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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with James Willbanks
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
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Transcribed by Shannon Geach

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

1 Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with
2 Dr. James Willbanks. I am in Lubbock, Texas. Dr. Willbanks is in Leavenworth,
3 Kansas. It is the 20th of September the year 2000 at approximately 8:10 Lubbock time.
4 Alright, Dr. Willbanks would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of
5 your early life.

6 James Willbanks: Ok. I was born in Hot Springs, Arkansas in 1947. My father
7 was a career NCO in the Army so we moved around quite a lot. Probably spent the
8 longest time in Copperas Cove, Texas outside of Ft. Hood. My junior year of high school
9 my father was transferred to Germany and that's where I graduated high school,
10 Augsburg, Germany, in Bavaria. I departed Germany and went to Texas A&M where I
11 attended for four years and graduated in 1969, from receiving a commission as a second
12 lieutenant in infantry.

13 SM: Ok. When you entered Texas A&M and as you were going through the
14 university getting a degree and your commissioning, how aware were you of what was
15 going on in Southeast Asia? Did you keep up with it closely? What did you think was
16 going on over there and what did you think the United States was trying to accomplish?

17 JW: I was very much aware of the fact that we were in the midst of the war,
18 because obviously successive classes had gone off, most of them with only about four
19 months in places like Ft. Bragg and Ft. Hood before being assigned to Vietnam and

1 unfortunately some of the people I knew were not coming back. In terms of the great
2 strategic, grand design for what the United States was doing in Vietnam. I was probably
3 largely ignorant of that other than the effort to stop Communism. Other than that I
4 probably didn't have much of a depth of knowledge about what was going on there, what
5 the situation was really like.

6 SM: Was there much protest activity or anti-war activity going on at Texas A&M
7 while you were there?

8 JW: Zero.

9 SM: And that's surprising right?

10 JW: Well the only thing that I remember is some SDS folks from the University
11 of Texas came over to organize a chapter and they were met by a large number of myself
12 and my compatriots at the front gate and invited to return back to Austin, which they did.
13 That was my touch with the anti-war movement, I guess.

14 SM: The ROTC instructors that you had at Texas A&M, were any of them
15 Vietnam Veterans?

16 JW: All of them.

17 SM: All of them? Did they talk much about their experiences with you cadets?

18 JW: It's kind of a strange situation, there really wasn't any overt necessarily talk
19 about Vietnam, but it was just kind of a specter that was hanging there. You knew when
20 you graduated that more than likely you were going to go to officer training and then go
21 four months to some state side post and then to Vietnam. I mean that's what was done
22 and that was the norm. So, it sort of permeated everything we did, but not overtly. I
23 mean I don't think anybody spent a lot of time worrying about it, but it was certainly
24 always there as a concern,

25 SM: As far as just discussion amongst you as cadets and as college students, did
26 you talk much about Vietnam?

27 JW: Not a lot, I don't guess. But like I say the specter was always there, we
28 knew we were all going sooner or later because the period '65 to '69 was the height of
29 the war. There wasn't anyway you could get around it. It was on the news every night.
30 It was in the newspaper everyday. It was pretty much just there as a fact of life.

1 SM: What about some of the highlight portions of the Vietnam War? Perhaps
2 very important of course was the TET Offensive 1968. How much did you learn about
3 that and know about that? What was your perception based on what you were hearing in
4 the news and whatnot? What did you think happened in TET '68?

5 JW: Like most Americans I was stunned by the fact that...well, the length and
6 breadth and the nature of the attack after so many positive things were said about
7 progress in Vietnam. That the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong could mount something
8 that large and in such a surprise fashion was pretty stunning. Of course it was on...It
9 permeated the news, the media and all parts of the media. So, it was pretty hard to get
10 away from.

19 JW: I guess so. You know that was a long time ago for me to remember. I have
20 to tell you though that like most college students, maybe more than those who were
21 actively involved in the anti-war movement my near term battle was trying to get through
22 college. I didn't have a lot of money. I was working part-time so I could stay in school.
23 So, that was my focus, was try to get through and get a degree and get a commission. I
24 was aware of those other kinds of things but I got to tell you that my focus in life was
25 surviving the next 24 hours and staying in school.

26 SM: Your major at Texas A&M was history. Did you study much Asian history?

27 JW: No, I think I had one course.

28 SM: How about in ROTC, was there much talk in particular of course Vietnam
29 history in relation to the Vietnam War?

30 JW: Not a lot about history, more tactics, techniques and procedures kind of
31 things. General military history as I remember we took the first two years. The U.S.

1 Army in the greater context of American history but not a specific Southeast Asian or
2 Vietnamese history or even U.S. Army in Vietnam.

3 SM: Well, in terms of your understanding of Vietnamese history or even certain
4 aspects of Vietnamese current events, were you familiar with some of the other key
5 events early in the war? Things like, well the end of the French-Indo China War? The
6 Geneva Accords? The Diem governments, their refusal in '56 to hold the elections? You
7 know those types of issues?

8 JW: Yeah, I was generally aware of what had gone on before, but like I say I'd be
9 less than frank if I told you that I was studying it closely. Because I certainly wasn't.

10 SM: From your perspective, prior to getting your commissions as the son of
11 someone in the United States Army, the son of an NCO, just out of curiosity what was
12 your dad's MOS?

13 JW: Infantry and then armor.

14 SM: Infantry, armor ok. So, combat arms all the way?

15 JW: Right.

16 SM: In terms of the reality of the ground in Vietnam prior to entering the active
17 military service what did you think was actually going on there? Was it just
18 Communism?

19 JW: You know I'm a child of the Cold War. To me it was fairly black and white.
20 It was the good guys against the Communists. There were obviously various gradations
21 of that as I've continued to study it over the years. But to a college kid who was
22 immersed in the Cold War and someone who had been to the Berlin Wall as a 16-year-
23 old, the Cold War looked pretty real to me and it looked like a pretty clear cut case. The
24 Western block against the Communist block. Obviously it was a lot more complex than
25 that. But at that particular time I really wasn't aware of all the complexities involved.

26 SM: Was there anything else that sticks out in your mind from your experiences
27 as a cadet in ROTC at Texas A&M?

28 JW: In terms of what? All kinds of things stick out.

29 SM: Well, ok, in terms of how it affected you later as a military officer? How it
30 might have helped you when you found yourself in rather trying situations in Vietnam?

1 JW: Well, I think I attended Texas A&M as a member of the corps defined who I
2 am to this day. It's very hard to describe. You know Texas A&M's a pretty strange
3 place from the outside looking in. It's pretty difficult for me to describe what it's like
4 from the inside looking out.

5 SM: Well, let's go ahead and talk about going into the United States Army.

6 What did your dad think about you getting your commissions?

7 JW: Oh, I think he was pretty proud. You know NCOs at that time didn't make a
8 lot of money. I was the first person from my family to go to college, by and large with
9 scholarships and various other things. I paid for it virtually myself. So, that's always
10 been a point of pride with me. I think my father was not a very out going type and leave
11 it at that. He's not a real demonstrative type in terms of emotion, but I think he was
12 proud.

13 SM: How did you feel?

14 JW: Oh, I felt great. I felt like I had accomplished something. All universities
15 have their trials. A&M seems to have its own kind of unique set of trials and I felt like I
16 had passed them all. There was some not concern, but certainly Vietnam was basically a
17 specter and it's about the only word that I can use. It sort of permeated everything. You
18 knew that you were going to be there sooner or later. In 1969 it looked like there was no
19 end in sight. You knew you were going to be there sooner or later. There was the idea
20 that you wanted to make sure that you were good enough so you didn't get soldiers
21 killed. So, there's always that at least in the back of my mind.

