1 at LZ Baldy and I think it was the 11th Armored Cavalry Division was one unit I worked
2 with quite a bit and supported. So we would go out in the mornings and what we'd start
3 off with and I've got a battle map that I'll show you and I had check points laid out and I
4 had to send a platoon north up Route 1 to one of their major bridges across a huge river.
5 It was almost, maybe 10 miles south of Da Nang. Then I had to go south all the way
6 down to the other side of Thang Binh almost to Tam Ky. Then I had another mine sweep
7 that went west from LZ Baldy Hill 63 out towards, I think it was called Firebase Ross and
8 a couple other firebases out there. So we were very busy everyday starting of at zero
9 dark thirty in the morning until probably noon or later just clearing roads and sometimes
10 it took later then that because we'd run into mines and we'd run into ambushes and stuff
11 like that. What we did and I don't remember how we got this idea, but as we're moving
12 up the road we would have a dump truck full of dirt and rock and we'd have that dump
13 truck back up the road so that if we ran into a situation where the NVA or VC if there
14 were any VCs left around there, but they'd blown a hole in the road or something... we
15 could check it out with the mine detectors and then we could just dump dirt in it to keep
16 the road going until we could come back and put a culvert in or whatever we needed to
17 do for drainage. These roads, this Route 1 was again probably twelve to fifteen maybe
18 eighteen feet wide at the most, six foot on either side for shoulders leading off and
19 usually its either rice paddies. In that particular area it was mostly rice paddies on either
20 side of it. So you had to put culverts in to get the water moving one way or another so it
21 wouldn't flow over the road and mess the road up. So it was a constant problem. One of
22 the problems I found was a lot of times the North Vietnamese and these provisional units
23 that they brought in there were extremely good with mines and demolitions and a lot of
24 times they would take dud ordinance from our aircraft and reuse that against us. So more
25 than one time... what I did, I had a helicopter ever morning, a Huey, and they would pick
26 me up and I'd go out ahead of the mine sweep teams and I go up one side of the road, and
27 we'd go fairly slow and I'm visually looking for a couple of things. I'm looking into
28 culverts to see if there's any, you can sometimes see where they'd put a bomb in there
29 and they'd up ended the bomb in the culverts so that a pressure device setup would
30 detonate it or they would have wires leading back to some Vietnamese in the bushes there
31 and they'd have a command detonated device there. So I would go up the road looking

1 for that and I had machine gunners in the helicopter and all. We were pretty well armed.
2 I would also look because the road was primarily, a lot of it was dirt, hard packed gravel
3 and all, if they were putting mines in roads usually you could see where fresh diggings
4 were and stuff like that. So I'd go up in the morning ahead of the mine sweep and come
5 back, go up one side come down the other and keep radio contact with my sweep teams
6 as I was going up and back and I'd do that with on all three areas every morning. I had a
7 lot of interesting adventures we'll talk about maybe if we have time later. The main thing
8 I was trying to do was give them advance notice of problems... more than once we
9 flushed out some North Vietnamese who were waiting to ambush our troops and stuff
10 like that. So it was a useful thing to do. It got a little hairy every now and then, but the
11 main thing was that we had visual observation ahead of the troops.

12 SM: Let's go ahead a talk about some of these adventures and some of the hairy
13 situations you found yourself in.

14 JO: Okay. When we... I can remember a couple of incidences where...one thing
15 I do was when I finished up I'd come back to LZ Baldy and I'd get in the truck and I go
16 up and follow up behind the mine sweeps, different ones on different days, just to kind
17 of... it's a command and control issue and I wanted to be out there with the troops
18 involved in what's going on so I'd get back in there and work with them at some point.
19 Some of the things that happened, one that stands out in my memory especially is... we
20 were going down the road and I'm looking back kind of over my left shoulder because
21 I'm kind of half hanging out of the helicopter and I'm looking out and I'm talking with
22 the pilot and all and I'm looking at this one particular culvert and we're going along
23 fairly slowly in this Huey, this UH1 probably...the Army had a different version for the
24 Marines, I think UH1 Delta probably by then. And I hear... all of a sudden I hear this
25 "Jesus Christ! Look at that!" and I'm turned looking over my left shoulder and as I turn
26 and start to face around the helicopter slows down and he kind of hovers up a little bit
27 and look out over that road way...of course my troops were way back, they weren't up
28 there at that point of course. Here's is a huge; it turned out later to be a reticulated
29 python crossing the road. Now I said we're about 18 foot wide roadway with 6 feet on
30 either side, this sucker was in the rice paddy on one side, up, over, down and coming
31 across the other side. The front of the snake, these guys when they move, those huge

1 snakes like that, they're usually 4 to 6 feet. They raise themselves up 4 to 6 feet to move
2 all that massive body they've got. So I call back to Sam Martini, the lieutenant of the
3 platoon that was coming up. I said, "Sam who you got out on the flanks?" Because one
4 of the things we would do as we're moving up the sweep team, we have two Marines out
5 in the water, the rice paddies, and it was a tough movement going through there, but
6 they'd have things that look like a Shepard's hook with just a big long pole with a hook
7 on. They would drag that along in the water ahead of the sweep team and a very
8 vulnerable thing to do. The theory was that if the North Vietnamese had command
9 detonated wires and they found them, they'd pull it straight up in the air and they'd flip
10 the, they'd take the, once they'd contacted it they'd flip it 180 degrees, put it straight up
11 in the air and they would recon by fire down that wire, which was really interesting
12 because that way we could usually interdict or intercept or flush the North Vietnamese
13 out who were trying to ambush us and blow up our vehicles with these command
14 detonated mines and all. So I called back to Martini, I said, "Sam," in fact I didn't say
15 Sam at that point, it was kind of like I think we were, I can't remember our call sign, but
16 whatever it was I was I think a Delta 6 was my call sign and he was, I think he was... in
17 fact I can tell you what platoon he was because I've got it right in front of me here... he
18 was third platoon. So I'd say, "Delta 3 actual this is Delta 6 actual. Who do you have
19 out on the drag lines with the mine sweep team and where are you?" And he told me
20 who he had and what was going on and I said, "Well, you better pull those two guys in
21 for a few minutes because we've got a major snake out here that's probably thirty feet
22 long, python!" So we just let the snake go, no sense killing the darn thing... it's a
23 beautiful snake, magnificent. We figured it might eat a couple North Vietnamese and
24 we'd be ahead of the game... you never know. Figuring most Marines were too big for it
25 hopefully, but those things eat some pretty large meals as you can imagine. So I told him
26 what was going on and one of these guys was a fellow from down south, Lance Corporal
27 Sleet, S-l-e-e-t and on a patrol many, many months before that, probably six or eight
28 months before that when we were down in Chu Lai. Sleet, I guess he might have
29 extended too because he was around... we were on a patrol and he was like my point man
30 and we were going across this rice paddy and we ran across a bamboo viper who was
31 eating a fish and Sleet froze. I had to stop the patrol; I had a NBC Correspondent and a

1 first marine division photographer with me. I had to jump down into a rice paddy full of
2 you know what and slog up to the thing and take my M-14, take the magazine out, take
3 the rounds out, and just beat the hell out of this snake so we could move on. Crazy
4 situation. That got written up in the newspaper as ‘Snake Holds Up Marine Patrol.’ And
5 I’m going, oh my God! It had my name in there and everything else... I’ve got the article
6 I’ll show it, it’s amazing. But here’s Sleet again, same old Sleet, he’s back out there and
7 when Martini told me later, we laughed for days over this... Martini turns, “Hey Sleet!
8 There’s a thirty-foot snake up there that’s coming left, coming right towards where you’ll
9 be. Get in here!” Sleet must have been maybe forty or fifty feet out in the rice paddy,
10 said the man almost instantaneously was standing beside him. “Sir.” Because he didn’t
11 want anything to do with any of those snakes. Man he just popped... first time you ever
12 seen a man walk on water. Sleet just tore right in there, man he was moving. And both
13 our guys came in there you know, their eyes wide open, “A what Sir? A thirty-foot
14 snake? Holy shit!” It was very difficult to get Sleet back out to do anymore dragging
15 lines.

16 SM: Now the incident with the bamboo viper... what, how big was that and why
17 did you have to go up and do it? Why couldn’t one of the other marines do it?

18 JO: Oh I was a second lieutenant I think at the time and I just took it upon myself
19 to go up there and kick ass, you know, combat O’Kelley! (laughing) The thing was about
20 18 to 24 inches long, it wasn’t very big, but these beautiful, brilliant green snakes.

21 SM: And was very poisonous.

22 JO: Oh very. I had another incident... we came off a patrol one day and I was
23 sitting afterwards and we were kind of airing out our feet and all. We were sitting around
24 in a mortar pit and in the mortar pit you have sand bags but then they’d take, what they
25 would do they would take ammo boxes and knock the ends out of them and that was how
26 you’d drain and you’d put them in below the sand bags and that’s how you drained the
27 water out of the pit. I was sitting there with several guess, I think we either had
28 medicinal Brandy to give us the little things, slugs of medicinal Brandy like I was
29 drinking a warm beer or something and we were all just chatting. All of a sudden I saw
30 the corpsmen sitting right beside me pull his 45 and start leveling it right at me. I went,
31 “Holy crap!” He says, “Be still Skipper” or “Lieutenant.” He fires a couple rounds... it’s

1 a damn bamboo viper crawling through that slit and it was within about 8 or 10 inches of
2 my feet, of course I was bare foot at the time. So, I ran into several bamboo vipers and
3 they were not pleasant.

4 SM: Did the medic hit the viper?

5 JO: Yeah, he did. Scared the hell out of me. I figured he'd probably kill me, but
6 he managed to hit the snake. So I was eternally grateful to him after I finally calmed
7 down, but I was a little worried at the time to be honest with you.

8 SM: Well that brings up an interesting question.

9 JO: Okay.

10 SM: Fratricide and of course frag. Did that ever occur in the units where you
11 were assigned or in adjacent units? Did you hear stories about fratricide fragging?

12 JO: No. With the Marines up in the period when I was there, up to that point, I
13 don't think there were any incidences that I know of. The only time I even had anything
14 like that occur, and a lot of times I think a lot of that fratricide is because the officers or
15 the staff NCOs either were hard ass on their troops, really badly or they weren't
16 participating with them in a sense of leading them by example. That's just a gut feel for
17 what seems to me like causes some of those problems because in my knowledge the way
18 we were trained is you never ask a man to do something that you won't do and you're
19 going to be doing it with them. You made lead them and of course the Marine Corps...
20 you know the difference between the Army and the Marine Corps in this area is we talked
21 about platoon leaders in the Marine Corps, in the Army they talked about platoon
22 commanders. My understanding was the reason for that was in the Korean War, they had
23 all this platoon leaders and one of the classes of West Point cadets lost a tremendous
24 number of their lieutenants leading their troops in Korea. So after that the Army went to
25 an idea of platoon commanders were in a lot of times you're back in the rear with all the
26 equipment and everything and they'd put a ton of money into you, they don't want to lose
27 you. So it was like command the troops rather than lead the troops. The Marine Corps
28 stayed with that platoon leader concept and the whole idea was you lead by example. So
29 when you said, "Why did I go kill the bamboo viper?" It seemed like what I ought to do.
30 Why I was always number two on the patrol because it seemed like I needed to be up
31 there where I could influence where we went and be in control of things. When we

1 attacked positions and all, a lot of times I'm out there leading the show. One time up at
2 Cao Lu we had a problem I think it was on probably Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve I
3 can't remember which, where they started mortaring us and somebody said, "The Gooks
4 have gotten into our ammo dump!" Well, I asked for a couple of volunteers and I went
5 down with the K-Bars and all... I go after them because you can't shoot them down there
6 of course. So we went after them, but I asked for volunteers and I took them out there.
7 Now that's not patting myself on the back, it's just that's the mentality I think is born in
8 Marine officers that you lead by example. By the same tone when it comes time to eat
9 chow, if you've warm chow we're the last to eat... all the troops go first, then we eat. So
10 those kind of philosophies I think made a difference. I did have one problem in all, both
11 my tours, there was some sergeant of some kind, he was at a water point down in that LZ
12 Baldy area someplace and this sucker had kind of been there for a long time and he was
13 running kind of an operation out of there were he was running some prostitution and I'm
14 not sure about it, I think he had some drugs although I'm not positive of that part... but
15 he was selling contraband and everything else you know, like stuff he'd gotten North
16 Vietnamese stuff and everything else. And he'd taken advantage of some of my troops
17 and I had put him under house arrest there and told him to stay put. In fact what I had
18 done was I brought him back to our camp and we were going to court-martial him.
19 Somehow he got out and went over and got a hold of some beer or whiskey or something
20 and got drunk and he was going to come over and shoot me one night. And Ryan could
21 probably remember more about that than I can. I didn't find out about it until the next
22 day because my troops just beat the holy hell out of him! They just tore him up! So,
23 that's the only incident I ever remember of anything like that... and this was kind of
24 because this guy was running his own independent operation, had been out there doing
25 his own thing, and I came in and messed up his operation. But he was, he had tons of
26 money stashed away... he was going to go home a rich man at the expense of our troops
27 even. But that's the only incident I remember fraggings. I was actually shocked when I
28 got home and sometime later in '68 and '69 when I started reading these incidents about
29 fraggings, about things like people rolling grenades into tents and that kind of stuff. I
30 think an awful lot of that was in rear areas. Now, I wouldn't, how do I put this? I
31 wouldn't be surprised occasionally if you got into a combat environment and you had

1 some lieutenant who was a screaming asshole, pardon the expression, but he was in there
2 trying to win medals for himself... I wouldn't be surprised if occasionally if one of those
3 guys might have gotten shot in combat during an intense firefight because troops are
4 savvy enough to understand when people are working with them and when they're trying
5 to sacrifice their lives for somebody else's benefit. I don't know that to be true every, but
6 you hear stories after the fact. So I don't know if that helps you.

7 SM: Oh yeah sure.

8 JM: That's all I... and see, we didn't see, I don't remember seeing a lot of drugs.
9 Hardly any drugs, there might have been a little bit of pot smoked out on the, but most...
10 all the time this happened Steve this was always to my knowledge in the rear areas.
11 Where people get bored and they have access to this stuff. If you're out on the front lines
12 and you're out in a combat environment you damn well better not being doing any of that
13 stuff because you're going to be dead! And your troops around you aren't going to put
14 up with it because they don't want to deal with it either. Now that was our mentality up
15 through the period I was in there. You look at some of these crazy films that Hollywood
16 shows; it looks like everybody was doped up all the time we were out there... that's not
17 my experience at all. In fact movies like, was it I think Platoon?

18 SM: Yes Sir.

19 JO: Most Marine officers you talk to that were over there and all said, "What that
20 guy did was he took the worst events of everything that occurred from '60 to '75 or
21 however long we were over there and compressed all that stuff, the worst of everything,
22 into about an hour and a half movie. And nobody agreed with that all. I've never found
23 an officer that ever agreed with the way that movie was portrayed. I never saw the movie
24 because I tried to look at it once and it just revolted me so much that I just never went
25 back to it.

26 SM: What movie do you think is a good, is the most accurate or best depiction of
27 the war from your perspective?

28 JO: Probably Rumor of War, I thought Caputo did a wonderful job, not
29 wonderful; they did a very good job at depicting an awful lot of what went on there.
30 There were some scenes in, what was that thing called... Full Metal Jacket, were fairly
31 well done, early on with training and all.

1 SM: The boot camp scenes.

2 JO: Yeah. But the actually where they were portraying the war, the Hue/Phu Bai
3 thing, I wasn't in anything like that so I couldn't relate it to anything like that.

4 SM: This will end the interview with Mr. James O'Kelley on the 20th of
5 December.

6 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. O'Kelley, it is the
7 19th of January 2001 at approximately 8:40 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock Texas and
8 Mr. O'Kelley is in Vienna Virginia. Alright Sir. Would you please continue with your
9 discussion about your mine sweeping operations?

10 JO: Okay. What I want to do is kind of cover a couple of areas for you. When I
11 came back off my second tour or my first tour and I went home for thirty days and I came
12 back, immediately after that or very soon after we moved up to North to Dong Ha and Cu
13 Loa, which were areas that we spent some time talking about. We were there through
14 January into early February. As Tet moved on they moved us out of there, which I
15 thought was kind of weird because they needed to open that road up and everything, but
16 then there were some politics involved and it looks to me like from looking from a
17 distance now. Late February, March and April I was at LZ Baldy which is Hill 63 south
18 of Da Nang and there's where we did a lot of our mine sweep operations. In fact my
19 company we responsible for keeping Route 1 open from LZ Baldy which is Hill 63, there
20 was a Route 22 that went west of off Route 1. Route 1 was kind of the north south route
21 and Route 22 was east west and went out into the Que Son Valley. Que Son is different,
22 there's Khe Sanh up north, but there's Que Son down south and Que Son is Q-u-e-S-o-n I
23 think. We called it "The Valley of the Black Rocks" because there's a lot of volcanic
24 rock around there and they were very dark black rocks. I brought one of them home, in
25 fact I've got it on my deck. I don't know why I brought rocks home, but I did. What we
26 would do, we'd get up every morning and I'd send out three mine sweep teams. One
27 would go north up to a river just south of Da Nang, one would go south down almost to
28 Tam Ky, T-a-m K-y, and the other one would go out west to what was called I think LZ
29 Ross, which there was a lot of army folks up in there by that time. The marines had been
30 there before, but they'd moved up north and the army had back filled in behind us. LZ
31 Ross was a firebase and we wanted of course to keep those roads open. Mine sweeps

1 were, I think is probably one of the more challenging and particularly dangerous daily
2 jobs that anybody had because as we'd move up the road there were a lot of things we
3 had to deal with. First of all of course was the mines themselves, the North Vietnamese
4 and Viet Cong got very sophisticated in their abilities to hide their mines and to
5 camouflage them so that it's hard for us to find them. And the equipment that we were
6 using to sweep for them, you know radio waves and all, pick up metal and all, if it didn't
7 have a lot of metal in it; it was very difficult to detect. For instance, one thing they
8 started doing, they would take... and one thing that was really disconcerting was the fact
9 that over and over again if our infantry or air wing had either dud rounds or left rounds
10 laying around out on the battle field, either purposefully or by accident, they'd end up
11 coming back to us in one way or another. A lot of times what we'd find is the 250 pound
12 bombs and other, occasionally there'd be a dud bomb, we seemed to have more problem
13 with that with the Air Force pilots then the Marine pilots. I think what happened was the
14 Marine pilots were used to close air support differently from the way the Air Force used
15 to do it. The marines would come in really low on the deck so they'd have their bombs
16 set to go off 50-100 feet off the deck. The bombs had a little device on it so once you
17 release it, there's like a propeller that spins through the airflow and that would actually
18 arm the bomb as it's in flight. What would happen on some of the bombs, the Air Force
19 guys would be working out of Da Nang and they're usually, they're used to more high
20 level bombing and not coming in right on the deck like a Marine pilot. So they would
21 tend to have their bombs set to detonate at a different timing, obviously from a higher
22 elevations. So when they'd get with the Marine pilots, the Marines are down there on the
23 deck, the Air Force says, "Whoa! Man we'd better be on the deck with them!" So they'd
24 come roaring down there, but they'd forget that the timing on their bombs was such that
25 if they dropped them from that low an altitude they're probably not going to off. And so
26 those dud bombs would end up in the rice paddies and every place else and then the VC
27 and the North Vietnamese would take those things, take them apart and they would
28 actually take the shell off of the bomb and take the green explosive powder, which was
29 something like cordite, out of them and melt that stuff down and then pour it into what
30 affectively looked like cigar boxes and they would have a nail stuck upside down in this
31 wooden box. They'd pour all the explosives in there, in some cases you'd have 10, 12,

1 15 pounds, some cases they'd make it even bigger than that, but all they'd have was
2 simply would be just one nail and then they would take a blasting cap and sit it right on
3 the nail... they would very carefully take the road and put it back in shape and the next
4 poor person that walks over and steps on that blasting cap's gone or if a truck ran over it
5 or anything else. The blasting cap would hit the nail, would detonate the blasting cap,
6 which detonated the cordite and BOOM! It's gone! Very difficult kind of mine to find,
7 they were very, very good at this. They'd also take our cluster bomb units, we call the
8 CBUs and those things supposedly could not be disarmed, and they'd disarm the damn
9 things and then they'd turn back around and we'd find them in the road. Either we'd find
10 them before we get blown up by them or we'd accidentally come across one and those
11 had more metal than so sometimes we could catch them. Then other times they would
12 take the 250-pound bombs and they would up end them and put them in culverts on the
13 road. So you would have a, 250-pound bomb is probably not quite 36 inches high,
14 maybe 36 inches high. So if you had a 48-inch culvert it was not a problem, just put a
15 pressure device in there and up end the thing in the culvert. Many of the times we'd find
16 them in these culverts and what they would do... I guess most people if you're reading
17 this would know what a culvert it, but you know, a culvert is galvanized steel round
18 usually pipe that you carry water from one side to the other and that kind of a thing.
19 What they'd do is they'd upend these bombs in these culverts and then they'd pack sand
20 bags around it. Well, what we found they also did is they booby-trapped the sand bags
21 and they would also booby-trap their mines. I think one of the first times I really lost a
22 lot of people on a mine sweep was...it was always one man-one mine, in other words if
23 the detector fellow finds a mine, they Marine, he would call and say, "Mine!" And then
24 he would move back, we'd send up a man that we call a prober who would take a bayonet
25 and he would probe in the ground. You've seen pictures of that probably.

26 SM: Yes sir.

27 JO: Until he found the mine. And then he'd very carefully remove the dirt and
28 whatever from it and then he would try to disarm the mine. Well, one time that happened
29 and what happened was they found one of these box mines and just by pure luck. Of
30 course he removed the blasting cap and he checked underneath the mine because

1 sometimes there's a pressure release device. What they'll do is they'll put a mine down
2 and they'll put a pressure release device and put another mine on top of it...

3 SM: Oh my.

4 JO: he'd pull the first one off and BOOM! You'd get hit with the second one.

5 SM: Yep.

6 JO: Well, this gentlemen had done quite a bit of mine work and he checked and
7 of course as you're clearing it and you check underneath it and around it and everything
8 seemed okay. He took the mine off and he laid it to the side of the hole and he had it
9 checked to see that everything was okay, fine. He calls some of his guys over; he was
10 going to have a quick class showing them what's going on. Well, unbeknownst to him
11 the North Vietnamese or the VC or whichever had about a foot further down buried a
12 second mine where they had control detonated wires leading out into the rice paddy. So
13 when he brought the guys over and was standing around trying to hold class and show
14 them, they detonated the second mine and killed most of the guys. There was not much
15 shrapnel, it was mostly just concussion.

16 SM: This is one of those box mines built with the boil down remnants of one of
17 the bombs that didn't detonate cordite or whatever?

18 JO: Yes indeed.

19 SM: Wow!

20 JO: It's kind of a green powder, I don't remember the name exactly, it kind of
21 has a cordite smell to it and it blows up. But that took out a whole bunch of guys and a
22 whole bunch of Marines. I think that was my first time seeing somebody destroyed by
23 concussion because I went up to one of the Marines...he looked perfectly fine, I turned
24 him over and his head just kind of like floated and that's just like, oh man. I think the
25 concussion just turns everything to jelly.

26 SM: Yeah.

27 JO: So that was one of the kinds of things we had to worry about. The other
28 thing we'd do is we'd move it up...and this is stuff that hopefully somebody will know if
29 they ever have to do this again is when you're moving up through an area and you're
30 doing a sweep, you want to also make sure that you have people out in the, in the case out
31 in the rice paddies. They'd be twenty-five feet out and we'd have things like Shepherd's

1 hooks, you know, you see the hooks that Shepherds have...dragging through the rice
2 paddies looking for wires because what they would do is they would take the mine, put it
3 in the road and then they would be off in the bushes in a nest of machine guns and
4 whatever else, and they would have this command detonated wire capability and they'd
5 have their detonator in the woods there. So they'd wait for us and what we would do, if
6 we came across wires, of course the guy would do a 180 flip on his Shepherd's hook so
7 he had the wire tied up in the hook, and he'd stick that up as high as he could get it and
8 he'd be screaming...we'd fire what they call recon by fire, we'd start shooting down that
9 wire. Of course he tried to jerk the wire lose and of course everybody would jump back
10 off the road. It usually was total confusion and whatever else, but that's how we manage
11 most of the time to stay ahead of the command detonate wires kind of thing. But you
12 know you could just as easily go over it and miss it too. Depending upon how clever
13 they were if they buried the thing then you don't stand a chance either, so there's that
14 issue. Another thing we did on mine sweeps that I thought was kind of unique is we
15 knew that going up the road that most of the time the easiest place to blow up the road is
16 where there's a culvert and all. So what we would do, we'd have two dump trucks, we'd
17 fill one with culvert and the other with dirt and rock and those dump trucks would
18 literally back up the road rather than driving forward because you drive forward there's
19 no way to turn around because it's some kind of a one lane road. So we'd literally back
20 them up the road. If we found a culvert...I got there, after a while I got to the point that I
21 didn't want my guys going in there and trying to disarm these things because they're so
22 dangerous and there's so many booby-traps on them...we lost so many guys. So I said,
23 "Look. The way we're going to do this...we're going to blow the sucker in place and
24 then we're going to come back in and we'll put a new culvert in and fill it back in. It's
25 not one man's life even to deal with this." So that's what we did. If we came across a
26 250 pound bomb or anything else, what we would do is we would usually take
27 ammonium nitrate shaped charge and we'd put that in there right next to it and we get our
28 command detonated wires and we'd get way back down and we'd blow the thing. I've
29 got some good pictures of those things being blown up and guys hiding behind a truck
30 while we're doing that. So there's some stuff that would link in here visually about what
31 we're talking about.

1 SM: Yeah that's great!

2 JO: The other thing that we used sometimes was dogs went with us. Of course
3 they were just sniffing along line looking for wires and stuff like that and of course they
4 could smell, I don't know what they had them trained to smell, but I guess North
5 Vietnamese or Vietnamese or something, I don't know. But the dogs would come along
6 with us sometimes, especially if we're out in an area where it's close in and everything.
7 So they were alert to things a lot better than of course humans were. Going out to LZ
8 Ross was pretty bad too, that was out route 22. I was talking about going North and
9 South, going out to LZ Ross we also had to put up with a lot of sniper fire and
10 occasionally RPGs, Rocket Propelled Grenades, RPG 5 I think it what they used back
11 then, hand held grenades. They'd fire those at the trucks and stuff like that. We would
12 usually when the team went up we took what we called a big six-by, a big truck that had
13 six wheels and has the, I guess not articulated, but it's more than four wheel drive, it's six
14 wheel drive...and we'd have a ring mount, which was kind of like an anti-aircraft mount
15 over the top where the driver was with a .50 caliber machine gun on that. That gave us
16 some firepower! A lot of times the North Vietnamese and VC didn't want to mess with
17 that 50 because that thing was pretty powerful. Occasionally, I can remember one
18 incidence where almost every time we'd go north we had to go through this one area
19 where it was kind of a...ARVN had a...ARVN's Army, Republic of Vietnam, they had
20 this little fort, just a large brick building and it was kind of off to the side of the road, but
21 they had blocked the road off with these...I forget what you call them, just removable
22 gates with a lot of barbwire on them and they would booby-trap these things with
23 grenades and all. So every time we'd come up the gate, we'd blow the horn and try to get
24 these guys to come down and get their booby-traps off and they wouldn't do it. So we'd
25 have to go over and disarm the booby-traps and then open up the gates and then drive
26 through on mine sweep and then open up the other side. So it was pretty ticklish business
27 and then these characters would stand up on their wall, the brick wall of their little
28 fortress kind of thing they had there and they would every now and then they would think
29 it was a big joke to take their weapons and fire over our heads. Well, myself and a gunny
30 got really sick and tired of that and after a few times and you know, you're a visitor in
31 their country and all this stuff, so we're trying to deal with it. Finally I'd had enough of it

1 and one day on a mine sweep these guys fired over heads and just scared the hell out of
2 some of our guys and we had one of the grenades, we'd disarmed all of them but one, and
3 one of them went off and injured one of my guys and I was pretty upset with that. So I
4 told the guy on the 50-caliber machine gun I said, "You know we've got to teach these
5 suckers a lesson. We don't appreciate this." We'd talk to their officer in charge and all
6 sorts of stuff it hadn't made a bit of difference. So I said, I don't remember the guy's
7 name who was in charge, who was firing the machine the gun, the 50, but I said, "Take
8 the first row of bricks right of the top of that wall where they're standing!" They had
9 kind of like a little parapet kind of thing. He says, "Yes sir! You sure you want me to do
10 that?" I said, "Oh yeah! What do you think Guns?" He said, "Yep! Sounds good to
11 me!" So we backed off and he took that 50 and he fired a warning round, which they all
12 scattered. Then he just took that 50 and he just...duda duda du... He just chucked off the
13 bricks right off the top row. We never had another problem out of those guys from them
14 on.

15 SM: Okay.

16 JO: But it's amazing what you have to do sometimes to get their attention. I
17 think although they knew that we were a potent fight in force they also knew that they
18 could get away with all sorts of stuff that they couldn't get away with the Koreans or with
19 anybody else. So sometimes you just kind of get to a point where you say, 'this is
20 enough.' And you know I was at the reunion this year and I talked to a couple of guys
21 and they remembered that incident, they remember how good our guy was with a .50
22 caliber anyway, especially how he could take off just one row of bricks with that 50...but
23 every brick's flying and I know there were rear ends and elbows flying all over the place
24 with those guys trying to get out of there, so that was pretty good.

25 SM: Let me ask you a couple of questions real quick.

26 JO: Sure.

27 SM: Back to those box mines that they created out of the explosives from bombs
28 and stuff, now obviously there was some forethought into this making them less
29 detectable or undetectable by mine sweeps. Correct?

30 JO: Absolutely.

1 SM: So it must have been very difficult for you men to find these through
2 conventional means.

3 JO: Yes. That's right.

4 SM: Since you knew that they were using this tactic, did you employ any special
5 counter measure to try to define these?

6 JO: Yeah I did a couple of things. I was coming to that and I hadn't gotten to it
7 yet.

8 SM: Oh okay.

9 JO: One of the things that we did...and that's a good question...what we did, I
10 got in a helicopter every morning and I would start off before my guys went out and I
11 usually had a Huey and I'd go up the road at about fifty feet off the deck in a helicopter
12 and visually inspect every inch of the road. Since it was mostly dirt, hard packed dirt,
13 you could usually tell, sometimes you could tell, where they'd been digging and you
14 could see it visually from the air where you couldn't see it from the ground.

15 SM: Ah!

16 JO: Also I'd go along at about probably fifty to hundred feet, you know it's kind
17 of like a triangle looking down from a helicopter, and I could see into the culverts...and
18 we'd come to a culvert, we'd hover down and take a look. Plus my man on the other
19 side of the helicopter, if you're going up the road north-south, what I would be doing is
20 on the right hand side of the road I'd have a man who was actually, his whole entire
21 responsibility was to look for snipers and command detonated wires and people down to
22 the bush and all. More than once we surprised those guys coming over in the helicopter
23 and they weren't expecting anything coming from the air so they hadn't protected
24 themselves well enough from the air. What we would do...I'd go out there and I would
25 visually inspect and look, and a lot of times we could pick out where things had been
26 done. The pilots were pretty trained to do that, the crew chief and the machine gunner
27 right beside me and we were all looking for the same thing; and I had binoculars with me
28 and everything else. One time I can remember coming up through there and there was a
29 big hole in a road and still some smoke literally coming out of it, a dead water buffalo, a
30 momma son and a kid, which was interesting because that told us right off the bat some
31 of those mines were being put in by civilians. So this old woman had her kid on the

1 water buffalo, they'd come out and they were digging a hole and putting the mine in and
2 obviously did something wrong and the dad gum thing blew up and killed all three of
3 them. So you never knew who or what was putting those mines in, how sophisticated
4 they were going to be or how not sophisticated they were going to be, unsophisticated.
5 So it was always a challenge and it was always a challenge to try to stay one step ahead.
6 It's like a spy versus spy, you know, by the time you make an antidote somebody comes
7 with a dote to the antidote, so you've got all that stuff you're dealing with over and over
8 again. But anyway...I would go up one side of the road, I'd come back down the other
9 side of the road and I'd go out and back and I'd go down and back, down to Tam Ky and
10 back. So I would cover the whole route in probably less than an hour. Usually the north
11 south was the one we were most concerned with, the LZ Ross if that didn't get opened
12 until one or two in the afternoon that was okay as long as we get the supply convoys in
13 there later in the day. But the north south route, route one, was the main highway for
14 everybody so we tried to get that open as quick as we could. Now if you run into
15 problems...a lot of times...you know the interesting thing is sometimes civilians would
16 come along and they'd just go right on by us. So they knew that there was no mines in
17 the road that day, usually. Every now and then one of them would go right on by and the
18 next thing you know, BOOM! And there'd be people all over the place and they'd hit
19 something. So, I never did quite figure out the system on that although I did notice that
20 the shell oil trucks, it used to be called Esso Trucks back then. They would run up and
21 down that road and never, I never saw one blown up, I never saw a problem with any of
22 them. There's Shell Oil and Esso Stations, I've got some pictures of the whole entire
23 village being blown up except for the Esso Station and the Shell Station. It's like, hmm,
24 that's interesting, isn't it? So later on I heard that those companies were paying off the
25 Viet Cong.

26 SM: Yes.

27 JO: Obviously they must have been because they were never touched. I guess
28 another thing that was interesting, one time...that area is very...there's jungle on the left
29 side if you're going north, the left side is mostly jungle and the right side is rice paddy
30 and sand...so you kind of, it was a transition zone where that route one went in this
31 particular area south of Da Nang. So I can remember one time we were going up through

1 there and I'm looking back at this culvert and we're going fairly slow and all of a sudden
2 the helicopter stops and kind of hovers up a little bit. I hear this, "Jesus-H-Christ! Look
3 at that!" So as I turn and look, here's this road way which is eighteen feet wide and it's
4 got six foot embankments on either side leading down into rice paddies, which have got
5 water in it and all. And here is a huge snake! And that sucker is across the road, over
6 down, over the other side and he's moving through cross the rice paddies. Turned out it
7 was a reticulated python and that sucker was over thirty feet, it's got to be to have
8 covered all that ground. So I call back to Sam Martini, the platoon commander, I said...I
9 think I was Berabus 6 that was our call sign. I said, "Berabus," I think he was, I guess he
10 was Delta One or Two...so I said, "Delta Two," I think I said, "Who do you have out on
11 the western side of the road pulling Shepherd's hook?" And he told me the young man's
12 name and I said, "Well you just tell him that there's a thirty foot snake in the rice paddy
13 out near him. He said he turned and yelled, "Hey Sleet! There's a thirty foot snake up
14 the road here from ya." He said never seen a man walk on water but once in his life and
15 that was it. That man was back and standing at attention beside him...he said, "I don't
16 think I want to be out there!" So there was some stuff out there that you had to watch.
17 There were water snakes out in there and all sorts of things. These guys didn't have to
18 just deal with the VC or the NVA, they also had to deal with slogging through rice
19 paddies; they had to deal with snakes and other kind of varmints as well; and then of
20 course anytime you get into the rice paddies you had those leeches on you, you had to
21 deal with that stuff; then of course rice paddies are fertilized with human manure so then
22 you've got that kind of stuff to worry about. It was just so many dangers and some of
23 them you didn't even realize there were dangers to. But we did that everyday.

24 SM: Just out of curiosity. Your counter measure there to try to detect where
25 difficult mines were located flying over and things like that, and also ways of dealing
26 with these field improvised mines that the Viet Cong used. Was there any
27 communication mechanism in place, which distributed this type of information
28 throughout the Marine Corps engineers?

29 JO: Yes. We had something called lessons learned.

30 SM: Okay you did have the lessons learned.

1 JO: And there was lessons learned pamphlets that would come out on a regular
2 basis that were typed up on a stenos machine and sent out to people. Later they were put
3 into book form and those lessons learned books should be available to you. I may have
4 some of them around.

5 SM: Okay.

6 JO: I know in my paperwork I kept of stuff on the mines and the demolitions and
7 I've got the old-field manuals and stuff like that at the house. That's some of the stuff I'll
8 be turning over to you as well.

9 SM: Okay.

10 JO: But yes were did. We made a point of doing that. We also had a school in
11 Da Nang and one in Chew Li where the first engineer battalion and I think the seventh
12 engineer battalion had a school where they would send our Marine engineers to teach
13 them more about the mines and not only how to find them, but also how to disarm them
14 and of course disarming was really a tricky business, you've got to be so careful with it.

15 SM: Right. Because as you pointed out...they'd booby-trap booby-traps. I mean
16 it must have been phenomenally difficult keep up with some of that stuff.

17 JO: Well you never knew and you think you're in safe just like that sergeant did
18 and the next thing you know they got you from another angle. So it was always a game,
19 and a deadly game of course.

20 SM: Yes. Now I was wondering, you mentioned that the old woman, child, and
21 water buffalo near that culvert where obviously a bomb detonated. Do you think it's
22 possible too that maybe they were trying to retrieve that to sell it? Maybe they came
23 across it and they were like, well you know I could cash in on it...