22 SM: What effect did LBJ's decision in '68, early '68 not to run for re-election,
23 what kind of effect did that have on you? Here you are going into the active duty Army
24 and getting more than likely probably going to end up in Vietnam? Here back in '68 the
25 President's kind of quit, Commander and Chief and of course from Texas.

26 JW: I have to tell you at the near term our focus was and I speak for lots of my
27 classmates, what was going on at the strategic level didn't really have a lot of impact on
28 what was going to happen to a platoon leader as long as we continued to fight. I mean
29 they could have Peace Talks in Paris, they could do whatever they wanted to do. What
30 the bottom line is, if you ended up in Binh Long Province with a rifle platoon somewhere
31 it pretty much looked the same. If I told you I was really concerned about all these

1 strategies national level issues, I'd be lying. It was just largely assumed that the war was
2 going to continue in some fashion, that we were all going to be there sooner or later. I
3 had no sense that the war was going to wind down, be over. You know, a change in
4 administration was not going to have any large impact on my life as a platoon leader.

5 SM: What did your dad think about this war?

6 JW: Interestingly enough we didn't talk a lot about it. I did not live near my
7 parents. Well, when I went to school I was some distance from my parents. In fact, for
8 the first year there they were still in Europe. Then they were in Arkansas, which means I
9 only got home a couple times a year. It wasn't something we talked a lot about. He
10 didn't talk a lot about the Korean War. He's just not that kind of person.

11 SM: Is that both before and after you went on active duty and to Vietnam? You
12 didn't talk after?

13 JW: In the last four or five years he's begun to talk about his Korean experiences
14 and I think that's a function of old age. I've learned more probably in the last three years
15 than I have in the rest of my life.

16 SM: Alright, so why don't you describe first going on active duty, going to Ft.
17 Benning, Georgia, to the infantry officer basic course. Describe that training that you
18 received there if you will.

19 JW: Well, I reported to Ft. Benning, I think it was six days after graduation and
20 Vietnam permeated all the training. Virtually that was the intro to every class. Listen up
21 you're going to Vietnam. You need to know this stuff or you're going to get killed or get
22 people killed. All of the instructors had been to Vietnam. Most of them multiple tours.
23 Some fairly, couple of strange happenings there. I went to one training, I think it was
24 mortar I can't remember to tell you the truth. And there was a captain with 101st ombat
25 patch and it was guy who had been two years behind me in high school at Copperas
26 Cove, who apparently had joined the Army right after high school and then went to OCS.
27 And he'd had two tours in Vietnam by then. So, that was kind of a strange occurrence.
28 Left Ft. Benning in the late fall of '69. Went home for leave and then I reported to my
29 unit, which was 2nd of 30th Infantry Frankfurt, Germany, 3rd Infantry Division.

30 SM: Is there anything in your training at Ft. Benning how heavy of an emphasis
31 was their on conventional or counter insurgency warfare?

1 JW: Well, the emphasis was on what we called counter insurgency. Not
2 necessarily the traditional definition of counter insurgency as I found in my later studies.
3 But search and destroy types of missions. Not much on the advisory effort. Primarily
4 focused on being a platoon leader in the 1st Cav or the 101st or the 173rd. That was the
5 introductory remarks, the attention grabber in every class. I don't care whether it was
6 leadership, medical subjects, machine gun range, whatever it may be.

7 SM: Ok. What about weapons training things like that?

8 JW: All of the infantry weapons from mortars down to small arms and pistols,
9 MO, artillery adjustments. Pretty extensive in terms of what a second lieutenant would
10 need to know.

11 SM: Do you remember any specific briefings or classroom lectures regarding
12 Vietnam in the context of the recent past, but especially the military aspects of what's
13 going on in Vietnam, but also the political, social context of what was going on in
14 Vietnam?

15 JW: I frankly don't remember a lot about that or any particular incidents of that.
16 I got that more when I went to the MATA (Military Assistance Training Advisor) course
17 at Ft. Bragg before I went to Vietnam some time later.

18 SM: Ok. What was the most important thing you took away from the IOBC
19 course at Ft. Benning that later was important for you?

20 JW: I think the leadership aspects of what you have to do to be a good leader to
21 get people to do the right thing to get the job done and keep from getting killed.

22 SM: Later when you found yourself in Vietnam did you feel that IOBC had done
23 and adequate job in its limited scope in just trying to prepare you to be a basic infantry
24 platoon leader? Do you think it was adequate to the task of preparing you?

25 JW: That would be hard for me to evaluate. Because I went as a captain, I was
26 an advisor. I didn't go as a rifle platoon leader in the 1st Cav. I went several years later.
27 Actually I went in December of '72, so it was two years plus after that training that I
28 went to Vietnam.

29 SM: How about when you found yourself as a platoon leader in Germany? When
30 you finally did get, here you are young lieutenant in charge of 30-plus men. This was a
31 ground infantry rifle platoon?

1 JW: No, a mechanized infantry platoon.

2 SM: Mechanized. So, you had 113s?

3 JW: Right.

4 SM: Was there anything that when you became a platoon leader, was there
5 anything you wished they had taught you about?

6 JW: Oh, I think more about the mechanized aspect with regard to maintenance
7 and those kinds of things. You don't get a lot of that at Ft. Benning or you didn't in
8 1969.

9 SM: What was the most challenging part of being a platoon leader in Germany?

10 JW: At that particular time the U.S. Army was in desperate trouble in Germany.
11 They were all over them I would guess. I had about maybe a third of the people I was
12 authorized. I had a large number of folks in jail at Manheim. The Army in Europe was
13 rife with drug problems and race problems and that's why I volunteered to go to Vietnam.
14 I figured it was safer in Vietnam than Germany.

15 SM: Safe in Vietnam than Germany?

16 JW: We probably could not have whipped a determined Girl Scout troop in
17 Europe in 1970, '71. At one point we didn't have enough money to maintain our
18 vehicles. Half of them we put in admin storage. Couldn't man the ones we had. The
19 barracks were falling apart, didn't have parts for the vehicles. It was pretty much a mess.

20 SM: How did this affect the morale of your platoon and your unit generally, your
21 company battalion, brigade?

22 JW: I think most folks were just in the survival mode. You had some good
23 troops, but the Army did some really stupid things. They sent troops from Vietnam to
24 Germany with less than six months to go in the Army. You imagine what kind of morale
25 problems and motivation problems they had. There were other localized things that
26 contributed to bad morale. There wasn't a centralized command selection process at that
27 time. So, there was a lot of politics involved. I had one battalion commander relieved for
28 racial prejudice basically as a result of trial by *Overseas Weekly* [of being tried by the
29 *Overseas Weekly*]. It was very hard to describe and hopefully the Army will never go
30 back to those days again.

31 SM: Can you describe of the incidents surrounding this relief of the commander?

1 JW: At that particular time the race problems were tremendous. This individual
2 happened to be from Mississippi. I think that was probably the largest aspect involved in
3 his basically being found guilty. I thought the guy was just trying to do a good job. But
4 at that particular time the Army was bending over backwards to try to put the rods back
5 in the reactor as far as the race problems go. It was just a bad situation all the way
6 around. This battalion I was in had four battalion commanders in six months.

7 SM: Four battalion commanders in six months?

8 JW: Well, we had the guy that was there when I got there. Then he was replaced
9 by a major acting [commander]. He was replaced by this other lieutenant colonel who
10 was then relieved. Then we ended up having a guy from brigade, who had been the
11 brigade XO come down and be the battalion commander. The first guy that I got there
12 ultimately ended up being a major general. He was a black officer, who was a
13 tremendous guy. But unfortunately I had only had a short period of time to serve with
14 him. But the other three guys were pretty much substandard in my estimation. Although
15 the guy that was relieved it was hard to tell whether he was good or not because he
16 wasn't there long enough.