24 JO: Get some money out of it. Well, they did have that program that did that.
25 There was the Chieu Hoi program and all where you could turn in weapons, you could
26 turn in anything that they found...we would pay them to turn in ordinance and I don't
27 remember how much. I know if you turned in a 60-millimeter mortar shell you get this
28 amount of money, etc., etc. That could have been true. I don't know, of course there's no
29 way to really know it. But that's a good point and it's a possibility. On the other hand...

30 SM: Equally possible they were putting it in themselves?

31 JO: That's right.

1 SM: Yeah. I was just curious what your thoughts were.

2 JO: You know it's hard to tell in those things. For instance, we were going
3 through this one particular fishing village one day, we weren't an infantry company was,
4 coming back from an operation. This was north of Chu Lai and it's a rather constricted
5 area and all of the Marines were in the back of the trucks, of course they were sand
6 bagged and they were all kind of tactical. They'd have to slow down going through this
7 village and this young girl runs out of one of the hooches, pulls the pin on a grenade and
8 tosses it in the back of the trucks. Well, the Marines first reaction just gunned her down
9 unfortunately the grenade didn't go off. So all of a sudden you created an international
10 incident and every time we'd through that village from then on we'd get sniper fire. No
11 matter what Marines went through there and a couple of Air Force guys got killed going
12 through there because they were in their jeep driving through, kind of like a Sunday
13 afternoon drive and they gunned them down. So you don't know what you're dealing
14 with and that was one of the biggest problems in the war. If everybody wore uniforms
15 like the North Vietnamese did you could usually tell who's who. But even then though
16 Steve, I think one of the hardest things for me was to be able to give the order to fire and
17 when to fire because it's hard to identify friend from foe. The other thing that's very
18 difficult...and of course you know, Americans don't want to be killing women and
19 children either, but yet women and children were killing us. So you have a really tough
20 moral decision to make there. The other decision that was very difficult for me to make
21 sometimes was when you get into these situations where you're drawing fire from like
22 snipers and all, you've got to be real careful. They had a game called, I think it was
23 called Go or something, and the idea of that is something like checkers, but the idea is
24 you keep retreating, retreating, retreating until you get your enemy right where you want
25 them and then you attack. So you always had to be worried about getting suckered in to a
26 firefight and going after these snipers and then to get drawn into a big ambush or
27 something. So I was always concerned about that because our major job was to go up
28 and down that road and clean it out, it wasn't to go clean out snipers. So you had to
29 always keep that in mind but if you started getting rounds and everything happening you
30 tend to get pissed off. Pardon the expression, but you tend to get seriously pissed off,
31 especially if get a couple of people hurt you want to take those guys home and clean them

1 out. So what I would do is call in artillery on them. Of course then you know the
2 problem is are calling artillery in on friendly people or on the sniper? So you always had
3 that issue to deal with. I think most Vietnamese civilians that were not combatants if
4 their village...rounds started coming out of their villages they got down in their holes.
5 They all had their little bomb shelters in their houses and around their hooches and all.
6 So they would dive into their hole because they knew there was going to be return fire
7 coming in. There was so many things that could happen based on mine sweeps that made
8 it even more dangerous. In fact one of the areas that we went over day after day after
9 day, my replacement, I told him, his name was Butch Reso. I said, "Butch, there's one
10 area here near this cemetery you've got to be real careful of. We get sniper fire every
11 Wednesday morning or when we would go up there. And it's kind of like the guy has got
12 his day off from the PX at Da Nang, he comes down and snipes the Marines or
13 something." That was the big joke everybody had anyway. But sure enough, Butch was
14 going up on a run to Da Nang and was on the way back and he got shot in the chest. So
15 you know, you never knew from day to day and trying to get everybody...it's hot as hell,
16 so you try to get them to keep their flak jackets buttoned up was very difficult because it
17 was so hot, but if you don't you're exposed. Teaching these guys just basic stuff and just
18 fundamentals that we learned many, many years... just like professional football you
19 know. In the games, the games usually turn on fundamentals. Well it's the same thing
20 here, getting these guys to stay with the fundamentals when all the weather conditions
21 and nature around them and everything's going to hell in a hand basket is very difficult.
22 That control issue is what leadership is all about, especially in the Marine Corps and
23 that's why when you get the time to go out after a sniper, I'm going to lead them I'm not
24 going to tell them to go get him, I'm going to go with him. That whole concept says,
25 'okay, if you're going to do that just be sure that you understand what's going on and
26 what's the most important part of your mission.' My mission was not to take out the
27 snipers, my mission is to straighten out the road and keep it clean of mines. So that was
28 very difficult to kind of get the emotion out of it and stay with the mission, especially if
29 you get people hurt. But we managed. The interesting...one of the interesting things
30 about that...a thousand meters, ten clicks from LZ Baldy, our headquarters, we had a
31 large complex there, which had a lot of the Army Cavalry division and other people in it.

1 We came across in March, I think it was March of that year, we came across a large
2 North Vietnamese training camp, base camp and we'll talk about that in a minute too.
3 All these mines and booby-traps and all, I think they were putting them out there because
4 that's part of their training. So when we finally uncovered this place it was really
5 interesting because a lot of the mine and booby-trap problems slowed down extensively.
6 So they were actually training these guys to do the very thing and then as a result of that
7 what you'd run into is you know...we'd run into these base camps and we'd say, 'wait a
8 minute, ten clicks from our position, that's kind of audacious at best.' But they were
9 right there in that village and it was just like, hmm, very interesting.

10 SM: Ten clicks, not one click?

11 JO: Yeah ten clicks is a thousand meters, it's like a hundred meters per click.
12 What they mean by clicks of course is just artillery term. One click on the mortar would
13 give you about a hundred meters in distance. So a lot of times guys would talk in terms
14 of clicks.

15 SM: Just out of curiosity, were there any Vietnamese that were in your base camp
16 area that were working, cleaning up hooches, shining boots, washing clothes, that kind of
17 stuff?

18 JO: We had a barber that would come in.

19 SM: Okay you talked about him.

20 JO: Yeah and we had to have somebody with him. I don't remember having any
21 others in there doing stuff, but outside the camp...the Army used a lot of people for that
22 because they had what they called Civic Action Groups. That'd be like you have the S-1,
23 S-2, S-3, S-4...well this would be the S-5, which was civic action and they had money set
24 aside to pay these people to help them. We didn't use that, first of all because we didn't
25 have much money to deal with that. The barber was taking piasters, which was their
26 money, for haircuts and we had problems with him, but the actual...I don't remember any
27 other Vietnamese being inside our camp. But what the guys would do is they would take
28 their wash, their laundry and stuff out into town, it wasn't a town it was little villages,
29 little hooches and all...and pay the women to wash their clothes for them. I don't know,
30 I guess they had their boots polished. I never saw any of that done. I think most of us
31 did our own boots, but they might have, it'd been pretty easy to do.

1 SM: When you were out on these missions sweeping, you'd go down this strip of
2 road, come across a mine, guy would yell, "Mine," you'd bring up whoever was most
3 qualified I suppose to take care of that particular situation. I assume that you'd deploy
4 flank security and all kinds of other stuff as well.

5 JO: Yes. Yeah we'd go totally tactical, 360 degrees. So everything you did over
6 there was 360 degree tactical. When you hear this term like face out, and spread out and
7 face outboard...that's what it was all about. So when you're really being sarcastic to
8 somebody for some reason...well let's bunch up and face inboard. (Laughing) That was
9 a very sarcastic remark and they knew at that time that somebody's pissed off when you
10 start talking like that.

11 SM: Right. As you were doing your recon by air of those roads, did you ever
12 come under fire?

13 JO: Yes. Yeah I took fire quite a few times and I managed to take out a couple of
14 them too. So more than once...and I was armed to the teeth and we would when we
15 come across these guys every now and then and start-taking rounds...of course we had
16 two M-60 machine guns on there and then all of us had our weapons too. So they made a
17 big mistake usually by doing that, but sometimes I think we surprised them and they
18 thought they'd been found and so they were just defending themselves so to speak. It got
19 a bit hairy every now and then.

20 SM: Never got shot down though?

21 JO: Yeah I did once. I can't remember much about it. One time we took a round
22 through the oil line and the helicopter went into a rice paddy. One of the guys didn't get
23 out, the helicopter was rotating in, I think he tried to get out too quick and the blade got
24 him.

25 SM: Oh.

26 JO: But several of us got out. One time I was coming back...going up and down
27 that road, I've got the map and I'll give you the map too that I used on one of the roads.
28 Going up and down that road there was check points and so my base camp, the radio
29 operator would call, as we moved up the road the radio operators, there would be more
30 than one we usually had two or three radio operators with us depending on how big the
31 mine sweep was. Sometimes that mine sweep north and south if we'd been taking in a lot

1 of fire and stuff could be as much as a platoon of forty or so Marines, plus we'd have
2 some Army security with us, we may have another forty plus a couple of APCs and all of
3 our stuff. So you could have it strung out for a mile or so with a lot of folks. We had
4 checkpoints and as we moved across checkpoints up and down those roads and all we'd
5 call in where we were. So the radio operators and the command bunker in my CP could
6 keep track of who was where and how they're moving and if they didn't hear from
7 somebody in a certain period of time they would call up to us to check to see where we
8 were and what's going on and seeing if we needed support in anyway. They would
9 always have like a...we'd have a hot pad launch of F-4s or A-4s down out Chu Lai and
10 we also had Army gunships and reaction platoons ready to go at any point. So we had
11 this back up there and we had this sequence of ways of doing things. One day I was
12 coming back from...what I do, after I finished up my visual recon on the helicopter I'd
13 go back and get in the jeep and my driver would take me and we'd go back up the trail.
14 His name was Carolos Molina, he's actually out in California now, he's a lawyer out
15 there. I'll have to give you his name so you can interview him if you want to. We were
16 coming back, it was in the Mark 38 Jeep and I had a radio operator in the back and I had
17 a driver and myself, and we got ambushed and I was between checkpoints. Luckily I had
18 stopped off...the Korean Marines had an outpost a place called An Hoa, I think it's
19 spelled A-n H-o-a or something like that. As you're going north towards Da Nang it was
20 off on the eastern side of the road, it was a pretty big city and the Korean Marines had a
21 pretty large group of folks in there. We'd been over to visit them and talk with the
22 Anglico people, which the Anglico were Marine air naval gunfire liaison outfit. Those
23 guys worked with the Koreans and gave them artillery support and air support. Well, we
24 were coming back and we got ambushed and got blown out of the jeep thirty miles an
25 hour they opened up on us. So we ended up out in the rice paddies and it took a company
26 of Korean Marines to get us out of there. Those kind of situations, when it occurred the
27 nice thing is, nice thing (laughing) the lucky thing is that the guys on the radios are
28 paying close enough attention that they know what's going on. So they call back and
29 they didn't get an answer to us because the radio was messed up and everything
30 else...you know they started calling in a reaction platoon to get out there and help us.
31 Luckily they did because it was a pretty large group of NVA and the rounds started

1 coming in and that's what kept them off our backs until they could get us out of there. I
2 kind of got my neck injured up pretty bad coming out of that jeep and I don't know if
3 Molina was driving that day or who was driving, but somebody was driving. To this day
4 I'm still having trouble with my neck from that landing and that stuff. So there were
5 some pretty scary times, so to speak, in there.

6 SM: How did you get pulled out when the helicopter crashed?

7 JO: We just kind of struggled our way out and what the...I guess he said he was
8 going in, "May day!" and that kind of stuff and the Army sent immediate...we had
9 helicopters all over that place before you knew it. We were Medevaced out of that place
10 pretty fast. And they didn't lose the whole helicopter, they were able to get the thing, I
11 guess they took it back because a few days later we were going back up there on another
12 mine sweep, the next day in fact and I don't remember seeing it up there. So most the
13 time things happen to you, you know you just keep going...patch it up and keep moving
14 because that's all you could do. We had a saying over there, "It don't matter." The
15 whole theory of the thing was no matter what happens it don't matter, just don't matter
16 and that was kind of a pessimistic view but that's kind of the way the troops got after a
17 while.

18 SM: Coping mechanism.

19 JO: Yeah that's exactly what it was, no question about it. Okay let's see...

20 SM: Well I was curious about that AP Bon 2. If there's anything else that you
21 wanted to discuss about the mine sweeping operations we can, other wise if you want to
22 move forward to...

23 JO: Right. I think I've covered most of the mine sweep stuff unless you've got
24 any other questions on it.

25 SM: I can't think of any thing right now.

26 JO: Okay. And I'll get you those books.

27 SM: Okay.

28 JO: And any of the other materials I've got I'll turn over to you guys.

29 SM: Wonderful!

30 JO: And I've got a lot of pictures of mine sweeps too. From time to time I took
31 some pictures of it.

1 SM: Those would be great to integrate.

2 JO: Yeah and if I can get those integrated into the Oral History that's what I hope
3 I can do. Can I take just one break for a minute?

4 SM: I was just going to say. Yeah. If you want to take a break...Actually why
5 don't we go ahead pick up with AP Bon 2.

6 JO: Okay. On one of these particular days when action was getting pretty strong,
7 I think this was like March 13th, I'll have to go back and get the actual date...I should
8 have had it and I thought I had it in this file with me I was just looking it up, but it didn't
9 have the right date. But I'll get you that date because I've got a write up on some of it; it
10 made the newspapers and all. The Army was conducting a sweep up to the east of Route
11 One, which was heading north. They were actually north and east of LZ Baldy and this
12 was at ten clicks out, about a thousand meters from our base camp. It was often an
13 area...there was a lot of rice paddies and then there'd be clusters of homes and around the
14 homes there'd be a lot a trees, a lot of palm trees and stuff like that. Of course the
15 Vietnamese if they're working these rice paddies...it was kind of a neat system, it was
16 kind of like the hub of a wheel...they'd be in the center of the hub with a little village and
17 there's rice paddies all around them so everybody could work together or it was easy to
18 get to their fields so to speak. Well the Army was moving through a particular area over
19 there on kind of a search and destroy operation and just more or less checking things out
20 and they'd been through that area before, never had any problems. So, they were moving
21 through and they started receiving some sniper fire from a position right out on the edge
22 of the fields there. So they immediately took that sniper under fire and started moving
23 towards that position and then they started receiving heavy fire and receiving a lot of
24 rockets, rocket propelled grenades and machine guns and everything else. It turns out
25 what they'd done...and later on we tried to figure out what happened, this was 11th
26 Armored Cav guys. They were in those M-113 Army personnel carriers. What happened
27 was, we think, is there was some trainees...it turned out this Ap Bon 2 was just, it's not
28 the Roman numeral it's just the numeral 2. It's A-p B-o-n-2 in parentheses...and I'll
29 show you on a map where that is. This particular area of village was one of those areas
30 surrounded by trees and all and had these houses in there. Well, they turned
31 out...thatched roofs, these houses were reinforce concrete and there was twenty-six

1 reinforced concrete bunkers with interlocking fire built in underneath in the basements of
2 these houses. So the Army didn't realize what they were getting into. They suddenly
3 attacked this position...next thing they know they're in a world of trouble with fire
4 coming from all over and all sorts of fire coming in. So they call for reinforcements and
5 the first thing this captain in the Armored Cav group calls for, he needs some engineer
6 support. So they call down asking for us to come up and help them out because they
7 realize that they were working with reinforced concrete bunkers. Now what these were
8 these were houses, they were bunkers, built over houses built over bunkers. These
9 bunkers were not only reinforced concrete steel; the insides of the bunkers were lined
10 with bamboo. They were sophisticated; they had firing slots and interlocking...do you
11 know what I mean by interlocking fires?

12 SM: Oh yes sir.

13 JO: The whole entire circle was interlocked. The fires were interlocking so it's
14 mutually supporting fires. So you got to take one out to break the whole chain or you just
15 lose a lot of people trying to do it. So he called for engineers to come up, so it was
16 interesting we'd just gotten everybody back from the mine sweeps. It must have been
17 noon or so, maybe one o'clock, I don't know, somewhere in that area. I called and asked
18 for volunteers, the whole dad gum company volunteered to go out! So we had to pull
19 together satchel charges, and we had some flamethrower people. I remember Mick Ryan,
20 his name is...he's one of my Marines; he's now a minister down in Lynchburg Virginia.
21 You probably ought to talk to him because he ended up having one of the flamethrowers
22 carried out and he was not excited about having that flamethrower on his back because
23 those things... you know, you're a big problem when your carrying a flamethrower
24 because everybody's trying to shoot you and you've got jellied gasoline on your back that
25 could be a pucker factor.

26 SM: Yes.

27 JO: So anyway. He and I were talking about this just recently because I was
28 trying to get some information together of exactly what happened on that. Sure enough
29 when we got everybody, all these guys together and they volunteered and I started
30 picking out the people who'd go. Actually the Army came and picked us up from our
31 base camp, we had a little LZ out back and they came and picked the guys up. What we

1 did, we had to build these satchel charges...and if you remember World War II they had
2 these packs and they would have explosives in them and you'd have to prime them and
3 all that stuff, same thing. We were back to World War II "Bomb 'em, Burn 'em, and
4 Blast 'em!" So what you'd do...they Army was calling in artillery on this place and
5 trying to keep their heads down, but then we had to come in with flamethrowers and
6 satchel charges and take those things out. The guys...when we got in there and landed it
7 was just absolute chaos and everything where we'd landed and we had to move in and
8 immediately had some APCs and one of them had a 50-caliber machine gun on it and two
9 of my guys went in with that with their satchel charges and all. They didn't have the
10 flamethrower for that one, but they were armed to attack the bunkers. The Army takes of
11 with this APC and 50-caliber flying away and it immediately gets hit with an RPG,
12 Rocket Propelled Grenade...blows up a lot of the guys in there, killed. My two guys
13 survived, but they were bleeding out of their ears and their nose and everywhere else and
14 shocked obviously. The North Vietnamese, some of them came running out of their
15 positions and wanted to grab, try to overtake that armored personnel carrier because of
16 the 50-caliber machine gun on it. Well Davis and DeGennero, the two guys over there,
17 somehow got up on the 50-caliber mount and actually held the North Vietnamese off and
18 kept them from over running that APC and turning that 50 on us. As a result of that, later
19 they were put in for a Silver Star and one of the unfinished pieces of business that I've
20 got is that never got through to them. I didn't know that until recently. I've tried to work
21 with my battalion commander and he won't return any of my calls or return my mail or
22 anything. So I don't know what's going on with that one, but I'm working that from
23 another issue now. I'm going to take it to headquarters of the Marine Corps as soon as
24 I've got it all pulled together. In fact I've got a letter I wrote to my mother, I was just
25 looking at when you called, which said...lets see if I can find it real quick here. It says,
26 "I'm still at Hill '63, although I've been down at Chu Lai for meetings the last two days.
27 At the awards boards yesterday three of my Marines were written up for the Silver Star
28 for heroism." So there's some of these issues that need to be resolved with these guys you
29 know. It was actually written up in the newspaper. There was twenty-five reinforced
30 concrete bunkers, we ended up killing, I think 122 North Vietnamese that day.

31 SM: Wow!

1 JO: The Army took some pretty heavy casualties. I had some guys hurt like
2 Davis, DeGennero and [?], but I didn't lose anybody. Praise the Lord for that!

3 SM: Do you know how many the Army lost?

4 JO: No I don't. I'm not sure whether that's in that newspaper article or not, but I
5 can pull it out. Let's see where are we now...

6 SM: Well I was curious again with regards to the flamethrowers in particular,
7 obviously the backpack flamethrowers. How about the vehicle? The vehicle mounted
8 flamethrowers. Any of those available to you?

9 JO: No we didn't have any of those available. The Marines had had some flame
10 tanks early on in the war, but tanks were such an, pardon the expression, pain in the ass to
11 deal with over there. To get them off the road they're nothing but trouble. For every
12 mile you'd drive them it takes...one hour you drive them it was eight hours of
13 maintenance. They'd blow tracks, you know tracks would fall off and everything else so
14 it was constant maintenance. So those things weren't even available to us. We even had
15 some things called Ontos, which were 106 recoilless rifles on this kind of a small track
16 body. Those things were very good for a while, but they had no skin on them to protect
17 them against small arms fire even and after a while they got rid of those things too. They
18 also...one thing about a recoilless rifle it gives off a tremendous signature when you fire
19 it. It's a lot of smoke and stuff like that, just like rockets you know. One thing you don't
20 want to be around is rockets and things like that when they're going off because you can
21 spot where they're coming from for miles and usually that means incoming rounds
22 coming back at you, counter battery fire and stuff. So we didn't have the flame tanks, all
23 we had was what we could get and I can't remember where we got the flamethrowers to
24 be honest with you. I think the Army had some, I'm not sure if we had them...I was
25 trying to remember whether we had them with our company or not and I can't remember
26 whether we had them or not. That's one reason I was trying to talk to Mick Ryan and get
27 him to give me some information. He'd written me some information on that too and
28 he's got a lot more memories than I do because he was a corporal at the time so he's now
29 on the ground, you know one-on-one and I'm a captain so I'm back a little ways off of
30 some of that early on because I'm trying to direct and get people into position to do the
31 things we needed to do. When we got in there and hit that Ap Bon and finally broke open

1 the first bunker, they were able to move from bunker to bunker. When the time...I
2 moved in there with them we started going bunker to bunker and literally...and we're all
3 with weapons drawn moving bunker to bunker taking people out and actually grenades in
4 the bunkers blowing them up, moving through and making sure everybody's dead and all.
5 Really the unbelievable thing to me was we found a lot of nurses in there, women that I
6 guess were taking care of wounded and all. They were down in the bunkers. Now
7 there's no way you'd know. When your going in there and attacking a bunker and
8 they're firing back at you there's no way to ask, "Oh by the way are there wounded in
9 there? And by the way are there nurses in there?"

10 SM: Of course not.

11 JO: Until after you taken the position and then you're going "Oh crap!" There's
12 nothing you can do. So like I said there was about 122 North Vietnamese killed and how
13 do I say this properly? This was the battle that made me decide to go home for a couple
14 of things because I was really...we were...I don't want to sound arrogant or anything, but
15 we were getting really good at killing people. We were almost enjoying it. I don't mean
16 it the way it sounds, but I mean it was something you just took for granted, it was going
17 to happen. The excitement of the battle was always very stimulating kind of thing. So
18 you kind of look for battles and you look to pick fights. That was what we were there for
19 anyways. So I found that after that battle the company commander for the 11th Armored
20 Cav called me over to his APC and we sat there and he pulled out a bottle of booze and
21 we drank some booze and kind of celebrating the victory and all...and I hadn't had any of
22 that kind of strong whiskey in a long time and when I got back into my hooch I was
23 sitting there trying to write up some of the stuff and all...I started getting very
24 melancholy and very depressed about the whole thing. Mainly I can remember...I had
25 never taken any pictures of dead bodies the whole time I was over there so I decided,
26 well, this may be one of the last times since I'm supposed to rotate back in May. At that
27 time I was thinking about maybe staying for another tour. Then I said I'm going to take
28 some pictures. So after the battle was over I went around and took some pictures of these
29 dead North Vietnamese and all in their fighting holes and in the bunkers and stuff.
30 Incidentally I took that film back and shipped it to Kodak to have the pictures developed
31 and they confiscated the film! I never got the film back. Which is remarkable in the fact

1 that they let everything else go through. So I never was able to see those pictures again,
2 but praise the Lord I didn't because I just don't need that memory. I have enough
3 memory of it anyway. Really the part that I think disturbed me the most was some of this
4 things, the graphics...if you can see two or three or four people in a hole fighting and a
5 round comes in and just destroys them. So you've got arms and legs and stuff like that
6 everywhere. It just, the grossness of that is just beyond...I don't know how to explain it,
7 but it sticks in your mind and you never forget that kind of stuff. On the other hand I felt
8 that I was getting too close to it and it was time to get out of there. What I ended up
9 doing, I came back home...going into psychiatric care for about eighteen months to get
10 rid of what they call Manic Depressive stuff, just depression. I had a lot of nightmares
11 and stuff like that from that for a long time...and every now and then I still do, but I've
12 pretty much gotten most of it out of my system because the doctors spend hours and
13 hours telling me "you've got to talk it out, you've got to get rid of it, you've got to
14 exorcize it out, e-x-o-r, literally get that demon out of your system." I think pretty much
15 I've been able to do most of that. But that battle was pretty tough. The 11th Armored
16 Cav had written those guys up for the Silver Stars and all. I don't know, I think I've got
17 the commander officer's name some place. He put me in for an award too and I got, I
18 don't know why I got mine and they didn't get theirs.

19 SM: What did you get?

20 JO: Bronze Star.

21 SM: Bronze Star. Now I don't want to jump too far ahead, but because you've
22 raised the issue I want to go ahead and discuss it with you. Coming back from Vietnam I
23 would imagine that your transition was very rapid. That is you got your orders, got on a
24 plane any where between 36-48 maybe 72 hours later and you were back in the United
25 States.

26 JO: Yeah that's the scary part.

27 SM: Probably on leave to visit, to go up to visit your family because you might
28 have been gone so for long.

29 JO: Right.

30 SM: How do you think that affected you? Did that very rapid transition from
31 being where intense combat situation being back at the dinner table with mom and pop?

1 JO: I think it was a wrong thing to do. I think they made a big mistake
2 transitioning guys like that. The nice thing about World War II and other places is they
3 were on ship for thirty or forty-five days coming home or maybe longer and they had an
4 opportunity to kind of get rid of some of that and kind of decompress so to speak. I came
5 home and I can remember, I must have gotten back in May sometime. Then July 4th
6 everybody wanted to go to fireworks, and well...okay fine. I go to the fireworks, scared
7 the hell out of me! I spent half of my time on the ground. Not good! The kids in the
8 neighborhood were firing off rounds and I'm still hitting the deck again. So it's crazy
9 and I'm not being melodramatic...

10 SM: No.

11 JO: It's just your reaction is BOMB! Go to the ground. I drive up the mountains
12 there near my home a dark road at night scared the hell out of me. I'm having problems
13 thinking I'm going to be ambushed. So a lot of those kinds of things you've been trained
14 for you've got to decompress out of it and those guys didn't ever do that. I think coming
15 home and walking off the plane and being spit on and attacked and all that kind of stuff is
16 just unbelievable. Did I mention to you about the attack?

17 SM: Well let's go ahead before we get...I want to talk about this, but I don't
18 want to get too far into it. Let's go ahead and just transition into it through the events
19 after Ap Bon 2.

20 JO: Okay.

21 SM: What happened after Ap Bon 2?

22 JO: Well we went back you know, that's just one day and we were backing into
23 finishing up mine sweeps; we were just doing mine sweeps. We were starting to get
24 some incoming rounds a lot, mortar rounds and stuff at night. So I had some materials
25 from down at Chu Lai and pulled in to build a bunker, a first aid bunker. Since we were
26 getting so many rounds we decided to put a pretty good size bunker in there. All the
27 materials we got and brought up, we built this big bunker. Of course that pissed my
28 battalion commander off too. I don't know why he got mad that I'm building a bunker to
29 protect my people, except later I found out that he had those materials set aside to build
30 an O Club for the nurses down at Chu Lai. So I guess I screwed that up. It seems like I

1 was always stepping in something with him. That was another round of that stuff and I
2 didn't even know what I was doing.

3 SM: My goodness.

4 JO: I'm just trying to help my troops out and my master sergeant...sometimes I
5 think LaDuke kind of got me into some situations and I was too naive to realize he was
6 really having me, he was setting me up a little bit sometimes. But this was one where he
7 was really pressing because he was concerned about the troops and all and I thought that
8 made sense too. So we got the materials and the sand bags and we built this big bunker.
9 I've got pictures of it and all. It seemed to me that's where you ought to be putting stuff.
10 In fact I was so mad about that when I got back that I was going to write a letter to the
11 chairman of the House of Armed Forces or Armed Services Committee saying how bad it
12 was that he was using materials like that to build something for the nurses so that he
13 could have a steady you know what, girlfriend. I wrote that letter and I've still got it
14 around, Mendel Rivers. I wrote that but I never sent it because I felt like that was
15 disloyal to the Marine Corps to send that kind of stuff. But I'll be glad to show it to you.
16 It's interesting because the loyalty to the Marine Corps overrode some of the other stuff
17 that I may...at that time I was sick and tired; trying to get back; not doing well;
18 depressed. You know all those things that you had to go through it was just unbelievable
19 coming home. On top of that and everybody hated you for being back because now
20 we're baby killers and all this other crap. So...

21 SM: Well when did you actually get your orders to leave?

22 JO: Okay yeah, I'm sorry I got off track here a little bit here.

23 SM: That's okay.

24 JO: What happened was...I guess I got them in late March and...

25 SM: In what year?

26 JO: This was '68.

27 SM: Okay.

28 JO: That Ap Bon Battle was like maybe March 13th or March 22nd or somewhere
29 in there. So the end of the month I was getting the orders. What he did, the battalion
30 commander sent my replacement up and I had about a day or two to work with him.
31 Then I went down to Chu Lai and I wasn't due out of there for another thirty days or so.

1 So what he had me do, he had me take over a service company, which is the biggest
2 company down there for about thirty days. I remember doing that, which was okay, but it
3 was just kind of a transition job. I do remember though that when I had to turn over stuff
4 I was missing certain gear and one of the things you have to do as a captain you sign for
5 all the gear of the company.

6 SM: Yes.

7 JO: Somehow from the time we went up north to Ca Lu to we got back down
8 there we'd had sleeping bags because it was so cold up in the mountains and all and I'd
9 lost a whole bunch of sleeping bags; and I was missing a couple of dump trucks that'd
10 gotten blown up and a couple of other things. So what we ended up doing...they were
11 starting to turn hard ass me about that, but I was going to have to pay for that... and I'd
12 lost a bull dozer up at Ca Lu it got stuck when were clearing that area down in a swamp
13 and we couldn't break the suction to get it out. So he was going to charge me for all that
14 stuff, the battalion commander was going to charge me for the whole business. So what I
15 did...we gathered up a lot of AK-47s and North Vietnamese flags and all sorts of stuff
16 like that. We went down to Chu Lai, went over to the Navy support group right there at
17 the port where they built. I think that's were Rodger Staubach and all those guys were. I
18 got with one of the Navy Lieutenants there and made a trade because those guys wanted
19 all of the gung-ho stuff and we'd had enough of it. So I was able to come back with a
20 truckload of sleeping bags. Then what the Army did, one of the Army engineering that's
21 up there near us, yeah it was engineering. They had these gasoline engine dump trunks
22 and they'd given us a couple before because they wanted to go to all the new multi-fuels
23 but they couldn't do that until they got rid of the other ones. So they just put them down
24 a couple of them as combat losses and gave them to me and of course we just changed the
25 TAC marks and away you go. So I was able to pull some of the equipment back, but it
26 was, you know...Another thing I think really made the battalion commander mad at me
27 was the fact that I said, "I'm not paying any \$22,000 for a dang bull dozer that was lost in
28 combat. Now why in the world would you be charging me for it to begin with?"

29 SM: Right.

30 JO: So we had another falling out...and then I think the final falling out was...I
31 had lots of people killed at Ca Lu and some people injured and seriously injured and all

1 up and down the line there through that whole entire six months. Laduke told me and he
2 was an old World War II and Korean War Marine, he says, “If you flag’s bloody the
3 collecting commander can take the old bloody flag with you.” Meaning if a lot of people
4 killed on. So when I left I talked with the first sergeant and he says, “Oh yeah. No sweat,
5 we’ll just order a new one.” So I rolled up the flag and took it with me. Well about two
6 months later when I’m home I get this letter from I think its Major Walls who was
7 executive officers saying, “Your end of tour award is being held up until you return the
8 flag!” So I...

9 SM: Do you want to take a break?

10 JO: No I think I’ll just get some water. So I just wrote him back and said, “Well
11 you know I don’t really want to return the flag. According to me the tradition of the
12 Marine Corps is the if the flag’s bloody they commanding officer can keep.” And that’s
13 the last I ever heard.

14 SM: Did you ever get your end of tour reward?

15 JO: No! It was supposed to be a Bronze Star too.

16 SM: What!!

17 JO: Yeah, I didn’t get it. And all that crap I’d done for two years...nothing. And
18 that again I tried to write to the commanding officer and talk to him about it and he won’t
19 even talk to me at all.

20 SM: Wow!

21 JO: I’ve got another guy who was in the operation shop, he sent me a letter and
22 I’ve got a copy of the letter that says, “Yeah, I was being put in for the big one!” Of
23 course Bronze Star for the Marine Corps is big! It wasn’t that big for the Army because
24 the tended to give out Bronze Stars a little differently from the Marine Corps, but just
25 getting anything out of the Marine Corps was amazing. But anyway...

26 SM: Oh that’s amazing!

27 JO: So it carried on.

28 SM: I hate to take you back, but I need to ask you a question. You left in I guess
29 May, is that right?

30 JO: Yes.

1 SM: Okay. Well of course one of the major things that happened just before Ap
2 Bon, Tet Offensive. Did your tempo of operations increase in January? Late January and
3 February of '68?

4 JO: Because of Tet yes. And then you know, one thing that happened that held
5 up a lot of stuff that I'd had going on was Calley. Where his incident occurred was not
6 too far where we used to operate in Binh Son, south of Chu Lai on the Batangan
7 Peninsula. The Americal division was the primary division in control of all the forces in
8 that area south of Da Nang and all. So when all that occurred they just froze all the
9 paperwork on everything. So my...like that Bronze Star I was put in for, it didn't even
10 come through until 1980 something.

11 SM: Oh my goodness.

12 JO: Or '79 or some place. I can't remember when it was, somewhere in the
13 seventies or eighties, but I've got it at home. The reason was they'd call me up one of
14 these days and say, "You know you were put in for these awards do you still want them?"
15 I said, "Oh sure! Why not?"

16 SM: So you finally did get your Marine Bronze Star?

17 JO: No I didn't get the Marine one.

18 SM: Oh you didn't get the Marine one?

19 JO: This is the Army.

20 SM: This is the Army Bronze Star.

21 JO: Yeah actually I was put in for...the guy told me, he said, "You know, what I
22 did and all the way it was written up. If it had been given out during that time it would
23 have probably been a Silver Star." But it was downgraded to a Bronze Star because of
24 the time involved and trying to remember all of the stuff and they had me write what I
25 remembered of it and all that stuff too. But I think I've got the name of the guy who was
26 a CO of the 11th Armored Cavalry who put up my guys in for an award and I've got to
27 get that together too. The stuff's around the house, I've just got to pull all it together.

28 SM: So what happened in terms of your units' missions and operations? What
29 was different during Tet?

30 JO: Well it was just an intense period of a lot more sniper fire. We were very
31 lucky we didn't get overrun by any units or anything because most of them went for the

1 bigger cities. They were going for publicity and PR, so hitting a small base like LZ
2 Baldy which was pretty well defended and all, didn't make a hell of a lot of sense
3 because what they were trying to do is hit like Da Nang, Chu Lai, places like Tam Ky and
4 really get publicity out of it. So we were very lucky, they ended up going north of us and
5 south of us, but never really nailing us hard in that area. Now when Tet actually started I
6 was up on the DMZ in Ca Lu and right after Tet is when they moved us south down to
7 LZ-63. So we were just kind of in transition through some of that too, which is very
8 interesting. Still can't understand some of it. I look back at why they moved us out of
9 Ca Lu is just beyond me right after Tet, right getting ready to go into that operation and
10 opening up at Khe Son and all. It didn't make any sense.

11 SM: Why do you think they did it?

12 JO: Politics.

13 SM: In what context?

14 JO: Well see we were attached...my company Delta 9th Engineers was attached
15 to the 11th Engineer Battalion. So we were really First Marine division working for Third
16 Marine division. I think, the best I can figure, the 11th Engineer Battalion commanding
17 officer wanted his people opening that road up and getting credit for it, from Ca Lu to
18 Khe Son. And although we were right there, positioned, ready to go they choose to pull
19 us out. And I don't know the full background on it, but that's all I know. I've got that
20 write up you know I told you about all that stuff we did and all and I can give you that
21 too. But I don't now...that was like 19 January. See I'm not sure. When was Tet? 1
22 February?

23 SM: Yeah the end of January first of February.

24 JO: Yeah. So maybe we were back by then. I'll have to go look in my log a little
25 closer. Okay. I'm about talked out here.

26 SM: Okay. Well are you...So you left in May of 1968.

27 JO: That is correct.

28 SM: And you know, by that time, President Johnson had made his decision not to
29 run for reelection. Do you remember hearing about that?

30 JO: I think so. I think what I remember most is when Martin Luther King got
31 killed...that created a lot of problems within the company. A lot of the black Marines

1 decided to take a day off, they were going to not work and kind of in protest to him being
2 killed, which of course none of us had anything to do with it. So we had some problems
3 with a few of the guys there. I can remember a lot of...we get this "Stars and Stripes"
4 magazine newspaper kind of thing and that's where we'd see this stuff. I think some of
5 the guys had radios although I don't remember every using a radio or hearing many
6 radios around our seeing guys carrying radios much. I know that we had a standing rule
7 that you didn't take radios with you out on post or out on patrols or anything else and you
8 see some of these Army films and all and these guys got radios hooked up and all this
9 crap. I don't remember any of that...so maybe we were unique or different, I don't think
10 so. But I just don't think there was much as that, you know, the "Good Morning
11 Vietnam" kind of thing where they guy was, everybody's listening to him all day long. I
12 don't remember all that. But maybe that was an enlisted thing and I was kind of busy
13 with other stuff. But let's see, what were you asking me?