17 SM: What about company commanders and other platoon leaders? Was there a
18 high rate or turnover there?

19 JW: I'm looking at it from the lieutenant's perspective. We had a I guess about
20 12 ROTC distinguished military graduates and West Point graduates show up at the same
21 time, all lieutenants. Generally with the same date of rank. All graduated about the same
22 time. You know looking from my perspective I thought these guys were pretty decent
23 folks. The company commanders with one exception were pretty poor. That's just
24 looking back and 30 years plus later, but some of the things that I saw them do that
25 they'd be relieved for today in a heartbeat.

26 SM: Well, it's interesting the story about the battalion commander who was
27 relieved because of the race issue. Because of course in the current situation in terms of
28 political correctness in American society and the hyper reaction that exists in certain
29 institutions and of course in government and in the military. You know this is not a new
30 phenomenon. Obviously this was a pretty significant issue for you as a lieutenant and as
31 an officer in the United States Army and for other officers. The Army's response to the

1 race issue, generally in the United States in the '60s was one of very little tolerance. At
2 least that's the way it appears.

3 JW: Well, it just depends on where you were. There was very much sensitivity to
4 the situation and it was a very bad situation. Then you add in the drug problems and the
5 crime problems. We were in a melt down in U.S. Army Europe in the early '70s. In fact,
6 a schoolmate of mine wrote a pretty good book about the same company I was in a
7 couple of years removed. About that Army of that era. I've recommended it to some of
8 my students and they just can't believe the things that went on. In this particular case I
9 remember one of the incidents was a number of black soldiers stood outside the brigade
10 headquarters and demanded that the brigade commander come out. You know bring his
11 honky ass out and talk to them about their problems. In fact, the brigade commander
12 went out there. That was kind of the atmosphere this lieutenant colonel was operating in.
13 I think largely he was guilty of being from Mississippi. I didn't see any overt racial
14 prejudice on his part. Of course, realize that I'm a white guy looking at that.

15 SM: But even still, being a product of the military yourself as the child of an
16 NCO in the active duty in the United States Army. Your exposure to different people,
17 different cultures, different perspectives. Don't you think you would have been in tune
18 enough to recognize racism if you had witnessed it?

19 JW: Oh, I would think so. You know I grew up in the Army. Some of the racial
20 problems that were experienced in the south I never really overtly experienced them
21 because that's not the situation I grew up in. You know it's like my kids, everybody talks
22 about diversity. My kids are Army kids. They've lived in all kinds of communities with
23 all kinds of people and I think they're better people for it. So, I think that pretty much I
24 felt the same way about me. About myself and my family. There was a large criminal
25 element involved in these activities in Germany. It was pretty hard to call out those who
26 had real racial concerns. There were real racial concerns about prejudice. But there was
27 also a criminal element there that was just there to cause trouble. Of course they were the
28 vocal ones and they were the ones to get all the media attention. They were the ones that
29 elicited all the response. I wouldn't tell you that the racial situation in the U.S. Army was
30 good. I think the Army has dealt with that situation over the years much better than a
31 couple of the other services wanted. At least, for sure Admiral Zumwalt talks about some

1 of the racial problems in the Vietnam era Navy. I think the Army dealt with those kinds
2 of situations much earlier. It wasn't something that happened overnight.

3 SM: Did you yourself in growing up in the military did you ever witness racial
4 intolerance, discrimination?

5 JW: Among kids I went to school with?

6 SM: Amongst kids, amongst adults?

7 JW: No, not really. You know I'm like most kids. I'm oblivious to most of the
8 stuff that's going on around me. That's just the kind of environment. You know
9 everyone talks about diversity, but that's the kind of environment that I grew up in.
10 Never thought anything about it; neither did my kids.

11 SM: You mentioned a criminal element involved in the issues of the race issues
12 and problems in Germany. How many soldiers did you know of that were the byproduct
13 of being confronted by a judge back in the states that said you've got two choices? You
14 can either join the military or go to jail.

15 JW: I can only assume they were. How could I sit down here and give you the
16 names and the backgrounds of all the guys that I knew when I was a lieutenant or captain.
17 Of course I can't do that.

18 SM: Oh, no I'm not looking for that. I mean can you generalize and say yes.
19 There were some people like that. There weren't some people like that. You have
20 absolutely no idea.

21 JW: I can make that general statement, but I can't give any specific individuals
22 off the top of my head right now. Realize now I'm reaching my dotage here. It's been
23 30 plus years since these things we're talking about.

24 SM: Yes, sir. Understood and that applies for all questions from this point
25 forward. In terms of criminal activity during your time in Germany what were the major
26 infractions and how were they dealt with in terms of?

27 JW: Oh, every day. I had five at one time six guys in jail at Mannheim and they
28 didn't put you in Mannheim for minor infractions.

29 SM: Do you recall what the infractions were?

30 JW: Oh, one was for attempted murder, another one was for assault, beating up
31 cab drivers. Beating up other soldiers, assault with a deadly weapon. You know we had

1 all kinds of incidents there. You know our scout platoon leader had a new Pontiac
2 Bonneville convertible that was sitting out in front of our company one night at that
3 particular time. We had thermite grenades on all the safes. You know in case of an
4 attack we were supposed to pull the pin on the grenade and let them melt the files. So,
5 they were sitting on all the safes. Someone launched one of these grenades out the third
6 floor window, it landed on his car and burned its way to the street. It was just a very
7 dangerous situation. One of our platoon leaders and his wife were trying to go to the
8 movie on Ledward barracks there and a large group of soldiers surrounded his car and
9 began rocking it for no apparent reason other than the fact that lieutenant and his wife
10 were white. It was a pretty bad situation all the way around. We were concerned in
11 many cases for our families' safety when we were in the field.

12 SM: And how about drugs?

13 JW: All over the place.

14 SM: Drugs of choice?

15 JW: Black tar heroine, if I remember right.

16 SM: How was usage in terms of the make up of your platoon, company battalion,
17 how would you describe usage in terms of, was it predominantly lower enlisted? Did it
18 infect all ranks?

19 JW: Lower enlisted primarily.

20 SM: How about in terms of socio-economic and racial? Were there any racial
21 distinctions in terms of drug use? Were there more whites that used marijuana or heroine
22 or vice versa?

23 JW: I think marijuana was pretty much a given. I think the hard users used
24 heroine. There was one particular time we had duty officers in all but five companies and
25 the battalion with locked and loaded .45s. That's not something you would expect in the
26 U.S. Army in terms of an organization that is built around discipline. There were places
27 in the barracks that when you went into you took your life in your own hands. My first
28 sergeant kept a metal bunk adapter under his desk in case he had any trouble with guys
29 coming in the orderly room.

30 SM: Was there anybody killed while you were there?

31 JW: Not in my unit.

1 SM: Other units?

2 JW: Yes.

3 SM: Other service units there?

4 JW: I don't think in Schweinfurt. I do remember one incident where it was the
5 4th Armored Division, which became the 1st Infantry Division, later at Grafenwöhr. Had
6 an offier/NCO softball game in a Sunday afternoon and had gone into one of the mess
7 halls there at Camp Achen or Normandy or one of the containment camps. Were having
8 coffee and cake and someone threw two frag grenades in on them. And as I remember
9 two or four were killed and about 25 wounded.

10 SM: By your description I asked you earlier what was the most difficult part
11 about being a platoon leader in Germany. Doesn't sound like the mechanized part
12 anymore.

13 JW: No, it really was just dealing with the U.S. Army circa 1970.

14 SM: Sounds like a mess.

15 JW: It was and I'm not sure that most folks had a real good idea of what the
16 nature of the beast was there. We were in desperate trouble. The good NCOs were
17 primarily in Vietnam, on their way to Vietnam, or on their way back from Vietnam. So,
18 in large amount of incidences we had calls for NCOs with brand new officers trying to
19 corral these hooligans. Some of whom were fairly well armed. I mean arms rooms were
20 broken into and machine guns were stolen.

21 SM: Black market activity?

22 JW: I would guess. I would guess. I don't know for sure. It was just a very
23 shaky situation. At that time we kept all the ammunition on the tracks in the mortar pool.
24 That included grenades and mines. We kept all the machine guns, the heavy machine
25 guns on the tracks and not in the arms room. So, it was pretty shaky.

26 SM: Was there any Black Market activity that you were aware of?

27 JW: Not that I'm overtly aware of. I'm sure there was.

28 SM: How about espionage? Any cases, incidents while you were there?

29 JW: No, not that come to mind. I mean there was the occasional one that used to
30 be in the *Overseas Weekly*. It seems like I remember some sergeant in Berlin, but only
31 vaguely.

1 SM: I guess a larger strategy and to a degree tactical issue, how concerned where
2 you deep down that the Commies might come running for the Fulda Gap? You as an
3 American infantry platoon leader, mechanized might find yourselves facing armed
4 Communist Russian armed forces coming through Germany? While you were there was
5 that a genuine concern for you?

6 JW: Well, I think it always was. You have to realize what kind of upbringing I
7 had. I can remember being a junior in high school standing at Check Point Charlie
8 looking across the way at some guy looking at me with binoculars. That made a very
9 large impression on me. The Cold War was very real to me. When you roll through the
10 zone as my wife and I did when we were lieutenants. When I drove to Berlin it pretty
11 much looked like those guys had their act together and that they didn't like us and vice
12 versa. Except that we didn't have our act together. That was probably the biggest
13 concern. When we went out on the GDP for an alert I put little signs out that said
14 machine gunner, grenadier, rifleman. Because at one point I can remember I had four
15 tracks and ten people. I had enough to drive and TC each one of the vehicles and I had
16 an RTO. That was my platoon. Now, it doesn't take a military genius to figure out that I
17 wasn't going to be able to handle the sector that would normally be handled by a 48-
18 person platoon in reality. But the near term battle, you know that's always in the back of
19 your head. The near term battle was trying to get through the next 48 hours. You know
20 not having some major dust up with a troop or having somebody throw you out of a
21 window or those kinds of things. It'd be very difficult for me to describe to you the
22 atmosphere there. And I don't think Schweinfurt was any different than anywhere else in
23 Germany then.

24 SM: I think you've done an adequate job. That's a very graphic picture and very
25 scary one.

26 JW: This book, excuse me I'm on a portable phone here. If ya'll don't have this
27 book in your library there at the Vietnam Center you should.

28 SM: Ok, what's that?

29 JW: The guy's name is Michael Lee Lanning and I just got the book back from
30 General McAface that I had loaned it to. I know it's in my bookcase here, but I don't see
31 it right now. It was called like *Armies of Peace*, but he was a company commander of the

1 same company that I had been the XO of later, right before I left I was company XO. He
2 talks about what it was like when he arrived there I think it was 1972 or '73. It's startling
3 to say the least, but not something that was new to me.

4 SM: I'm sorry the title again, do you remember?

5 JW: Oh, there it is right there. *The Battles of Peace*.

6 SM: *Battles of Peace*.

7 JW: Micheal Lee Lanning. One company commander's battle against drugs and
8 racial conflict and the war to rebuild the post-Vietnam Army. He got there in 1974, he
9 really wasn't there at the height of the difficulties. But he certainly saw the vestiges of it
10 by the time he'd gotten there.

11 SM: What would you consider the most important thing or collection of things
12 you took away from your Germany experience that were important for you later as an
13 advisor in Vietnam and later as an officer in the United States Armed Forces.

14 JW: I just think the leadership issues about getting to know your troops and doing
15 the right thing and being fair and equal to all. And trying to preclude those situations that
16 led to the kinds of unrest that I saw in Germany. But probably in the final analysis had
17 some germ of a situation that should have been addressed early on and it just continued to
18 grow and grow and grow until you know by that particular time in the Army things were
19 way out of control in terms of putting up with drug users and addressing very real racial
20 issues that could have diffused a lot of the situation that I saw. Always in the back of
21 your mind in technical competency. Being able to do the things that you're supposed to
22 do. You know like adjusting artillery fire. If you do that wrong you kill somebody and
23 maybe yourself. So, I think leadership and technical competency were probably the two
24 biggest things.

25 SM: Well, you left Germany in June of '71. Actually you had three different
26 positions in Germany. Platoon leader, battalion maintenance officer and then company
27 executive officer. Was there anything significantly different about your positions as they
28 changed in terms of your perspective? Or was it just again pretty much dealing with the
29 same issues throughout?

30 JW: The battalion maintenance officer job was a challenge. Because I'm not a
31 very technical person. Luckily I had a very good maintenance sergeant and a very good

1 maintenance warrant who were. That was their business. But it was not a job I was
2 comfortable in. Maintenance was never my long suit. Never was something I really
3 enjoyed. But being a platoon leader and being an XO were pretty closely allied in terms
4 of job requirements.

5 SM: Well, you went from there to USAJFKSWC, Ft. Bragg, North Carolina.

6 And this was for MAT training correct?

7 JW: Right. Military Training Advisor Course, which covered all kinds of
8 advisory positions where everyone went through there even when they were going to be
9 an advisor with the ARVN or they were going to be one of the province teams or a
10 mobile advisory team or any other capacity. It was just a general advisor in Vietnam
11 course.

12 SM: How did you come about this?

13 JW: It was part of when I went to volunteer to go to Vietnam, it was part of the of
14 course like all infantry guys I wanted to go to the 1st Cav or 173rd or one of those sexy
15 line units. And by that particular time Vietnamization had been initiated and we had the
16 first troops come home in '69 from the 9th ID from the Delta. I was told, 'Well, you're
17 going over. You're going to be an advisor because the U.S. units are being withdrawn.'
18 So, in order to kind of sweeten the pot a little and I was obviously disappointed that I
19 wasn't going to the 1st Cav they said, 'We'll send you to advisor school, we'll send you
20 to language school en route.' So, I said, 'Ok, whatever.'

21 SM: Why don't you go ahead and discuss as much as you remember your MAT
22 training?

23 JW: As I remember it was about 11 or 12 weeks long. It was very intensive. At
24 that particular course we got very directive types of instruction in Vietnam culture,
25 history, social kinds of things. How to exist in that particular culture. Things to do,
26 things not to do. Ideas about counterinsurgency and advisory techniques. It was a pretty
27 professional course. We got a little bit of language training which was then built on
28 when I went to Ft. Bliss to the Defense Language Institute Southwest Branch there at
29 Biggs Field at Ft. Bliss. But as I remember it was number one it was very professionally
30 done. The JFK center obviously has pretty much got its act together in that arena. It's
31 what they're about. They were very, very good at what they were doing. Training was

1 intensive. Students were motivated because they realized that they were going by the end
2 of the course or by the end of the language school they'd be in Vietnam. So, there wasn't
3 a lot of horsing around. Frankly, more than that I can't remember off the top of my head.
4 Maybe some of your questions will elicit some more specific responses, but that's
5 generally what I remember.