14 SM: Well actually now that you've raised that issue a couple of other things we
15 should probably talk about briefly. Was there much racial tension generally in Vietnam?

16 JO: I didn't think so, I look back on it now and there was some. I can remember
17 when I first took over the company it was some guy name Thomas, I don't know why his
18 name sticks in my mind, but that's my middle name I guess that's why I remember it. He
19 got court-martialed for being disrespectful and he was really antagonistic and nasty. He
20 was going to come after me for some reason I don't remember what for. I was just taking
21 over the company and he wasn't happy with it. And then there was this incident there
22 was a guy named Henry Townsend was another black guy who...he's the one who
23 decided he wasn't going to drive his truck and he was a truck driver. He put a sign on his
24 truck and we had told him he couldn't have signs on the truck and Oh Lord. It was all
25 this kind of...it was very frustrating because that's not the place for social protest. I mean
26 you're going to get your tail shot off in the middle of a social protest, you're going to let
27 your own people down, and you may get shot yourself. So I was trying to convince him
28 that that wasn't a good idea and I guess we did all right with it. I don't remember a lot of
29 racial tension because I think where the racial tension was in Vietnam was in the rear
30 elements, where people weren't busy and they had time to get in trouble. I don't
31 remember seeing a lot of drugs. Now you talk to Mick Ryan and some of those guys

1 maybe there was some stuff around, but I don't remember seeing it and if I'd seen it of
2 course I'd court-martialed him for it.

3 SM: Did you court-martial anybody for drug use?

4 JO: No. I never had one in all my time there, the two tours.

5 SM: How about just court-martials in general?

6 JO: There were some. I was prosecuting attorney and defense attorney on
7 several. Most of those things were AWOL kind of things where guys would literally go
8 on R and R and not come back kind of thing and they had to round them up and bring
9 them back. Or sometimes in situations you'd have guys going out of the wire after
10 dark...crazy stuff! You know, why in the hell would I go out alone into a field to get
11 with a gal when I knew the VC controlled the evening? I mean you're just taking a
12 chance trying to get yourself killed in the process. But these guys would do it. They'd
13 just act like animals sometimes, just go out and do those things and like Whoa! That's
14 terrible. So those kinds of court-martials and then occasionally we'd have somebody
15 refuse to obey a lawful order or they're being disrespectful to their NCOs or officers or
16 something. But it wasn't...I don't remember a whole lot of stuff. I don't remember any
17 of this grenades killing officers and all that kind of stuff...wasn't happening where we
18 were. Now I may have been again like I said naïve to some of that, but I was so damn
19 busy with mine sweeps and construction work and road repairs and everything else that I
20 don't think we had time to think about that to be honest with you. It's only when you've
21 got those people sitting back with nothing to do that kind of stuff seems to start
22 happening. Or in some of the infantry units they claimed the Army had some disciplinary
23 problems in the infantry units. Like ordering people to run into machine gun nests and
24 stuff. Usually the way we handle that is we lead and that took care of that problem I
25 think. But that may be again naïve in some cases.

26 SM: Well speaking of leadership. What did you find to be the biggest challenge
27 of leading Marines in combat at Vietnam? Or was there a series of things that you can
28 talk about with that?

29 JO: Well probably the biggest thing with me was control, the issues of control in
30 battle and then also...Control is of course is all encompassing term, but what it starts with
31 is getting them prepared right, having them carry the proper equipment, things like button

1 up the flak jacket we're talking about and things of that nature, not leaving equipment in
2 the field, following standard operating procedures for like mines, demolitions, reaction to
3 snipers, all those kind of things. Then I think keeping them under control under certain
4 situations was difficult too. For instance, every now and then our guys would be coming
5 in off mine sweep and going back and we'd been hit by sniper fire, something
6 everybody's pissed off and maybe a couple of guys had gotten injured or something.
7 And I remember one day driving down the road and we're driving down this road
8 probably twenty miles per hour in the truck and there's some dogs out in the field over
9 there, in the rice paddy area kind of around this village. The guys open up and try to kill
10 the dogs! And I stop the damn truck, got out and I just chewed them a new one. I said,
11 "Hey look. You're not over here to kill everything that moves! We don't kill the
12 people's animals and pets or whatever they are, we don't shoot cattle. We don't do these
13 kind of things unless there's a situation where it's life threatening." And those kinds of
14 situations you know, every now and then, I'd go up and we'd have guys guarding the
15 bridge and so they'd get hungry so they'd take a grenade and toss it in the river, blow it
16 up and then the fish would all float to the surface and that was dinner. I said you know,
17 "We don't do those things! That's not...I mean we lower ourselves to the level of the
18 other people when we start getting brutal and nasty and smacking people around or
19 shooting their animals or any of that other stuff." And that was an issue that was very
20 difficult to deal with I thought. Trying to keep young men patient in a combat
21 environment is very difficult. Their reaction is just let loose and just do it! Yet some
22 cases 'let loose and do it' is exactly what the North Vietnamese wanted and they'd
23 ambush you. So you had to be aware of a lot of different kind of things. I think an issue
24 within that control is communication and trying to communicated to everybody what's
25 going on, how is it happening, etcetera, etcetera. I'm going from the top down, they're
26 catching it at the bottom under several layers of interpretation too. So you've got all
27 those kind of issues of communication and control, command control and communication
28 of course is the big deals anyway. They call them the Three C's, the big three. So
29 command just...the Marine Corps teaches you to command and lead by example. So that
30 one made sense, I could handle that. Control was part of that same issue and them
31 communication was another part of the issue. So those three were always my biggest

1 challenges I think. Yeah I'd say that's it. I never felt that I didn't have all the support of
2 all my troops. Of course you can talk to Ryan and some of those guys, but I think most
3 of them...I got along pretty well with most of them. They thought I was gung ho, hard
4 ass, which is okay that's what I wanted to be. To me that made a lot more sense than
5 wimping and staying in the background, I was going to be out there leading like I was
6 supposed to be. And that is what I thought I was supposed to do and that's what I was
7 trained to do so that's the way I went after things. So I guess that's the best I can do on
8 that.

9 SM: Did you notice much of a difference during the time that you spent in
10 Vietnam...as the war progressed the level of the Marine coming in or the...of course the
11 draftees versus those who came in voluntarily. You know some of the stories about
12 recruiters sticking around courthouses...

13 JO: Pulling in guys

14 SM: Pulling in guys that had options...well you could either go to prison or you
15 can go to the Marine Corps or the Army or whatever.

16 JO: Right. That's what happened. And that's probably more of the trouble
17 makers came from that group. In fact at one time they'd lowered the IQ standards down
18 to I think he said 100! And we got some of those experiments in there. What we found
19 with most of them is they couldn't hack it and we processed them out administratively
20 one way or another. Now what you get in some cases like with those is they'd end up
21 going back to the rear and working in the PX or driving a truck or whatever and then
22 they'd end up in trouble. And that's why in the rear area you had some much trouble I
23 think because...see one thing we were always able to tell the Marines when we were first
24 there is, "Hey! You're not here...nobody ordered you to come here. You voluntarily
25 signed up and you're here because you volunteered." Well when you get those draftees
26 in there, they turn back around and say, "Forget that mac. I'm only here because I had to
27 be here." So you had two different attitudes too. And you could see that attitude, that
28 difference really was prevalent. I think you could sometimes tell pretty quick who were
29 the draftees and who were the volunteers and in some cases you couldn't. It wasn't cut
30 and dried situation, but I know in my case, my impression of the draftees is quite
31 different from the volunteers. I think it was a less gung ho group of folks; less

1 professional; not as adequately equipped intellectually to handle things; and I some cases
2 physically. Because they kept lowering the standards for everything. I suspect in World
3 War II they went through the same thing more then likely, because you know you started
4 having to get younger and younger kids. The younger kids too is a problem because
5 you've got an emotional stability problem that's not there. A lot of them are not, when
6 something like that happens, they turn...like if one of their friends gets killed right near
7 them, you're going to get one of two reactions. One is it scares them to death and they
8 can't deal with anything after that and they're just totally shocked and appalled. The
9 other is they just turn mean as a snake. So you get those two degrees with the younger
10 ones. Where as with the older people they got up to be 21-22 the sergeants and all that,
11 they took a more deliberate look at that and they didn't tend to let their emotions
12 overcome them that fast. Maybe they'd been callused to it a little longer, but that was
13 just my impression, my observation on it. I wasn't impressed with most of the draftees
14 I'll tell you that. I think it was kind of a step down for the Marine Corps. But they didn't
15 get a choice in it, they were ordered to do that.

16 SM: Yes. Well what about leadership generally in both your area of operations
17 and with regard to the war in Vietnam itself. Did you agree with most of the leadership
18 decisions and command decisions that were coming down the pipe in your unit? Did you
19 think that the United States forces generally were engaging in an appropriate strategy?
20 You know West Moreland strategy of attrition, the battalion sweeps and that kind of
21 stuff?

22 JO: Well in hindsight I think I would have more question then I did then. I think
23 when you're at a level working you tend to stay at that level and you just kind of react to
24 it to a certain degree. I didn't have much time to look into the ideologies and who we
25 were fighting and of course you're not fighting communism you're trying to stay alive
26 and you bond together as a group of men working together with a constant goal. And the
27 way I appeal to my troops on occasion was "Hey guys, if we want to get out of here alive
28 we've got to work together!" So it wasn't a question of we're doing this to defeat
29 communism or it wasn't a case of it's a search and destroy operations, alright. We didn't
30 really get a vote in that anyway. That was being done at higher levels and incidentally I
31 don't remember seeing many general officers ever coming to see us, which is maybe

1 good or bad. In fact Colonel Perreira didn't show up much. The only time he came up
2 there was to chew my butt out. Then one time he did come to Ca Lou, he stayed about
3 ten minutes, got incoming rounds and he left and I didn't even get a chance to brief him.
4 So these guys, I don't know what the senior officers were doing, but you know, at the
5 company grade level and all we're out there taking rounds, doing our job, and working
6 night and day. We didn't have much time to think about strategy and tactics and stuff
7 like that at the higher levels. I guess it actually would be strategy at those levels not
8 tactics because we're down in the tactical level, you know. When you're down in a hole
9 getting shot at you're not worried too much about strategy. I look back and I see some of
10 those things and I think, well you know we were really very, very predictable to the
11 North Vietnamese. No wonder they were able just to smack us up one side and down the
12 other because we set up on top of a hill, we'd cleared the dang hill of, we'd put barbed
13 wire around it, and we put a few artillery pieces in there and we'd link by sight to another
14 group further down, or up the road, or around the road somewhere. Then we'd run
15 patrols out of it. Well if you do that you've only got so many ways you can come out of
16 that and then go back into it and after a while there's patterns that develop. They just
17 watch for patterns and habits of action and then the next thing you know you get two or
18 three people blown up with mines. Very difficult strategy to work with and I don't
19 know... You look back now and you read some of the stuff they, there's a lot of
20 discussion about that and I think it needs to be discussed because I think any time you get
21 into a pattern like that then you become vulnerable. Maybe there were other better ways
22 to do it. I still believe that 1967 when they had us ready to go into Hanoi and we'd
23 packed all our gear and we were ready to move north into Hanoi and work from there
24 down. Kind of like, what's his name did in...

25 SM: Macarthur.

26 JO: Macarthur did in Inchon. That would've made a hell of a lot more sense, but
27 now you know there's also the global strategy over what would the Chinese do and what
28 would the Russians do, etcetera, etcetera. So that as all a problem too. Well they're
29 ready to go in there, we had been given the order and we had stuff on pallets ready to roll
30 and then they...

31 SM: When was this in?

1 JO: 1967.

2 SM: What time period?

3 JO: Oh probably the fall of '67, summer and fall of '67. We palletized stuff and
4 we were ready to roll and then all of a sudden the decision was, 'nope we're going to
5 make McNamara's wall. You know that line across through there. So they went from an
6 offensive to a defensive posture and in that particular situation defensive posture
7 probably cost us the war I think.

8 SM: When did you initially receive orders to get palletized and ready to roll to
9 Hanoi?

10 JO: I'm not sure...and it didn't say Hanoi. They just said we'd be moving north,
11 but everybody assumed that we were going into Hanoi. That was probably the fall of '67.

12 SM: Okay.

13 JO: I'm not sure exactly when, but I know it was in the fall of '67. Everybody
14 was kind of gun ho, we thought was a good deal!

15 SM: Yeah.

16 JO: Because we'd have gotten into more conventional warfare I think.

17 SM: Okay so we're going to stop for today. This will end the interview on the
18 19th of January with Mr. James O'Kelley.

19 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Jim O'Kelley. It is
20 the 5th of February, 2001 at approximately 8:20 Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas
21 and Mr. O'Kelley is in Virginia. Sir, why don't you go ahead and talk about your trip
22 home, what it was like, what your greeting was like when you arrived in the United
23 States, the transition?

24 JO: Okay, I think the first thing is that when they pulled us out of serious enough
25 combat where you come from LZ Baldy which was a pretty rough area and they
26 transition me about I think a couple weeks before that I think to Chu Lai and put me in
27 charge of a service company. I stayed there for about two weeks while all the orders
28 were coming in. One of the things you had to do when you had a company commander
29 you were signed for a tremendous amount of gear so they had to have the new company
30 commander check every bit of the gear and of course there were things missing and I had
31 to get them replaced and all that sort of thing. Interestingly enough, the kind of things

1 that were missing, the way you got them replaced in those days took a series of AK-47s
2 we captured and Viet Cong flags and stuff like that down to the Navy at Chu Lai and we
3 would trade with the sailors for whatever it was we needed, and there was always extra
4 supplies down there, so that's how we kept our inventories correct, kind of a com-shaw
5 system more than anything else. But there's no way any of us wanted to be paying for
6 sleeping bags or wool shirts and all that kind of craziness. So that took a while to process
7 all that out and process all the paperwork and all but the thing is, he's still in a zone
8 where there's a potential to be killed at all times. All of a sudden I get my orders, I hop
9 on a plane and fly up to Danang. I think I stayed there maybe several hours. I can't even
10 remember now to be honest with you, but I can remember getting on a Continental
11 Airlines Plane and flying out of there and when we lifted off you could just hear the
12 cheers. It was amazing, because the guys were all so glad to be out of there. Then we
13 flew to Okinawa for another round of processing. It's interesting, when I got there I got a
14 sea bag and I had some things I was bringing home. There was this big speech by this
15 Marine master sergeant about, "Don't take home any contraband gear," and stuff like
16 that. Well I had captured...I had gotten a .45 off of an NVA officer and it was a real nice
17 .45 and I had broken it down and had it in my sleeping bag. I was going to carry it home.
18 He had this long speech and convinced us that it was important not to take that kind of
19 stuff home because if we were caught with any of that it would be a \$10,000 dollar fine
20 and five years in jail and all that and it just wasn't worth it. So he kind of convinced me
21 so I finally went and got it out of my sea bag and brought it up and turned it in to him and
22 I can still remember looking at that guy and seeing the kind of smile on his face, like,
23 "Thank you very much, sir, this will look good in my collection," kind of routine. So you
24 knew right away, I said, "Oh crap, I should have kept it," I guess because really it turns
25 out people brought all sorts of stuff home and I guess I should have brought that home.
26 But anyway, that stayed with him and I'm sure it's in his collection somewhere today.
27 But we spent a couple of days there processing because when I left out of there I'd left
28 my sea bag full of uniforms and all which was crazy to begin with but we'd left all that
29 stuff in Okinawa so I had to pick all that up and wait for a plane to fly us out so we flew
30 out of Kadena I think it was and we flew to Tokyo but they wouldn't let us off the
31 aircraft. We had to stay on the aircraft and then they finally let us off into a little kind of

1 a transient waiting area while they refueled the plane. Then we got back on and we flew
2 straight on into El Toro I think it was. Hold on a second. But, we flew on into Tokyo
3 and we flew from there into El Toro. Well when I got into El Toro it was like 3:30 in the
4 morning and we got processed and then they said, "Where are you going?" and they took
5 us and we went and got on a bus or a taxi or some kind of thing where they drove us up to
6 LA Airport and we got in there real early in the morning and myself and another Marine
7 were sitting there eating breakfast and he all of a sudden these five peace protestors show
8 up and they finally spotted us because we were in khaki uniforms, and we were sitting
9 there, we'd ordered some breakfast, and I think I had some cereal and this other fellow
10 had...I don't remember what he had. They came over to us and said, "Have you guys
11 been to Vietnam," and all this stuff and started really kind of harassing us, and there's
12 five of them so I guess they thought they were going to be big and really get after these
13 guys. We said, "Yeah," and this one character grabbed my breakfast and cereal and all
14 and dumped it all over me. Well that was a mistake, he shouldn't have done that. I don't
15 mean this to sound the way it's going to sound, but you don't...when you got guys that
16 have been in combat for a year, you don't come bouncing up there and start doing quick
17 acts of violence around them. It's just not a good idea. The other fellow that was with
18 me was a big fellow, he was about 6'5" and he just reached around and grabbed that guy
19 and took his whole head and just smashed it into the table and just broke his nose all over
20 the place. So we get in this huge fight and the police come, and they arrest me and this
21 other Marine and take us out in the car and meanwhile the medics, they've got a couple
22 of...what do you call them, ambulances and all and they've got stretchers and all and
23 they're carrying some of these characters out that had attacked us. We thought, "Well
24 that's it. We're in big trouble now," so we get in the car and the policeman takes off with
25 us and he goes down the street a little ways and after we get out of the sight of all the
26 commotion and everything he turns and says, "Damn, guys, I had to get you out of there
27 before you killed those five guys. I'm not going to take you to jail," he said, "Because
28 I'm a retired Marine myself and I'd love to have done just what you did," but he said,
29 "I've got to get you out of sight and get you cleaned up." So he took us underneath the
30 airport to a one hour [martinizing] place and you could go there and you could take your
31 clothes off and they could clean them right on the spot, and he took us down there and I

1 guess this is a place where a lot of airport employees used it because it was underneath
2 the airport. He said, "Where are you guys' sea bags?" and we told him we put them in
3 lockers and we gave him the keys and he says, "Okay, I'll go back and get that stuff.
4 You guys do not leave." Well we weren't going anywhere; we were standing in our
5 underwear. So he went back and got all that stuff and came back and by that time the
6 man had finished up cleaning our clothes and all and he gave them back to us, our
7 uniforms and all and he said, "Okay, where you guys going and what airline?" so we told
8 him and I think we were both on American Airlines and we were flying into Dallas and I
9 was going from there into Charlotte or Atlanta, I cant remember, and then on into
10 Ashville and the other fellow lived somewhere in Louisiana or something I think like
11 that. So he says, "All right," so he takes us over underneath the airport still to some back
12 steps and goes up into the American Airlines VIP kind of lounge that they had back in
13 those days and he went over and talked to somebody and the next thing you know they're
14 asking us to come over and they sat us down and they gave us drinks and everything and
15 treated us really nice, and very apologetic, in fact. Then when it came time to board the
16 aircraft they took us out first and we went on, it was a 707 and those days you could go in
17 the front of the 707 and as you walk past the first class area they'd have curtains drawn so
18 the first class people didn't have to mingle with the masses I guess. So they put us in one
19 of those first class area seats, closed the curtains, gave us a couple of drinks, and said,
20 "Hang loose, we'll see you in a minute," and we left there and went out and his comment
21 was, "Good luck, stay out of trouble, and I'm sorry this happened," which was on one
22 hand it was a shock going in the country and seeing that kind of stuff and all the things
23 that were going on, but on the other hand it was nice to know some people were trying to
24 help on the other end, too. Then I got home, it was a pretty long flight of course, with no
25 more incidents. But, when I got home, I noticed right away that I really had some
26 adjustment problems medically as well as emotionally to deal with. Looking back on it,
27 there needed to be some kind of transition for most of us. None of us had that real
28 opportunity. I ended up, I spent a couple of days leave and then I was shipped down to
29 Buford, South Carolina where I reported for duty with the Marine Corps Air Wing. Well
30 I spent an awful lot of time sick. I had a lot of trouble with amoebic dysentery, I had a lot
31 of trouble with malaria, I had attacks of malaria pretty frequently. I had a lot of trouble

1 readapting to the American diet I guess you could say. Then, I was having a lot of
2 disorientation, depression stuff to deal with too where it's like coming back in a society
3 and you don't know what's going on and you've been gone for three years. The music
4 was the funny thing. Songs would come on and I'd never heard them before, and even to
5 this day, we'll be listening to say this oldies stations and they'll come on with music from
6 songs from '67 primarily, that was the main year I spent the entire year over there, and
7 part of '66 and part of '68 but all of '67 pretty much. I don't recognize songs, and Jan
8 will say, my wife will say, "Hey, do you remember that song?" and I'll say, "No," and
9 I'll say, "Whoa, I bet that's one of those 1967 songs," and then they'll come on and tell
10 the date and sure enough, it'll be music, just like a cut out of history that I just don't have,
11 and I think a lot of guys probably have that problem too, it's just you've got a continuity
12 of living through a particular age and then you've got a chunk taken out of it and you
13 start back up. That chunk you missed, that transition over that year or two period I think
14 creates some problems of being able to relate to what's happened in the society and to
15 other people and experiences and all that because it seems to me one of the things that
16 keeps us together as a people or a civilization or a country is that we share common
17 experiences and we have ways to relate and communicate with each other based on those
18 experiences, and if you lose that for a year it does take a while to get back on track.