6 SM: Well, let me ask you if you remember anything that was discussed in terms
7 of course as an advisor, going over in '71 as an advisor, your key job is part of the
8 Vietnamization of the war. What did you know about that prior to going to the MAT
9 training and when did you think about that if you had any thoughts that you recall?
10 About this notion of Vietnamizing the war or turning everything over to the Vietnamese.
11 Trying to get that victory with honor that Nixon was so desperately seeking.

12 JW: You know as I remember I don't remember anybody overtly talking about
13 Vietnamization. I remember there was the idea that we were going to train the
14 Vietnamese Army essentially what Vietnamization was. But in terms of use of that word,
15 I don't remember it. I do remember that the effort was we'd go to make these guys better
16 so that when we pull our forces out and there was a fairly wide acceptance that now this
17 thing wasn't going to go on forever. Eventually it was going to be over and eventually
18 U.S troops or at least most U.S. troops would be gone so the South Vietnamese had to
19 stand on their own. That was kind of the thrust of how do we make them better? So,
20 they've got it when we leave. In terms of did someone stand up and saying, 'This is
21 Vietnamization 101. I'm your principle instructor for the next four hours.' No, I don't
22 remember that happening.

23 SM: Ok. What about in terms of training you to coordinate and work effectively
24 with your Vietnamese counterparts? How much cultural training do you recall in terms
25 of Vietnamese customs, the dos and don'ts? How to get along best, how to be most
26 influential and effective in terms of being an advisor?

27 JW: There was a lot of the cultural, social kinds of things to do. Things not to do.
28 There was some on history, but not to the complexity and richness that I've come to
29 know Vietnamese history in the later years in my doctoral program obviously. But much
30 more so than the infantry officer basic course. The focus was kind of on, how do you fit
31 in? What do you bring to the situation? The difficulty was it's very hard in that

1 environment to tell a brand new captain like myself how he's going to be able to insert
2 himself into a Vietnamese unit that's been fighting for years with a regimental or
3 battalion commander who may have been fighting himself for 25 or 30 years and have
4 any particular kind of influence. You can't teach that in a classroom. But in terms of
5 setting us up for the organization, what did it look like? What kinds of operations did
6 they do? The social cultural kinds of things I thought they did a pretty good job.

7 SM: Did they talk about the types of problems that you should expect to
8 encounter with regard to interacting with Vietnamese counterparts?

9 JW: Yeah, they were mostly case study kinds of things, but they at least it got
10 you thinking in terms of, you know, what would I do in a like situation right here.

11 SM: Ok. Based on your training what did you think would be your primary
12 missions? Your primary role and what would you do as an advisor in Vietnam, based on
13 what they taught you in MAT training?

14 JW: I'm not sure I understand your question. I didn't hear all of it.

15 SM: I'm sorry. I guess what I'm looking for is if there is any difference between
16 what they trained you or what they told you, you should expect to do when you got there
17 as an advisor and what you actually did. So, I'm curious, what did they tell you you
18 would be doing as an advisor in Vietnam and how did that compare to what you actually
19 found yourself doing in the ground in Vietnam?

20 JW: Well, when I first got to Vietnam I ended up with an Army called the Royal
21 Thai Army in Vietnam, which was about a 10,000 man force that the Thais had sent as
22 part of the Free World Military Forces. They were in the process of retrograding back to
23 Thailand. So, I was essentially working myself out of a job. I never went on a combat
24 operation with them because they weren't going on any then. By January basically they
25 were loaded up and ready to go back to Thailand and I was told to go find myself another
26 job, because we were all out of a job. So, I wandered around a bit and ended up in Xuan
27 Loc and got a job with the 18th ARVN Division on one of the regimental advisory teams.
28 That was pretty much like I had been told at Ft. Bragg. The thing at Bear Cat with the
29 Thais was kind of an aberration; that was essentially helping them get ready to leave.
30 Had very little to do with what I had done at Bragg.

31 SM: Did they conduct any operations at Bear Cat while you were there?

1 JW: No, I was there less than two months. By and large they were packing up
2 their stuff and leaving.

3 SM: Just based on that experience, what perception did you have of the Thai
4 Army?

5 JW: Pretty good, very positive. I found their officers to be very professional.
6 They had two firebases there that were still, one was called Pertieve and I forgot the other
7 one's name off the top of my head. But they were highly organized, well set up.
8 Everything was clean and efficient. I was pretty favorably impressed, pretty much across
9 the board with the Thais.

10 SM: Before we talk more about Vietnam and your specific advisory missions and
11 activities, was there anything else that sticks out in your mind about your MAT training
12 before you left?

13 JW: Not really. It's all largely a blur. Because the 900-pound gorilla was the
14 fact that you were going to leave on airplane, go to Travis and go to Vietnam. Things
15 were already a little tense in my family because I had volunteered. People wondered if I
16 had lost my mind. So, it was a very tense time. The language training at Ft. Bliss was
17 pretty effective. But at 11 weeks, you just touch. I could talk very well to the other
18 Americans talking Vietnamese. I had a little more difficulty when I was talking to
19 Vietnamese who were talking in Vietnamese later. But it was very intensive. I can see
20 that some of the Intel types that went there for a year that basically ate, drank, and slept
21 the Vietnamese language were probably quite proficient because it's total immersion.
22 Total immersion for 11 weeks only gives you a limited amount of capability. Total
23 immersion for year is a different situation altogether, I would imagine.

24 SM: The instructors that you had, these were all native speakers from South
25 Vietnam?

26 JW: Yes. Vietnamese women primarily.

27 SM: They didn't just teach you language, they taught you Vietnamese culture,
28 etiquettes, things like that?

29 JW: Yeah, in the context of the language a lot of other things that we were
30 talking about were you know just normal everyday living kinds of things that I found to
31 be useful.

1 SM: Any that stick out in your mind when you finally did find yourself in
2 Vietnam, things that they taught you that were extremely helpful?

3 JW: Oh, I think nothing more than just an idea of how you act in society. Not
4 pointing the sole of your feet at people, which they find offensive and those kinds of
5 things. Not any earth shaking kinds of ideas. Just some common courtesy kind of things
6 that get you off on the right foot.

7 SM: And everybody that you were training with in this 11-week course, these
8 were all going to be advisors?

9 JW: Yes.

10 SM: Now at this stage in your career you're a captain now right?

11 JW: I'd been promoted in June.

12 SM: Oh, just as you left Germany.

13 JW: Weeks before I left.

14 SM: So, you're a captain in the United States Army, going through MAT training
15 as you've already described it things are winding down. It's just a question of time. At
16 this point in your career what do you think about what the United States has done in
17 Vietnam? What are you and your fellow officer talking about in terms of what we set out
18 to do, what we accomplished and how we were pulling out?

19 JW: I don't remember any great political debates about what we were doing
20 there. Everyone pretty much focused on their lane, which was to go there, do their job
21 and come home. In terms of what was happening at the Presidential level or in Paris or
22 anything like that, I'm sure there was some knowledge of that at least what was in the
23 media. I remember the focus being on pretty much watch your own lane. There was a
24 certain idea at least on some people's parts I talked with about, 'If this thing's over, why
25 are we having to go over there?' kind of thing. But most of the guys I knew were pretty
26 much like me. They were West Point graduates or ROTC Distinguished Military
27 graduates and they were fairly well motivated and had some idea about why the thought
28 they were going.

29 SM: Was there much competition or conflict, not in a bad way but just in a
30 human context between ROTC graduates and the ring knockers, West Pointers?

31 JW: Not overtly I don't think.

1 SM: There wasn't a lot of cliquishness?

2 JW: In some cases, but you know you could always see that. But they were
3 probably the exception rather than the rule.

4 SM: Anything else that was important for you before you left to go to Vietnam?

5 JW: Nothing sticks out in my mind.

6 SM: Did you feel prepared? When you were getting on that aircraft getting ready
7 to fly over?

8 JW: Well, I suppose in one sense of my mind I felt prepared, but in the other part
9 of my mind I was wondering if I was prepared enough for what I was getting into.
10 Because you've got a lot of time to sit on an airplane and think about all of the
11 uncertainties that will present themselves when you step off the end of the ramp when
12 you get there. You can watch all the movies. You can talk to all the people you want to.
13 You can read all the books, but you really don't have an idea about what you're going to
14 be confronted with.

15 SM: Was there much discussion on the trip over? Was it mostly officers that had
16 gone through training with you to be advisors that you traveled together?

17 JW: Basically you just showed up at Travis, got on the airplane went with
18 whoever was already manifested. So, I didn't know anybody on the plane. And as I
19 remember it was a fairly quiet flight. You know, most people were dealing with what
20 they were going to be confronted with when they got to the end of the stairs.

21 SM: Well, let's go ahead and talk about that. Where did you enter Vietnam?
22 What were your first impressions when they opened the doors?

23 JW: Of course we landed at Tan Son Nhut. Cracked the doors, walked down to
24 the end of the stairway there, and got on a bus that had screen around the windows, which
25 sort of struck me as interesting. I was smart enough to figure out that was an anti-
grenade measure. Then the first thing that strikes you when they open the doors, the heat
27 is just pervasive. It's like putting on a wet coat, a wet hot coat. Then there was the
28 usually Army bureaucratic, stand in line, drag your duffel bag over in this direction kind
29 of thing that went on for hours it seemed. Then we ended it in a place called Camp
30 Alpha, which was kind of a holding area for those coming or going while we waited for

1 assignments. That's where I found out that I was going to Bear Cat to work with the
2 Thais. They sent somebody in a jeep to pick me up. That's how I got to Bear Cat.

3 SM: When was your first interaction with the Vietnamese and how did that go?

4 JW: Other than incidental contact it was after I got to Xuan Loc at the end of
5 January or mid-January.

6 SM: So, during your time with the Royal Thai Army and Bear Cat not many
7 other Vietnamese around there? Not much interaction around there?

8 JW: Nope. It was a giant base camp that at one time belonged to the 9th and then
9 I think had belonged to the 25th. We occupied about 1/3 of it and the rest of it looked like
10 a ghost town. There were obviously Vietnamese workers there but I don't remember
11 having any particular contact with them.

12 SM: What about briefings, in-country briefings and information you received
13 when you go to Vietnam? Do you recall anything?

14 JW: I would say it was probably insignificant because I don't recall any of it.

15 SM: Looking back do you find that to be startling or disappointing?

16 JW: Looking back it would appear to me that some...I understand that various
17 U.S. units had normally some sort of in-country training that lasted from three to five to
18 seven days. I don't know what that involved. But it was certainly kind of an
19 acclimatization process. Both in terms of the climate, but as well as the environment.
20 Other parts of the environment I don't remember any of that. I just basically remember
21 getting my orders, getting picked up in the jeep and I was off to Bear Cat and that was my
22 introduction.

23 SM: For your time at Bear Cat what did you do on a daily basis?

24 JW: Mostly admin kinds of stuff. We were scurrying around there trying to help
25 them get their equipment together. Trying to manifest their troops. We were down to I
26 don't know 25 or 30 advisors I guess. Basically I was working for a major and did
27 whatever he told me to do. But it was strictly administrative kinds of things.

28 SM: What did you do with your down time?

29 JW: Not much. I'm an avid reader, so I always had a rucksack full of books that
30 I'd pick up here and there. Trying to remember. That was about it. There wasn't a
31 whole heck of a lot else to do.

1 SM: No, I guess, drinking facilities?

2 JW: Oh, there was a little club there as I remember. Certainly nothing to write
3 home about.

4 SM: Alright. Was there anything significant you took away from that experience
5 that helped you when you moved on to Xuan Loc?

6 JW: Not overtly. I enjoyed the Thais very much and the interaction with them. I
7 enjoyed talking to them and asking about their country and their military and their
8 history. I just found them to be very good, nice folks almost across the board.
9 Regardless of rank, regardless of background.

10 SM: Is there anything you want to talk about your time at Bear Cat?

11 JW: No, it was pretty fleeting. It was less than two months. It wasn't where I
12 wanted to be. You know I was an infantry officer. I went over there. If I'm going to
13 war, I wanted a Combat Infantry Man's Badge and I wasn't going to get that counting
14 connexes at Bear Cats.

15 SM: So, you move on in February of '72 to Xuan Loc?

16 JW: Actually January.

17 SM: Oh, January of '72 to Xuan Loc. 18th Infantry Division ARVN and this was
18 Advisory Team 87. How were you received there? What was your primary mission,
19 your primary job and how did you fit in?

20 JW: Well there were lot of people moving around in terms of changing
21 assignments because units were standing down. Facilities were downsizing. So, when I
22 got to the 18th ARVN the D-Cat probably was about 60 or 70 people as I remember. By
23 the time I left we were down to about 20. So, there was this continually downsizing
24 going on. I started out a regimental advisory team where there was a lieutenant colonel,
25 three captains and three of four NCOs. When a battalion went out from our regiment at
26 least two of us would go out with the unit. I was first with the 48 regiment which was at
27 Long Gao or Black Horse with the 11th ACR had previously been. I ultimately ended up
28 working with all three regiments in the division before I left. Went out on my first
29 operation; it was about 10 days. Went on the second one, went out on the third one and
30 the third one I was wounded for the first time.

31 SM: So why don't you describe some in terms of going out on missions?

1 JW: They were mostly search and clear, search and destroy is probably too much
2 of an aggressive term to use. Largely it seemed like in most cases to be long walks
3 through the jungle. Infrequent contact at that particular point, we didn't know at the time
4 the North Vietnamese and they were North Vietnamese. I never saw Viet Cong, not in a
5 year. The North Vietnamese were laying low in preparation of what was to come with
6 the Easter Offensive at the end of March and the rest of the year. We had occasional
7 meeting engagements. Then the first time I was going for some strange reason we ran
8 into a large regimental sized ambush out in some areas we'd been working in for quite
9 awhile. The only thing I've surmised and after the fact it that we were getting too close
10 to one of their base camps that they were laying in for the Easter Offensive that caused
11 them to react. Otherwise they were just basically trying to stay out of our way. Normally
12 we'd go out for five to 10 days. I'd stay with regimental headquarters. The battalion
13 would do cloverleaf patrols or large battalion sized operations to particular AOs looking
14 for signs of the enemy and that was pretty much it.

15 SM: Were these operations in keeping with the tactical principals of
16 counterinsurgency you'd been taught during your MAT training?

17 JW: Primarily yeah, they were looking for the North Vietnamese base camps and
18 essentially what that regiment was trying to do was to keep the North Vietnamese off of
19 Xuan Loc, which was the province capital and trying to keep down any North
20 Vietnamese build up against Xuan Loc and from my perspective that seemed to work
21 largely. Not necessarily because of those operations but maybe because the North
22 Vietnamese just weren't that interested in Xuan Loc. I'm not for sure, not having talked
23 to the North Vietnamese commander there.

24 SM: Did you have a specific person that you worked consistently within the unit
25 in terms of a Vietnamese counterpart?