19 SM: Go ahead.

20 JO: I was going to say another thing that was kind of a shock to me, I'd been
21 riding around over in Vietnam for a couple of years there on effectively dirt roads and
22 gravel roads and whatever else you want to call those kinds of roads they had over there.
23 I got back home and my dad had put my car up on blocks in the garage which was not a
24 good idea because everything dries out on it if you do that. He drained the oil and
25 everything out of it so all the seals dried out but I put oil back in it, got in the car, and it
26 was a nice Oldsmobile 442 that I had, or not a 442, it was a Cutlass, and I got in that car
27 and I was driving around and the first thing I did was get a ticket for speeding. I told the
28 patrolman, "I just got back from Vietnam, I've been over here since 1966," and this was
29 May of '68, June of '68, May of '68 I believe. He says, "That's a problem, but you're
30 going to have to deal with it. It's going to cost you," and he was not even the least bit
31 sympathetic. It was like the second day I was back or something like that. So there's a

1 quick shock to get back into the real world kind of thing. I guess having going from dirt
2 roads and all that stuff to getting onto paved roads, that was a real adjustment, too. It
3 wasn't as much trouble actually steering the car and dealing with it, all that stuff, and
4 maybe the traffic got to me a little bit, too, but I was just on Interstate 40 and I was
5 actually going down to see what later became my wife, but I was just going over to see
6 her, and I got that ticket, and that kind of slowed me down. Those kinds of restraints that
7 you have to put back on yourself that you don't really have to deal with overseas, or
8 there's a different perspective on some of it.

9 SM: How long did you stay in the Marine Corps after returning from Vietnam?

10 JO: About six months. Let's see, I got in there about May and I stayed in until
11 December. They sent me down to Buford, South Carolina which is a really nice place
12 and it's real quiet and everything, but the problem is I was infantry oriented, a grunt they
13 call them, and all those guys were air wing people. Well the air wing in the Marine
14 Corps and the infantry are not alike. The air wing is kind of loosey-goosey we'd call it,
15 they're not as military or anything else because it's a little different focus on things; its
16 kind of like the Air Force versus the Army I guess would be the best way to look at it. I
17 had a hard time adapting to the lack of discipline and lack of they didn't salute officers
18 and all that kind of stuff. I was chewing on some folks pretty heavy and all. But also I
19 was still having some trouble and they had isolated me. Down there was kind of an
20 isolated place. There wasn't anybody around my age or anything else hardly as far as
21 young girls and people like that, and you try to get back in and socialize and you're kind
22 of, "Well you've been to Vietnam, you're a baby killer," kind of routine. There's a lot of
23 that, even down there; well, maybe even more so down there because it was around a
24 Marine Corps base. There wasn't much social life going on and in the midst of...I was
25 driving home each weekend just to have some place to go, and that's a pretty long drive
26 from South Carolina all the way up to Ashville. I don't know how long it took me, but
27 I'd leave on Friday afternoon. They'd just let me go. Their attitude was pretty loose in
28 the sense of, "Hey, man, you just get back from Vietnam? Relax, take it easy, take your
29 pack off." Well I didn't know how to do that and that was hard to adapt to as well. I did
30 get a call. All of a sudden I was called up to Cherry Point, North Carolina. The assistant
31 wing engineer, or the wing engineer officer was a lieutenant colonel by the name of

1 Crispen who had been my first commanding officer in the 9th Engineer Battalion when I
2 first got over there in '66 and he found out I was down at Buford and he wanted me up at
3 Cherry Point working for him. So he got me transferred up there, which wasn't
4 necessarily the greatest transfer because Cherry Point was even worse than Buford
5 because it was a big, huge, very big base down in North Carolina. But, it was interesting
6 because a couple of the guys that I had served with in Vietnam ended up coming back
7 there, too, that were in my company so I did end up with a couple of guys that I knew,
8 one of them's names is Mick Ryan, Mickey Ryan. He lives down in Lynchburg and I've
9 kept in touch with him to this day. In fact, I think I gave you his name to look up. He's a
10 minister down there, a youth minister in that area. I stayed down there and actually
11 worked for the wing engineer. Actually, in the mean time, I ended up getting married.
12 My wife and I, who I had escorted her in the National Cherry Blossom Festival back in
13 early '66 when I was in the Basic School in Quantico, and ended up coming back and I
14 went to see her in May and we fell in love and got married in August and I had a military
15 wedding and had the fellows from Buford and a lot of guys from Vietnam and some of
16 the fellows from Cherry Point and they all came up for the wedding. Then we moved
17 into housing, it was called Officer's Quarters, down at E6 married officer's quarters. E6
18 MOQ, yeah, married officer's quarters, building E, apartment number six. We had a little
19 apartment there and everything. I was starting to get a little bit better I thought and then
20 it came time for me to rotate out. Well, nobody was saying anything about anybody
21 staying around because I guess the war over there, they're starting to let people go. They
22 talked to me a little bit and said, "Well, you know, if you stay in you're going to rotate
23 back to Vietnam in about six to nine months, max." Well I'd just gotten married and I
24 said, "I don't think so." I'd been over there a couple of times, and I don't really want to
25 go back over there again, and my number's just liable to be up, so I decided I was going
26 to get out. One of the weekends we went up to visit my wife's parents and all I brought
27 home some slides and I showed them to some people and one of the men in the audience
28 worked for the Central Intelligence Agency, and he was very interested in what I had to
29 say and all, the engineering aspects as well as counter insurgency and all the stuff we
30 were doing, and he talked to his boss and the next time I came up I had an interview with
31 those guys and in the process they offered me a job working in the engineering. So I

1 didn't have anything better to do so to speak. It sounded like a good idea to me, sounded
2 kind of exciting and all that stuff, so I said, "Sure." So I had a job when I left, and then
3 the day I was getting ready to sign out I talked with this Marine captain and he said,
4 "Well why don't you stay in the reserves? They need Marines in the reserves; we need
5 officers, and especially engineer officers." So I said, "What do I do? I'm going up to
6 Washington?" and he said, "There's an engineer battalion, the fourth engineer battalion,
7 it's right up in Baltimore. Why don't you stay with it, because with your experience and
8 all you could be very helpful." Well, I thought, "What the heck." "Besides that, you get
9 good pay for one weekend a month." I said, "Okay." I left Cherry Point on like
10 December the 15th, somewhere close to that, and that was like on Thursday and they
11 gave me Friday off, and then Saturday I went to drill in Baltimore and joined the unit.
12 So, I effectively never had any broken time from the Marine Corps' perspective, which is
13 kind of interesting. I stayed with that for the next 20 something years.

14 SM: How long did you work for the CIA?

15 JO: Three years. I worked with them end of '68, I started in December '68, I
16 started that following Monday with them. It's like Thursday I left Cherry Point, Friday
17 was travel day, Saturday I was in Baltimore, Sunday I was in Baltimore, and Monday I
18 started with the CIA so there was no break in it at all. In the meantime, also, when I had
19 been talking...oh, that's right, in the fall I wanted to kind of get back into schooling again
20 so my wife and I took a course at East Carolina University while we were at Cherry
21 Point, Introduction to Business Management, and we both took that course together. It's
22 interesting, in the middle of taking that course they sent me down as inspection, an
23 engineer inspector to Vieques, Puerto Rico which is in the news right now. So I had to
24 do an inspection of the base down there and it was I guess an interesting experience
25 because now I can look back at all what's going on about what's happening at Vieques
26 and I sat there and watched the bomb runs and all the stuff they did in that area, very
27 different perspective from the way the news is approaching this. Excuse me while I drink
28 a little water. Another thing is when I went on that trip, first time my wife and I had been
29 separated, she went out and she got lonely so she went out and bought a beagle, so when I
30 get home here's this puppy in the bed, and that puppy stayed in the bed for the next 18
31 years! Our first kid! We named her Kelly O'Kelley, and she was a great dog. In fact,

1 one evening, I'll tell you a quick little story here. We were coming home and I invited
2 two...in the Marine Corps you don't really...there's kind of officer's country and then
3 there's enlisted, people kind of stay separated. Well I invited a couple of my friends
4 over, the young Marines that had worked for me, Mick Ryan and another Marine, I can't
5 remember his name now, for dinner because we thought we'd bring them over and we
6 had a lot to share and all. Well I invited them over and when they came to the door the
7 little puppy had gotten sick on something and had gotten diarrhea and had gone to the
8 bathroom right in the floor where you open the door. So I open the door and here's this
9 young captain with a new bride and these two enlisted men coming to have dinner with
10 him and I look down and here's this pile of poop and I said, "Oh good Lord." I said,
11 "Come on in, men, just step right over that." So they come in the house and they're kind
12 of a little giggly and embarrassed and I'm a little embarrassed and I'm going, "Holy
13 Cow!" and the next thing you know I look around and the dog just keeps just moving
14 down the road there just going to the bathroom and I cant clean it up as fast as the damn
15 dog's going! I said, "Have a seat, gentlemen, I'll be with you in a second." I finally
16 catch up to the dog and to this day my wife just thinks it's the worst thing but the dog had
17 one of these halters on. Well, I just stuck the dog on the doorknob there to hold the dog
18 just to get it to where it would keep pooping on everything until we could clean
19 everything up! Mick Ryan and those guys, he laughs to this day about that whole entire
20 event because here's this new captain with a brand new bride inviting a couple of enlisted
21 men over for dinner and cant control the darn dog, it's out of control! So we had some
22 interesting things I guess in that first round; kind of reminded me of the problems I was
23 having, too, because I was having the same amoebic dysentery problems and trying to
24 deal with all that. In fact, going up to reserve duty after I got out, I don't know how far
25 you want to go past some of this once I get out of the Marine Corps, but when I went in
26 to work for CIA and then I was going to reserve duty, many is the time I would have to
27 stop along the side of the road because the amoebic dysentery and malaria stuff would hit
28 me driving up to reserve duty and I'd end up in Baltimore on Washington Parkway and
29 having to pull off and go over and throw up and everything else. So I had a hard time. I
30 think by '73 I was even...and also in the mean time I went to talk to people at George
31 Washington University and I got into their Master's program, MBA program, so I started

1 a new job, had gotten married, and then I went into graduate school all at the same time.
2 So I put a tremendous amount of pressure on myself and in the middle of all that with the
3 agency, they started sending me to a psychiatrist because they said I had some problems
4 with serious depression problems, so they were treating me for that and all on this other
5 stuff and I was putting all this other pressure on myself at the same time. By '73 I had
6 my first round of peptic ulcers to deal with. So, it's ridiculous. I guess the point I'm
7 trying to make in that, there was this terrible drive in me that I had to get something
8 accomplished and there's things that needed to be done. I hadn't done as well at Duke as
9 people had expected me to so I really got into the studies and starting our marriage and
10 all this other stuff. Then, I finished that master's degree in two years, came out with a 4.0
11 average, and was recommended to go in the doctoral program and immediately launched
12 into the doctoral program and just...I don't know. It seemed like a maturity factor set in
13 and I was off and running. My wife and I agreed she had to finish her schooling so I got
14 my masters degree at the same time she finished her undergraduate degree and we got
15 those done the same day, and then I started in the doctoral program and then she started
16 working. So that was during the '70s and at the end of the '70s, '73, '76, '79 we had our
17 children and we just decided to dedicate the '80s and '90s to our kids, which we did, and
18 that really has paid tremendous dividends. In the meantime I stayed in the reserves and
19 they sent me to some fantastic places, some great schooling. I never did get back into
20 combat but I almost got back to Desert Storm. My orders were 1 March to go to Saudi
21 Arabia, and it ended, what, the 28th of February or something like that? So I just missed
22 Desert Storm.

23 SM: Well quick question about your CIA stuff.

24 JO: Okay.

25 SM: What was the difference between your engineering work for the agency and
26 what you did as an engineer in the Marine Corps? Anything you can talk about?

27 JO: Yes, some of it. What I was doing, they had me doing primarily, I helped
28 build a radar site for the information coming in on some of the new satellite systems and
29 all. That was really the main thing I was doing. They also moved me down to a couple
30 of their sites to be the facilities engineer. It wasn't what I thought it was going to be and
31 that's why after three years I left it. They were going to send me overseas and I got

1 trained to be a field officer and all. I didn't do well with that. That wasn't a good thing
2 with me and I didn't adapt to that very well. My first assignment, they were going to
3 send me to Kabul, Afghanistan, and I said, "I don't think so." My next door neighbor
4 worked for a control data corporation and they had some end roads with NOAA, the
5 National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, they were looking for some computer
6 people, so by the time I had gotten my masters degree in systems management actually,
7 so they hired me to go over there and I left the agency to work with NOAA. That's kind
8 of where we left that.

9 SM: And when you talk about your Vietnam experiences, first of all, would you
10 talk with your family? I assume you did talk with some of your fellow Marines. If it was
11 either family or civilian friends, did you talk much with them and were they receptive to
12 you talking about it?

13 JO: Yeah, when I first got back there was a lot of interest from different kinds of
14 groups. One thing that was interesting, where I had gone to school like East Carolina and
15 later at George Washington, there wasn't that much anti-war protest stuff going on that I
16 saw early on in '68 and when I started in '69. I do remember, though, that going to
17 reserve duty for instance, they didn't want us wearing our uniforms until we got there.
18 We changed up there. Going down and working at headquarters Marine Corps up
19 through the '70s, you didn't wear your uniform. You went in civilian clothes. So, if you
20 were in uniform you were kind of targeted, and people were pretty belligerent and nasty.
21 But if like in a classroom, in the university classroom setting, I sometimes expected I was
22 going to catch a lot of grief from people but I didn't. It was amazing. Some of the
23 professors who were very outspoken against the war and quite liberal in their thought,
24 they were respectful when they spoke, and I wasn't belligerent in speaking and all, I was
25 just saying that there was another side of this that you guys need to know, and it was
26 interesting to be a spokesperson for the other side of the war. So I was really impressed
27 with the fact that they listened. I think also when I went to church my wife and I joined a
28 Methodist church right by our house and I think again that was another situation where
29 people were very respectful of the fact that I'd been there. So when you see these
30 pictures that show the whole country going nuts, I'm not sure that's correct. In my
31 experience it wasn't. There were incidences at what I'd call flash points like at the

1 pentagon or certain universities like Berkeley and places like that, they go nuts anyway,
2 they're looking for a reason just so they can go nuts it seems to me most of the time.
3 They still to this day do a lot of this stuff. That's kind of a university thing overseas
4 especially, not as much here but maybe it's getting that way. But the whole country
5 wasn't out there screaming and yelling like these guys have it set up, at least not from my
6 experience. Going home to Ashville and stuff like that, I didn't see any of it. In fact,
7 people down there pretty much still were very focused in what was going on. I don't
8 think until later on in the early '70s did I think things were really starting to heat up
9 badly. Even then the only thing I had to be careful of is just don't wear my uniform
10 around places. But that was mostly in Washington, but then I wasn't interested in
11 wearing my uniform anyway around all these other places because when I was on reserve
12 duty I didn't have to. But, I didn't see the degree of anti war stuff that seemed to be on
13 the TVs a lot. I did notice, though, in '72 I was working downtown with the agency and
14 doing some surveillance stuff. It's interesting how the news media set up scenes, which I
15 thought were not correct. If you look at a basketball game at what's going on or
16 whatever else and they pan over into the audience, people just go absolutely berserk just
17 to get on TV, do something stupid so you can get on TV. Well I think that same
18 mentality was going on with some of that same anti-war stuff back in those days as well
19 because I could remember seeing TV people going over to a group of quote "protestors"
20 and saying, "You guys want to be on national TV? Let me show you what I want you to
21 do," and they'd almost choreograph some of this stuff, almost like some of the stuff I saw
22 in Vietnam where they'd try to choreograph battle scenes after the scene has happened.
23 So that got me to thinking, well, the credibility of the news media, I would look at things
24 with the idea, "How much of this has been contrived and set up, and how much of this is
25 really real?" Then I think about later on in the anti-war days they got some very
26 professional protestors in there actually egging people on and doing a lot more. It
27 became very organized. But early on, I don't remember seeing the kinds of things that
28 the news media depicts and shows as the way the whole country was going nuts against
29 the war and all that stuff. I don't remember that. That's not my experience

30 SM: What year would you place as the transition, approximately?

1 JO: Probably '72-'73, somewhere in that period. I think one of the protests I was
2 working with the agency with was in '72 maybe, somewhere in that area, '71. Early '70
3 is when...I think the first transition was Tet.