26 JW: No. In that particular case we were a regimental team made up of as I said
27 six or eight folks. Very seldom did the entire regiment go to the Seal at the same time.
28 So, when a battalion went out it was pretty much who was available at that particular
29 time in terms of an officer and NCO. We kind of rotated. You know if you went out last
30 week, then it wasn't your turn to go out this week kind of thing.

31 SM: Your other team members, do you recall their names?

1 JW: Yeah, a couple of them.

2 SM: Can you tell me who they were?

3 JW: Well, one of them was Captain Butler. Our lieutenant colonel was a guy
4 named Christi. There was a Sergeant Jones and there were three or four other folks.
5 There were people continually leaving from the day I got there. So, Butler was there
6 after I went to An Loc. I ended up away from the division for a large period of time, that
7 we can eventually get to here I guess. So, I remember a handful of folks there but not
8 many.

9 SM: And the rotation system was it identical to the 365-day rotation system prior
10 to that for confessional courses?

11 JW: In terms of what, my tour?

12 SM: Well, in terms for advisors? It was the same tour system?

13 JW: Yeah.

14 SM: What did you think about that?

15 JW: Well, in terms of being there 365 days seemed like a good idea to me. In
16 retrospect I think the personnel problems and the rotational policies that we set up there
17 were a large part of our difficulties. Particularly with regard to six months command
18 times. Might take six months to figure out what you're doing if you're a company
19 commander and then boom, you're pulled up and sent to a staff job and they bring
20 somebody new in. So, you know the old wag said we didn't have twelve years of
21 experience in Vietnam, we had a year's experience 12 times. That's real easy to say in
22 academic setting, unless you have to be the guy out there that's going to be there for 365
23 days or twelve years.

24 SM: But at the same time I mean this was kind of a new philosophy for the
25 American military. It wasn't a total war like World War II where we really depended on
26 people staying where they were. I mean as recently back as that in terms of from the '70s
27 back to the '40s. We had guys fighting wars for a couple of years.

28 JW: Duration plus six months. I think probably one of the things we learned was
29 that individual replacements was not a good way to fight a war. Unit rotations make
30 more sense. That's obviously what we're doing, in different kinds of conflicts, all in
31 Bosnia and Kosovo and those kinds of things. We send whole units; we don't send

1 individuals. All of the instability that goes with a 12 months individual rotation, we
2 learned all those lessons the hard way I think. There is no unit cohesion. You take a unit
3 like the 1st Cav, Hal Moore's battalion that fought in the Ia Drang. The comparison
4 between that battalion and that same battalion four years later, there's no comparison in
5 terms of effectiveness. Because Moore's battalion had trained together, some of them
6 two years before they went and they remained as a unit. With the exception of the influx
7 of other personnel they got before they left to round out the battalion.

8 SM: In terms of the interaction between your mat team and the Vietnamese as
9 collective counterparts how well do you think your MAT team actually got along with the
10 ARVN Army division?

11 JW: Ok, a little bit of trouble on terminology here. We were not a Mobile
12 Advisory Team, a MAT team. That's a decidedly different thing than what we were.

13 SM: Got you. Yes, sir. Absolutely. I'm sorry. Your advisory team, how well
14 do you think you got along? How well do you think...

15 JW: It kind of depended. I thought the regimental commander and our
16 regimental senior advisor Colonel Christi had a very good relationship. One of the
17 problems that mitigated against any kind of long term relationship was the fact that we, as
18 you've already pointed out by your question, is that I wasn't assigned to a particular
19 battalion on a regular basis. I might go out with the 1st Battalion one time, the 3rd
20 Battalion the next. That kind of mitigated against any kind of long term traditional
21 habitual relationship that might foster stronger ties, if you follow my drift?

22 SM: Yes, ok. Were there any instances that you recall of a particularly bad
23 communications between the advisory team and the Vietnamese counterparts? How
24 effective do you think you were in terms of, did the Vietnamese actually listen to your
25 advice?

26 JW: Well, let's be honest about what a captain with less than six months in grade
27 or about six months in grade, what kind of advice I've got to offer some regimental
28 commander like Colonel Tieb of the 52nd Regiment who had been fighting for 25 years.
29 Let's be honest, what I had was a U.S. Army nametag that made me the embodiment of
30 the U.S. commitment to support the South Vietnamese and I had a radio that allowed me

1 to talk to artillery, TAC air and attack helicopters. And that's primarily what my function
2 was.

3 SM: So in reality it was less advice and more support in terms of artillery
4 support, close air support, helicopter support. You were kind of coordinating that
5 relationship between Vietnamese military forces and operations and what little American
6 support still existed in Vietnam.

7 JW: I can only give you my perspective on it as a brand new captain in that
8 particular situation. In other situations where you had a lieutenant colonel or captain who
9 was assigned with the same unit for 12 months and went out with them on a daily basis
10 I'm sure that there was much more opportunity for advice to be given and taken. That
11 really wasn't my role, given where I was in my career and what was going on there.

12 SM: Did your advisory team talk much about these types of issues? In particular
13 what your expectations were? Your title versus the reality of your position? The fact that
14 even a lot of the senior officers, senior American officer compared to the Vietnamese
15 counterparts had pretty slim actual combat experience, compared to these guys who'd
16 been fighting since World War II? Some of them fighting alongside the Viet Minh if not
17 with the Viet Minh against the Japanese and then against the French at times and then
18 against each other.

19 JW: I think I felt that I was in an advisory role generally speaking in terms of
20 advising this guy is how we could integrate U.S. support into this?

21 JW: But, in terms of me walking up to this lieutenant colonel or colonel and
22 saying hey, I don't like the way you've drawn this route on a map, we really ought to go
23 over here. I mean let's be honest, I didn't have much to add in that particular arena.

24 SM: That's a good point.

25 JW: I had not commanded a company by that time, much less a battalion or a
26 regiment.

27 SM: But that's a good point. Your advice was in integration. Integrating
28 American fire support into the Vietnamese military operation. Of course one of the more
29 memorable experiences, operations you were involved in was the EASTER Offensive, is
30 that correct?

31 JW: Well, yeah, but I'd already been wounded once by then.

1 SM: Well, let's go ahead and start with that. Why don't you discuss the first
2 major operation where you were involved with the Vietnamese in a combat situation
3 where you're taking fire? Your first combat operation.

4 JW: That actually was the first time I went out. That was about a 10-day
5 operation. One of the things was I got sicker than a dog on the operation. It was
6 primarily I don't think I was acclimatized to that kind of exertion and that kind of heat.
7 Something I ate with the Vietnamese, something I ate made me deathly ill. You know
8 I'm just barely keeping up with these guys as they're cutting Vietnamese-sized holes in
9 the jungle; I'm trying to get through them. Which is another story in and of itself. We
10 took some fire. It wasn't anything of great importance, but it was my first time under
11 fire. It's pretty difficult to describe. A little frightening, strangely exhilarating. But once
12 it was over it kind of felt like, 'Wow, I'm glad that's done. Let's move onto the next
13 thing.' Because there's a certain amount of, 'I'm not sure how I'm going to react with
14 somebody trying to shoot at me.' You know that's pretty much in the mind of any Army
15 officer I think until it actually happened to him. So, other than that, that was a fairly
16 uneventful operation. The second one, same kind of thing. The third one was the time
17 we ran into the regimental-size ambush. That was very significant. We had come across
18 a river stream, started up a hill. They opened up with multiple automatic weapons. We
19 tried to move back down the hill, they dropped mortars behind us. So, that was very well
20 set up. Textbook Ft. Benning ambush. In the process of that I was behind a tree firing
21 and they hit the tree with an RPG-7 and when it detonated part of it hit me in the leg.
22 And at that particular point in all of the confusion, the Vietnamese battalion withdrew
23 and left me with a bunch of walking wounded. Unfortunately when they did that they
24 took my radio with them. So, for the next 18 hours or so, but ultimately we got around
25 the ambush by virtually bouncing until we found the corner and got around it and got
26 away from them. This was a rubber plantation. We walked through the rubber for a
27 number of hours and made it out to a road. Spent the night at an ARVN outpost on the
28 road and then I got picked up the next day. So, that was pretty much that. I was less than
29 happy that they went off and left me.