4 SM: Tet '68?

5 JO: Yeah, Tet of '68 was a big transition because we, if you look back on the
6 history of it, we pretty well cleaned their clocks if you think about it. We took some
7 casualties but if you look at it, it was a ten to one; for every one of ours, it was ten of
8 theirs, or better. With the exception of Hue, the Hue-Phu Bai battle and a few others like
9 the American embassy being attacked and all that, it seems to me like we really crippled
10 the NVA. If we had been able to continue that momentum, we were in pretty good shape.
11 But, as you read later on, looking at McNamara and Johnson and all those guys, they'd
12 already sold us out it seems to me in the history of reading on it. In retrospect now, it
13 looks to me now like it was already a fait accompli and this didn't help. But, that was a
14 transition point in my opinion. The second transition point I think probably was Nixon's
15 bombing and the Easter Offensive and all that stuff that occurred in '72 and then by '75
16 we're out of there so it's pretty much '68, '72, '75, goodbye.

17 SM: All right, so this will end the interview with Mr. O'Kelley on the morning of
18 the 5th of February.

19 SM: This is Steve Maxner, continuing the interview with Mr. James O'Kelley.
20 It's the 14th of February 2001 at approximately 8:30 Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock,
21 Texas and Mr. O'Kelley is in Virginia. Sir, in our last discussion you mentioned
22 something about choreographed battle scenes and I was wondering if you could elaborate
23 on that, what you meant?

24 JO: Sure. I only had one incident where I was ever even involved and it was on
25 the periphery of the situation where it occurred, but apparently the word going around
26 when we were there was that a lot of times some of these better known correspondents
27 and all would come up after a battle was over and ask the people to recreate the battle
28 because they didn't get a chance to see all of what was going on or mainly because they
29 weren't there for a number of reasons. Some of the guys said the reason they weren't
30 there was because they were afraid to be up there in the front lines when all the rounds
31 were flying around. But the claim was, and I've heard this from a lot of veterans, that

1 these reporters would come and say, “Hey, how about putting the bodies back up and
2 shooting them again?” Well that was called double thumping, that was just a term they
3 had, but it’s illegal and you’re not supposed to do that. I know in my situation, the only
4 one I was familiar with was this one particular battle at Ap Bon I was told that after we
5 were finishing up that some reporters came in and wanted us to recreate some of the
6 attacks on some of the bunkers and stuff and we did not do it; we refused. As a matter of
7 fact, we didn’t refuse very politely about it, either. The attitude of the people going into
8 battle in those situations was that these cats were just looking for some publicity after the
9 fact but they didn’t have the guts to be in there with us when it was actually going on,
10 which is different from the combat correspondents who were usually, in a lot of cases, the
11 Marine Corps had their own combat correspondents and combat photographers. These
12 were usually like ABC, NBC, CBS, those kinds of guys, who our perception was they felt
13 too important to risk being involved in an actual battle but they were certainly not above
14 coming out later on and asking people to recreate things. And, I know on occasions...I
15 don’t know, but I was told Dan Rather was especially...did an awful lot of that is what
16 the guys used to say. There’s a lot of rumors going around so I don’t know how you
17 substantiate that. Maybe somebody actually saw it up close and personal but there was
18 always talk about those kinds of things. That’s the best I can do for you on that one.

19 SM: No, that’s very interesting.

20 JO: Over and over I’d heard, I kept hearing the rumors about Dan Rather
21 especially that he’d hide down behind a rock and have people firing over his head and
22 recreating battle scenes and all that which weren’t really there. Now whether that’s true
23 or not, probably the only man that could answer that would be Dan Rather himself.

24 SM: Or some of those soldiers or Marines or whoever that were...

25 JO: ...around when he was doing that?

26 SM: Yeah, doing that.

27 JO: I know my reaction to that was pretty negative and we certainly were not
28 going to do any of that kind of stuff.

29 SM: Now did you receive directives from your higher headquarters not to engage
30 in that type of activity?

1 JO: No, and I probably wouldn't have either, Steve, because being an engineer
2 outfit, we were only usually a peripheral unit, a supporting unit, to these kinds of
3 situations. We weren't normally the primary unit going in because that would usually be
4 infantry units and they would be the ones normally getting that information although our
5 battalion might get that information and send it down. I don't remember ever seeing any
6 kind of a notice to that effect. But, I think there were certain rules of conduct that you
7 knew and you were taught, and there's certain ways that you did things and things you
8 didn't do, and that was part of the things you don't do. You don't shoot unarmed
9 civilians, you don't shoot dead bodies. The Vietnamese I think it was, or the Koreans, I
10 can't remember which, used to have a habit of...I think it was the Vietnamese, when they
11 would kill one of their own, like a North Vietnamese or something, they would stab that
12 person in the genitals and all and just cut them up real bad after they'd died, and the
13 theory there I was told was that so they couldn't reproduce in the next life. So there was
14 some craziness going on and some strange...I don't know if they're customs or what, but
15 there's some pretty rough stuff going around. I know, and you've probably seen, the
16 documentation on some of this stuff like the Australian guys sometimes were collecting
17 ears off of the people when they killed them, kind of like the American Indians used to
18 collect scalps. There was some really crazy, ugly stuff going on on both sides, I guess.

19 SM: What about your own personal experiences in terms of witnessing
20 mutilations or discovering bodies that had been mutilated?

21 JO: I saw some bodies that had been mutilated. One time we'd gone and driving
22 up Route 1 and I think it was one of the 11th Marines which was an artillery unit had been
23 hit pretty hard by some Viet Cong units, and a lot of the VC were still hanging in the wire
24 where they'd shot them and the Vietnamese, whether ARVN or whoever, had come
25 through there and had just all their trouser areas was just covered in blood where it
26 looked like it had been stabbed and all, and the guys, that's one of the times when one of
27 the people, one of my older master sergeants was telling me that's what they do, mutilate
28 that part of the corpse. That's the only time I can remember, I'm sure I saw other times,
29 but that's one time that just jumps right out at me when you asked me that question. That
30 was like '67 probably.

1 SM: Was there anything else before we move on that you remembered about
2 your Vietnam experience in country that we failed to talk about? You want to talk about
3 it now?

4 JO: No, I was thinking this morning, seems like when I look back and say, “What
5 did you do over there?” It seemed like I was doing a lot of patrolling, building a lot of
6 fortifications, we did a lot of destroying the enemy fortifications and bunkers and stuff,
7 we built roads, built some airfields, built gun emplacements, built bridges, built culverts,
8 tried to keep Route 1 open, tried to keep all the other area roads open, did mine sweeps.
9 There was a tremendous amount of stuff we did, a lot of projects like building these large
10 towers looking over the airfields so that they could see for longer distances. I even did
11 some channel changes of the stream so we could expand the size of the Chu Lai airstrip.
12 So there was a lot of different kinds of things. One minute I’m doing really great
13 engineering, and the next minute I’m just being a Marine combat infantryman type, a lot
14 of road reconnaissance work which was I thought when I look back now it was a lot
15 hairier than I wanted to admit at the time because we were doing that with just a couple
16 of jeeps and a PC and some machine guns and we were down in Indian country running
17 along up and down that highway and they could have just picked us off if they’d wanted
18 to. It amazes me because we were always out in front of the infantry trying to make sure
19 the infantry could get their trucks and their vehicles across. Then we built not only
20 bridges, but when they would blow bridges we would have to go in there and build ferries
21 and stuff like that. We had all sorts of responsibilities. The rock crusher, we had to keep
22 a rock crusher going which may sound like nothing but one thing about crushing a rock,
23 its tremendous vibration problems so you really have to set it on a well-built concrete pad
24 or it will vibrate itself and just destroy itself almost. So, there was a lot of stuff we were
25 doing. We would go out and blow the top off of a hill for recon guys and set them up on
26 top of a hill and then turn back around the next day and we’d be paving a road sort of
27 thing, and building some vertical construction. We built all sorts of buildings as well,
28 and then we could build bunkers and things like that and trench lines and water
29 purification and we had to supply electricity. We did a lot of water purification, that was
30 a big issue over there, because of course the water was pretty rough and I don’t remember

1 how many millions of gallons of water we were purifying but it was amazing amount of
2 water.

3 SM: Were these reverse osmosis systems that you were putting in place?

4 JO: In those days, it wasn't that sophisticated. We were using the old systems
5 that they'd use back...I guess it was reverse osmosis, I take it back, yeah, it was because
6 we had a lot of that. We'd used them back in Pacific and all, too.

7 SM: How about near the coast, did you guys have to do desalinization or was it
8 just pure water purification?

9 JO: I didn't do that. I don't ever remember doing any desalinization. I think the
10 Navy ships did it but we didn't do it. We pretty much stuck to where we could find fresh
11 water sources and we actually had a drill so we could drill wells. We could get water that
12 way, too.

13 SM: How deep would you usually have to go, depending on...well, let me
14 rephrase that question; it might be one foot, it might be 100. In the area in which you
15 were typically operating, what was the typical well dug?

16 JO: You weren't going more than ten, 12, 20 feet most of the time. They were
17 shallow wells because the water table was so high and it tended to be fairly sandy soil in
18 a lot of places so it was just a matter of trying to get down to a fresh source that wasn't
19 messed up because of all the traffic and everything going over and everything. So you
20 get down into it was kind of the second table, there are water tables and there are
21 different levels of water flowing underground, and usually if you get to the first or second
22 level you were in pretty good shape.

23 SM: All right. Well, I guess we should turn back to asking questions about when
24 you got back here. I was curious after your return, after a certain amount of time; did you
25 try to join a VFW or American Legion or anything like that?

26 JO: Never did, mainly because I stayed in reserves and it kind of felt like when I
27 was in the reserves I shouldn't be over there because I'm still wearing the uniform and all
28 that. My impression of those places was that they were just places to go drink and smoke
29 and tell war stories, although I don't take away from that a lot of the good things those
30 people do, but as a whole. I did have in the early part of the '90s when my son was
31 playing baseball they asked him to play American Legion ball and a couple of times they

1 invited me to come over to the American Legion post in Vienna and see it, and there were
2 a couple of guys there pretty nice, but it's pretty much folks sitting around at a bar and
3 smoking and drinking and watching TV and all that kind of stuff and it's good for certain
4 folks but that wasn't my thing. The night that the bombings started in Desert Storm I was
5 working Headquarters Marine Corps as a reserve officer and the commandant asked me
6 to represent him at an American Legion post, a huge American Legion post over in
7 Maryland and give a speech on what was going on in Desert Storm and all that. So, I
8 went up to his office and he gave me all the materials and all. Actually it wasn't him, it
9 was General Grey, but at the time General Buhl who was the executive secretary, or what
10 did they call it, Secretary of the General Staff, that's what it was, he was a three star
11 general and I had worked for him previously and I was working for him at that time as
12 well and he asked me to go give a speech and all so I had to go over in dress blues and all
13 and give a speech. They really treated my wife and I very, very well. They were
14 extremely nice, and it was a huge place. I didn't realize the American Legion was that
15 big, those kinds of situations it was that big and all, because I had only seen this little
16 small place over in Vienna. But I gave the speech and one of the questions afterwards,
17 we had a Q and A and one of the questions afterwards was, "Well, Colonel, do you have
18 any idea when the war will actually begin?" because this was before everything started,
19 and I said, "Sir, I promise you, I don't know." On the way home we hear that the
20 bombing had started, so it was amazing. But, I had a lot of pretty good information to
21 give them and they were very gracious, and I had to go over in dress blues and the whole
22 nine yards, so it worked out pretty nice. That's my only experience with them. I've
23 never been to a VFW post of any kind or anything. I joined DAV, Disabled American
24 Veterans, because they send me stuff all the time and I got a Purple Heart and I joined a
25 Purple Heart foundation, or the Military Order of the Purple Heart. There's a thing in
26 town here called the Purple Heart Foundation, and turns out it's nothing but some guy
27 getting used furniture and saying he's getting it for veterans but he doesn't. It's just a
28 business. But, the military order of the Purple Heart, I joined that, but I'm not in it
29 anymore because I send them money occasionally but these guys spend so much time just
30 remembering the war and some of the guys never get out of it, and I'm kind of of the
31 opinion that it's important to get past that and get into something else, and that's why

1 when I came back I emerged myself into school and all just to get away from some of
2 that.

3 SM: What about the 9th Engineer Battalion Association? When was that created,
4 and when did you become involved with them?

5 JO: I think that started somewhere in '90, I don't know. This guy named Eric
6 Kenny seemed to have just got that thing started, and I went to their first or second
7 reunion. It was out in Indianapolis in the early '90s and he just started trying to get some
8 folks together. He and...gosh, I'm blanking on Bob's name right now, it was another
9 fellow who got the ladies to write the book, the 9th Engineer Battalion book. I'll come
10 back with it in just a minute I hope. But, they just were talking I guess and decided they
11 were going to try to see how many folks they could find and just get things started. So I
12 think the reunion I got to was the first or the second. I think it was the second but I'm not
13 positive. Then, I didn't get back until this year, or this last year. I think it was last
14 summer when they had it, wasn't it?

15 SM: Uh-huh.

16 JO: I got there then. So, they had one in St. Louis and I think they've had a West
17 Coast or a New Orleans or something like that, so they've had a couple. They're now
18 going to try to have them every other year because a lot of guys are getting older and
19 they're trying to put some stuff...and I think they now have a website and Eric has a
20 large, large list of former Marines that served in the 9th Engineer Battalion. He's got a
21 very large list, and I think he must have 500 guys or so which is really good. But, that's
22 what got me going. I guess that's how I met Ron, and that was good that you guys came
23 there then, too. I think what's got us kicked off and going pretty good was that book and
24 Gene had done a real nice job of getting that book going.

25 SM: How has the association been important for you, personally, or has it? I
26 mean, is it just...

27 JO: Well it's been pretty good. I find that I've made some good friends and
28 renewed some old acquaintances and actually made better friends from folks as a result of
29 that. But, one of the guys I thought would come to some of them was Ted Zelan and I
30 haven't ever seen him at any of them and that's kind of surprising, but he's been really,
31 really busy with some of his engineering work. But, he and I work very closely together.

1 On the other hand, some folks that I'd almost forgotten showed up and a lot of the guys
2 renewed acquaintances who used to work for me and all. So, it's been kind of nice, kind
3 of like I'm one of the senior officers in the crowd now because I stayed in and made
4 colonel and not many engineers get to the rank of Bird Colonel. We've only had I think
5 one that ever went beyond that to make General Officer, so that's a pretty high rank. I
6 think there was four of us that were there at the last reunion that stayed in and made
7 colonel. So, that was kind of nice and to see all those folks, and to go back and talk about
8 some of those things and remember some of the good stuff, and I think doing that book
9 was helpful because it was kind of a catharsis. It got a lot of it out of the system and got
10 rid of it, and hopefully when I get done with this stuff with you and put those pictures
11 together I'll have another real catharsis because I'll have all that stuff done, too, and I
12 think the pictures will lend a lot to this whole entire narrative, what we've been talking
13 about.

14 SM: Well in 1973 when the United States and Vietnam signed the Paris Peace
15 Accords, what was your attitude about the war at that point? What did you think about
16 the accords?

17 JO: Well see I was kind of caught in a situation. I was studying my tail off and
18 working full time and trying to do reserve duty at the same time because I was
19 working...let's see, when I came back from Vietnam I signed up over at George
20 Washington University to go to graduate school and I went to work for Central
21 Intelligence Agency and I was doing the reserve duty at the same time and I had just
22 gotten married in August of '68 so I was trying to start a marriage, start a civilian career,
23 start education, and start a reserve career. So I had all sorts of things, a lot of pressure of
24 things going on, and I was trying to watch what was going on in the war on one hand but
25 on the other hand I was extremely busy. Some of the papers I wrote, I tried to focus them
26 on my experience and things like that. But I found that in graduate school and all, most
27 people didn't even want to hear about it much. They respected me when we did talk
28 about it in certain ways, which was surprising, because you'd think at a lot of the colleges
29 you wouldn't get that. But, let's see, '69, '70, I got my masters in '71 and I was
30 recommended to go into the doctoral program so I started into it in '71, so in '73 I was
31 immersed in the doctoral program pretty strongly. At that time I had worked some with

1 the agency and had gone downtown and seen some of the anti-war protests and all that
2 kind of stuff and it was pretty obvious that we weren't going to stay over there. We were
3 kind of sandbagging it, and the actual emotions at home were so strong. For instance, I
4 couldn't wear my uniform to reserve duty. I was better off if I wasn't seen in public in
5 the uniform. That's tough. But, there was an order came out, bring your uniform out to
6 the drills and change at the unit. So, that was kind of tough. The whole attitude of the
7 country was just turning around. People just wanted to get out. I guess the last battle I
8 was in, at Ap Bon 2 where there was so many people killed, I think it was 120 + North
9 Vietnamese killed there and all, and that was the battle, I mentioned to you that that was
10 kind of a turning point for me wanting to get out of there afterwards, seeing that I better
11 get out of there because I was starting to enjoy that kind of stuff a little more than I
12 should or whatever, feeling callous is the word I'm trying to think of. I felt like at that
13 point I can remember having the thoughts, "It's better just to get the hell out and just quit
14 all this because all we're doing is tremendous numbers of people and animals and land
15 and everything just being destroyed by all this nonsense and we're not making any
16 progress." We're not committed to go in there and win the thing, it was obvious. I think
17 the turning point on the commitment was when in 1967 when all the Marine units and
18 everything were up on the DMZ were all packed up, were going to get back onboard ship
19 and were supposed to go to Hanoi and cut the country in half, kind of like the Inchon
20 landings in Korea. When Johnson backed down and decided not to do that, it seemed to
21 me like that was the turning point. They said, "Well, we're not in there to win this
22 thing," because if we had, we would have done the same thing we done in Korea, just
23 turned it around, but we didn't do that. So, that was my attitude. At that point I was
24 saying it's just better to get on out of the place, and that was what, '73?

25 SM: '73 Peace Accords, yes. So you were disappointed or surprised by the
26 accords?

27 JO: Well it seemed to me like there was going to be accords one way or another.
28 Sell out is not exactly the right word, we're going to force something to happen so that
29 we can have those accords and so that we can get out of there. It was like "Peace with
30 Honor" or something like that?

31 SM: Yes, that's what Nixon called it.

1 JO: Yeah, and that whole concept is just, “Declare victory and get the hell out.”
2 That’s what it was all about, and I think that’s what they were trying to do. To this day it
3 seems like that. Now I have not read McNamara’s book. I’ve seen some talk shows on
4 it, some commentary about it, but I just haven’t been able to bring myself to read that
5 book because to me that’s kind of like reading Corson’s book. William Corson wrote a
6 book called The Betrayal. Have you heard about that?

7 SM: I’ve read it.

8 JO: You have? Well you know he’s saying that we were betrayed from the start
9 with that M-16 rifle and all, and the ammunition, and so forth. I’m sure McNamara’s,
10 that book, is going to give me the same kind of opinion of things and I’m not sure I want
11 to read that right now. I don’t know, I just don’t want to get into all that again. I did read
12 a book by Bui Diem who was the American Ambassador or Vietnamese Ambassador of
13 the United States, wasn’t he?

14 SM: Yes, sir, the South Vietnamese Ambassador to the US, In The Jaws of
15 History.

16 JO: Yes, that was an excellent book. I enjoyed getting a different perspective on
17 things. There’s some Vietnamese guys around here, one guy who was a pilot in the
18 Vietnamese Air Force and I’ve chatted with him a little bit.

19 SM: What did you think of Corson’s book?

20 JO: I thought he was right on. I thought what he said was perfect. A lot of the
21 stuff he was talking about, I witnessed a lot of the business with the M-16 rifle being
22 forced down our throats. We did not want that rifle. We had M-14s, we loved them.
23 One good thing about the M-14, you’re out in the bush and out in the jungles and all
24 running around and when something happens all you do is you throw a round in it and
25 blow it clean out. But the M-16, you’ve got to take that little sucker apart and every time
26 you take it apart there’s all these little parts all over the place when you clean it, and lo
27 and behold seems like every time we’ve gotten into a situation where we have a third of
28 the guys cleaning weapons or something we get a mortar attack or something and there’s
29 pieces flying all over the place. It was just ridiculous. Also, the jamming up of...the
30 extractor wasn’t strong enough to break the seal in the chamber and so it would slip off
31 and jam another round in on the top of it, and depending on how many rounds the guy’s

1 going and how hot the chamber was it might cut the round off or it might just jam it up in
2 there and then you've just got to get a ram rod and get it out. Then if you got into any
3 kind of hand to hand close combat that sucker was useless because most of the time what
4 happened if you hit anybody with a butt stroke the dad gum back of the weapon would
5 break off because it was plastic. The guys used to say, "If it's from Mattel, it's swell,"
6 theory. So most guys did not like those weapons at all. It was...an oxymoron is not quite
7 the word I'm looking for, but the theory was that with a lighter weapon like that, with a
8 round of tumble and all and it being lighter weight, you could carry more ammo. Yeah,
9 but the sustained rate of fire, the way these guys would just blow ammo out of there, you
10 have to carry twice as much ammo anyway. It just encouraged guys to fire more rounds.
11 The general that wrote about Men At Arms, I can't remember his name right now, but he
12 was talking about sustained rates of fire in combat through several wars and I think in
13 Vietnam we were just throwing rounds out at everything all the time, so it was a
14 tremendous waste in the way of ammunition the way these guys were being taught to fire.

15 SM: Are you talking about "SLAM" Marshall's book?

16 JO: Yes, S.L.A. Marshall, right. He spent a lot of time discussing about how
17 many men were actually in a trench line or a foxhole, how many people were actually
18 firing and not firing and all that kind of stuff. I think my experiences was that with the
19 M-14, you didn't carry as many rounds but you tended to aim your rounds better. With
20 the M-16 you get more of this John Wayne, shooting from the hip kind of stuff which is
21 not necessarily good. Another thing about the M-14, you put a bayonet on that sucker,
22 you've got a weapon. You put a bayonet on the end of that M-16 you got a toy. So, most
23 guys didn't care for that either. Let's see, I think Corson's book, though, I met Corson
24 down at Quantico. He came and talked when I was teaching down there at the Marine
25 Corps Command Staff School, and in fact he made a presentation to the Marine Corps
26 library of a collection of things he had. I think its William J. Corson or something like
27 that?

28 SM: I believe so.

29 JO: Yeah, William J. Corson's collection is down there of stuff that he brought
30 back. But he was an extremely intelligent man. I think he had a Ph.D. in philosophy or
31 Chinese Philosophy or something. So, he had done his homework on that in my opinion.

1 I don't know how it is perceived throughout the community, but a lot of the guys I talked
2 with thought he was right on. Of course he wasn't politically correct by a long shot!

3 SM: No.

4 JO: But see, I can remember in Basic School and all we were really excited in
5 the Marine Corps to get the AR-15 stoner system, and that was the precursor to the M-16.
6 they bastardized the AR-15 into this M-16 and gave Olin Matheson gunpowder and all
7 that stuff. That whole business there is another interesting...I've got it at home, I'll get it
8 for you; there's another story written about that. It parallels what Corson said in The
9 Betrayal and it was talking about the...oh, it was called The M-16; A Bureaucratic
10 Horror Story.

11 SM: I remember that.

12 JO: That was real interesting reading, also. When we got the weapon it was
13 forced down our throats. We had three days to fan fire it and they pulled our other
14 weapons away and away we go, you know. But what they used to love to have the
15 engineers on, the grunts used to love to have engineers with them because we kept our
16 M-14s longer than they did. The grunts got the M-16 probably six months before we did
17 and they used to love to have us with them because we had M-14s and we had the 50-
18 caliber ring mounted machine guns. So, they saw us coming, "Hey, great!" along with
19 other talents we brought like shape charges and stuff like that, which they loved to see,
20 too.

21 SM: How about when the war actually ended in April 1975 and the fall of South
22 Vietnam to North Vietnam?

23 JO: That was tough. I had a hard time living with that one. That bothered me
24 more than the '73 Accords did of course because not then it was really over and I think it
25 just really hurt me to watch the final move of people off the roof of the embassy and all
26 that. One of the CIA folks I knew pretty well was over there at that time and I was
27 worried about Mr. Parker getting out of there alive and all that, too. His name was
28 Hodges Parker. He was running the Phoenix Program and all that stuff. I think the main
29 thing, it was just kind of heartbreaking to see that, the way it finally came down. I don't
30 know how else it could have come down, but it was just really sad, and to this day I'll
31 never forget the vision of that North Vietnamese tank breaking through the gates of the

1 embassy and seeing those people coming off on the helicopters and all. A lot of the guys
2 later on when I was teaching down at Command and Staff and going to school and all, I
3 met an awful lot of those guys who were on those rescue operations in the back. Of
4 course right after that you had that Mayaguez Incident wasn't it?

5 SM: Yes, sir.

6 JO: So there were guys that just got through. The other thing that was awful
7 crazy was how we were dumping all those helicopters right into the ocean. We'd pull in
8 a helicopter full of stuff and then we'd dump it in the ocean, kind of like, "What the hell
9 are we doing here?" All that stuff that we did over there, I don't know how much is still
10 there today. Sometimes I have some curiosity. I'd like to go back to see how many of
11 those bridges I built and how much of the roads and the Dickey Chappell Memorial
12 Hospitals and some of those things, if they're still around. But then on the other hand, I
13 just don't have any desire to go back into that country either. I worry more about that
14 disease probably more than anything else, get back over there and get another round of
15 my amoebic dysentery or malaria flare up again. A lot of guys are going back.

16 SM: How would you say the Vietnam War effected you most on a personal level,
17 your experiences in Vietnam, and how have you integrated those experiences?

18 JO: There's a lot of different ways. I think first of all, it taught me that I can live
19 without a lot of materialistic stuff that I really don't need. I have conflicts with my wife a
20 lot about that, the whole business of we just don't really need that. I remember living
21 with whatever I had on my back, literally, for days at a time. It taught me also that you
22 can live in extreme conditions and make yourself fairly comfortable. You can survive
23 just about anything. By that I mean anything from monsoon rains to mortar attacks to
24 whatever. It taught me a lot about esprit in combat. Cold business. The thing that makes
25 the Marine Corps the strongest is this brotherhood of men that have fought and sweat and
26 fight and bleed and die together, and to me that was...I don't want this to sound
27 warmongering, I don't mean it this way, but it was a privilege to serve in the Marine
28 Corps in a combat environment. Serving in the Marine Corps in peacetime is okay and
29 it's great, but being in combat is just a whole different thing. In a way it's a privilege, it's
30 a privilege to come out of it alive and fairly unscathed in the sense of not being mutilated
31 or messed up like a lot of these guys got messed up so bad. I think there's a couple of

1 things that came out of it that were kind of negative though that I didn't understand. For
2 many years, all that pressure I told you I put myself under when I first came back and all
3 was a compensating thing I believe for a lot of reasons, but I can remember sitting on a
4 sandbag emplacement one night while the moon was out and I just was kind of staring off
5 in the distance and I promised myself if I ever got out of that alive, or I promised the
6 Lord, I said, "If I get out of this alive I'm going to go back to graduate school and get
7 focused," because I didn't do my college work. I spent too much time partying and
8 playing around. I worked hard, but I didn't have the mental focus on the academics that I
9 should have had. So I promised myself when I get back I would do better, and I was
10 really going to do it. So, the one thing that for sure came out of there was the concept of
11 focus because I could get, "The mission is..." and I could stay on it, because when I went
12 back to graduate school I came out with a 4.0 average in the masters program and got an
13 award and all this stuff and my advisor recommended me for the doctoral program, and
14 when I took the comps and all I scored the highest score that had ever been scored in the
15 school in the stuff. I was number one out of 330 students. I don't mean this in a
16 bragging way, I just mean this as focus. What I turned back around in the doctoral
17 program, I think I made one B the whole time and the rest were straight As and I got a
18 doctoral dissertation award from the Southern Illinois University for my doctoral
19 dissertation. I wrote incidentally on philosophy and political theory and I went from
20 systems engineering work, I'd been a civil engineer in college, and I went to systems
21 engineering which is computers and stuff and all in the masters, and went totally
22 different, went into philosophy and political theory. I got into a lot of looking at the
23 philosophical underpinnings American management thought and things of that nature and
24 how we got to where we're in a pragmatic philosophy myth and all that stuff, and I
25 compared that with some German philosophies and other philosophies as well. But, I
26 really got dedicated and focused on that kind of stuff, and I saw it again when I came to
27 work here at the Geological Survey and they told me, "Well you really need to get your
28 professional engineers license here," and I said, "Okay," and they said, "Don't get too
29 worried about it if you don't pass it the first time because people usually take two or three
30 or four times to pass it." It's kind of like the CPA exam or something. So I said,
31 "Bullshit!" I got busy and I spent every night and every weekend for nine months, took

1 some courses, went back and reviewed everything I'd done in college all the way through
2 my engineering program, took some review courses, and went in there and passed the
3 sucker on the first time; it's a two day exam. Everybody around here couldn't believe I
4 did that. It's just I know if I set my mind to something now, the mission is I can do it,
5 and that's kind of the way it goes. I think that was from Vietnam. The posttraumatic
6 stress disorder stuff, they never knew what it was, and I kept having trouble with peptic
7 ulcers in the '80s and all. I'd been having problems over the past ten years with severe
8 migraine headaches; in fact, I had one last Wednesday that nailed me so bad I couldn't
9 move for about 24 hours. That's all part of this PTSD stuff according to the doctors, and
10 they never knew what it was in the past. I've tried to get some help from the VA but
11 they're not doing anything to help me. The Veteran's Administration, to me, is a useless
12 organization. From the looks of what they do to those guys in those hospitals, they don't
13 take very good care of them and they use them as kind of guinea pigs it looks to me like
14 sometimes with stuff they're doing, experimental drugs and everything else trying to
15 help them, maybe, I don't know. I've got a friend Bill Dickerson who lost his legs in
16 Vietnam. He was a Marine. He works here and he had prosthetics, artificial limbs, and
17 every time they'd wax these marble floors in this building Bill would be walking down
18 through there and he'd slip and fall. I think he did it three times and he broke his limbs,
19 and the VA would not...after the second time, they wouldn't give him another set of legs.
20 So, he had to sue them to get legs. That's bullshit! Don't put that in the transcription, but
21 that's really what it is. I mean, you think about that. The Veteran's Administration,
22 you'd think they're for the veterans, but they're not. If anything they're protecting the
23 government from the veterans. It's kind of like the Bureau of Indian Affairs, same thing.
24 They're not for the Indians; they're protecting the government from the Indian in my
25 experience, from what I've seen, and same thing with VA. I've tried to put in some
26 claims and stuff and I've got less than 10% disability because of my leg and the amoebic
27 dysentery, malaria, but as I've gotten older things have gotten aggravating and I've got
28 this guy trying to help me, but the VA doesn't even want to listen to me so I just said,
29 "To hell with this. I don't have time to be fooling with these guys." I think a lot of
30 veterans are very discouraged by that. Let's see, where were we on this now?

1 SM: That's all right. What do you think we should take away from the war
2 collectively as a nation in terms of major lessons that we should learn and stuff like that?

3 JO: Well I think several things, and I think President Bush really did his
4 homework when we went into Desert Storm. What was it, Colonel Harry Summers wrote
5 the book on the Vietnam War when you're looking at the strategies of war, do you
6 remember that one?

7 SM: On Strategy.

8 JO: On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War, right, by Harry
9 Summers. I think that did more good than anything, for the military at least, and for
10 some of the political leaders, of anything that was done, which said in effect don't go in
11 there piecemeal, and I think Johnson's piecemeal muddling through approach, to use
12 Charles [?] famous line, "Muddling through things," and incrementalism which is another
13 thing. We jump it up a little bit and wait until they catch up, jump it up again, and let it
14 catch up, that kind of stuff. That's ridiculous. I think the Bush-Schwartzkopf-Colin
15 Powell-Cheney's philosophy of overwhelming force, annihilate them, and get over, get it
16 over with, is a hell of a lot better way to do than dragging this thing out. It's kind of, to
17 me, it reminds me of when we had to teach young Marines the immediate action drill. If
18 you are going down the road in a truck and you get hit by fire, you don't run away from
19 the fire, you run into the fire and overwhelm it because you have less casualties in the
20 long run. The short run you may take some heavy casualties but in the long run, you're
21 better off because you just get it over and I think that was nationally the whole idea of
22 overwhelming force. The other thing is including the entire country and the congress in
23 what we do. I think Summers made the statement that one of the biggest mistakes was
24 that Johnson early on in the war, when he could have gotten Congress to back him 100%
25 and declare war, didn't. Then in '68 when he needed it, he couldn't get it. So he was
26 handicapped and the country never fully got behind the war because the reserves didn't,
27 he never did commit the reserves, and you notice what Bush did right off was commit the
28 reserves as part of the whole process and that brought the whole country together and
29 everybody's involved in it. So, I would say right off the bat that the main lesson learned
30 is what Harry Summers put out there; those principals of war are time tested and they're
31 very valuable and we're forgetting them again right now, and it's going to be interesting

1 to see over the next five to ten years what's going to be happening when we're
2 piecemealing people all over the world right now. But that's what I would say would be
3 the main thing to come out of it. The other thing is don't go into a situation unless you
4 intend to win it. If you're not going in to win, get out of there and stay out of there. The
5 other thing seems to me we always take the role with the underdog regardless of whether
6 the underdog may or may not be correct. I'm not necessarily passing judgment that
7 underdogs are always wrong or right, but it seems like we have a national identity with
8 underdogs more than we do with when we get into these situations, these civil strifes.
9 Sometimes I'm not sure we think through the whole process before we dive in and grab
10 hold of one group. Somalia is a good example of that. I think we got drug into Somalia
11 because of the news and all these pictures of these poor children dying and everything
12 else and I look around and I'm sure there's stuff like that going on worldwide. Why did
13 we go into that one particular case, and why did we side with the people we did? Again,
14 Lebanon is another case. Who did we side with then, and how? I thought we were going
15 in there to be neutral. Before you know it, if you start shooting at people, now you're no
16 longer neutral. So there's some real interesting lessons. I think during the '80s we tried
17 to learn some of those and I think Summers' book brought a lot of that into focus and
18 allowed Bush to prosecute the Desert Storm campaign much differently and more
19 successfully, and the other thing was he had a mission. He limited that mission...there's
20 a lot of pros and cons on that, but the mission was what the congress and the UN and
21 Bush had agreed to and once that was done, that was it. They declared victory and got
22 the hell out of there, and to me that's the way to do things if you're going to do it. It was
23 expensive. But then look at Vietnam; they drug out like 15 years? I guess they really say
24 the beginning is somewhere in '60. On my campaign ribbon it shows '60 to '75,
25 something like that, so they drug out for over 15 years; think of the expenses of that. I
26 don't know if that's helpful, but that's where I'm coming from.

27 SM: Oh yes. Is there anything else you want to add or talk about today?

28 JO: No, we're wrapping up things pretty good. I appreciate your questions
29 because you've asked some very insightful questions and made me think about a lot of
30 stuff. I hope I was able to answer them in a helpful way. I think the key to most of these
31 guys, these veterans today, is that they shake this stuff and get on with the program

1 because I walk down to that Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I've been there two or maybe
2 three times, and I just get turned off by all those guys running around there in their
3 starched utilities and wearing all these ribbons and stuff like that. There are one of two
4 kinds of guys; they don't represent me, I know that, but from what I've read from
5 Reader's Digest and all a lot of them are imposters and the rest of them are sicko's that
6 need to get past all that stuff. Some of these guys I know have been emotionally and
7 physically scarred and they'll never get past it, but it seems to me like one of the things
8 that you have to do in life is you have to get past the things in your life, the emotional
9 scars. There's a guy named Morris Massey that wrote a book called What You Are is
10 Where You Were When and he spends a lot of time talking about what he calls
11 significant emotional events in our life and how those significant emotional events shape
12 our entire life and our perceptions of life and everything, and of course Vietnam for all of
13 us was a significant emotional event. But what he also says, he wrote a second book and
14 he says...the first one was What You Are is Where You Were When. The second one is
15 What You Are Isn't Necessarily What You Will Be. Then he wrote a third book that
16 says, What You Are is Where You See Yourself in the Future. So he said number one,
17 your background and your significant emotional events and all do determine a lot of your
18 perceptions, but they don't necessarily mean that's the way you have to stay your entire
19 life. That's' what the second book was talking about. The third book says in effect, "Get
20 a dream and grab a hold of it and run with it and try to go beyond what's happened to
21 you," and to me, that's one of the keys I think for Vietnam Veterans is to get beyond
22 some of this stuff and there's a whole lot of living to do out there and a lot of wonderful
23 things in life, but you've got to get past that stuff. That's what I've sometimes tried to do
24 and I could tell you that theoretically and say that's a great theory, but I can also say a lot
25 of the emotional scars and stuff like the PTSD and stuff stays with you. It's hard to
26 balance those off. But, I've tried. Whatever my shot is, I've done it. The other thing I
27 think Vietnam's done is it brought me a lot closer to God. It made me realize that there is
28 a supreme being and there are things out there that are incomprehensible, so to speak, and
29 that there's a greater power involved in all this stuff that's going on out there in the world
30 today. It made my religion stronger and my belief in God is much stronger. That's it.

1 SM: Well this is a good place to end it. This will end the interview with Mr. Jim
2 O'Kelley.