30 SM: I was just going to say. What did you think and how did you feel about
31 that?

1 JW: I wasn't too happy. Kind of interesting. The next day I was ambulatory
2 obviously, running on adrenaline largely. I just had a big chunk of metal in my knee. So,
3 pretty stiff knee. It cauterized itself so it wasn't even bleeding bad, but there were some
4 other guys who were hurt worse and we were kind of dragging them. These were South
5 Vietnamese and we made it to this outpost and by that time it was about 10:00 at night
6 and they didn't want to send a helicopter out to get us, because no one was in danger of
7 dying during the night. So they sent vehicles out, ground vehicles and picked us up the
8 next day. Then it was just a short run into Xuan Loc. I ended up going to 91st or 93rd
9 Evac. Anyway it was one of these Quonset hut hospitals, evac hospitals, in Long Binh. I
10 can remember stating...someone from advisory team came, and I remember stating that
11 these guys had run off and left me. Well, shortly thereafter I got word through another
12 captain that my senior advisor said I was to keep my mouth shut about the incident.
13 Apparently it was one of those things where we don't want to really raise the specter of
14 these guys running off and leaving an American advisor. Interestingly enough the
15 division commander later got an American Bronze Star for landing in a hot LZ to pick me
16 up, which was kind of interesting because he looked like a Vietnamese private in a jeep.
17 But that's just one of those things.

18 SM: Had this ever happened to an American advisor in your team or previous
19 teams that you were aware of?

20 JW: Not that I'm aware of. It'd been pretty quiet there. Like I said, I think by in
21 large they were laying in for the EASTER Offensive, so there hadn't been much contact
22 in the recent past in Xuan Loc or Black Horse. It was kind of a political thing by and
23 large. We're Vietnamizing these guys they're going to do better because we say they're
24 doing better kind of thing. So, I basically shut my mouth up at that point. Interestingly
25 enough I had a friend who had been at Bear Cat who was now one of the general's aides.
26 The Deputy III Corps commander, his aide, he came to the hospital and I told him what
27 happened so I'm sure it got up to the general. Now what happened after that I don't
28 know. Anyway, I was in the hospital for about a week and then I was on crutches for
29 about a month.

30 SM: Now when you were instructed not to discuss this, did that also mean with
31 your fellow team members?

1 JW: I think they were primarily talking about outside the team.

2 SM: Did you talk about this with your team members?

3 JW: Yes.

4 SM: What was the consensus there?

5 JW: You know by this time we're down to just a few folks. There were those
6 guys that say in the confusion of battle, that sort of stuff happens. There were other guys
7 who had their own ideas about the worst of the South Vietnamese, the soldiers who pretty
8 much said what do you expect? So, it kind of depended on their personal experience.

9 And the experience with the battalion and the regiments was different, depending like all
10 Army units are different. Largely taken back to the leadership. Where there was a good
11 battalion commander or good regimental commander, then the unit was pretty good or if
12 they were sorry they were less than pretty good. You know that's no different than in the
13 U.S. Army. In many cases, maybe not to that startling of an extent, but there were
14 certainly gradations of ability and capability in all units.

15 SM: Were there any precautions taken or safety guards or whatever put in place
16 after that incident to make sure that it didn't happen again?

17 JW: Not that I'm aware of.

18 SM: How about when you were on these types of operations carrying your own
19 radio?

20 JW: I did after that.

21 SM: So, you took your own precautions, but not as a part of policy?

22 JW: No.

23 SM: Was this ever spoken of again within your team?

24 JW: No. I got a Cross of Gallantry from the South Vietnamese for the operation,
25 which I thought was kind of ironic.

26 SM: Do you think that was kind of a face-saving measure?

27 JW: Not aimed at me, because it wasn't just me. There were about 20 people
28 involved, South Vietnamese as well. But, I don't think so. I don't know. Number one I
29 couldn't tell what he hell they were talking about when they were making the speeches.

30 SM: Ok. Well that brings up another interesting point. When you found yourself
31 actually finally assigned to a Vietnamese unit, how well had the Vietnamese language

1 training prepared you for that and how did you Vietnamese improve over time? Did you
2 get enough opportunity to practice, to get better closer to the time you left?

3 JW: You've probably studied languages before. Eleven weeks you can figure out
4 how to order a beer and a little bit more than that, but that's about all. The problem was
5 that...no doubt my language skills improved as I tried to use them. But I think there's a
6 certain reticence on the part of most Americans to try other languages and I certainly was
7 no different. I could probably understand it better than I could speak it until we got into a
8 situation where both they and I were excited. Then those skills began to fall off
9 drastically, but many of their commanders spoke English anyway.

10 SM: Ok, so the communication was primarily, would you say the communication
11 between the advisory team and the Vietnamese was facilitated by their English
12 proficiency versus your Vietnamese?

13 JW: Right, at least in my experience it was.

14 SM: How much contact would you have with the average soldier in this ARVN
15 division?

16 JW: When I was out in the field, it was daily contact. I mean I moved with the
17 battalion headquarters and he had his strikers.

18 SM: What was your perception and your evaluation of the Vietnamese armed
19 forces?

20 JW: I think like most soldiers it depended on how they were led?

21 SM: What did you think of their leaders?

22 JW: And that varied on who you were talking about. Some, like I say, were very
23 good; others were not.

24 SM: How would you evaluate when you went on missions, when you went on
25 these operations how would you evaluate the leadership you encountered there?

26 JW: Well, it depended on what unit I was with. I worked with all of the units. I
27 worked with all three regiments. They were all different levels of leadership involved
28 there. One was extremely good and consequently his unit was extremely good.

29 SM: Do you remember the unit designation for that?

30 JW: The regimental commander that I remember was the 48th regimental
31 commander. He was very well off financially. He supported out of his pocket a large

1 number of regimental widows who lived on the base camp that he supported out of his
2 pocket. He was fluent in English, very cosmopolitan kind of guy and absolutely fearless.

3 SM: How about NCO leadership? What did you think about Vietnamese NCOs
4 that you encountered in a general context?

5 JW: Well, let's put it this way. I remember no negative aspects of it. I thought
6 the soldiers, when aptly lead were good soldiers, to include their NCOs.

7 SM: Well, were there any other memorable missions that you went on after this
8 in between that and the EASTER Offensive?

9 JW: Well, basically I came out of the hospital and I was on crutches so I assumed
10 the duties as headquarters commandant on the division base camp at Xuan Loc, which
11 was where everybody except what was remaining of the advisory team at Black Horse.
12 They were down to about four guys by then, where all the Americans lived, which was
13 about 45 or 50 I guess at that time. So, since I was on crutches, I could not go back to
14 field. Since the headquarters commandant had left I sort of assumed those duties for
15 about three weeks I guess. Actually it must have been closer to a month. So, I was
16 responsible for all the admin on the base camp. All the facilities, the guard, security. All
17 of those kinds of things. Discipline, order, and then right from that experience I
18 volunteered to go to An Loc and replace some advisors with another regiment who had
19 been over run and medevaced.

20 SM: Real quick question about enemy disposition of course is how well do you
21 feel you were briefed and how good was the Intelligence you were receiving with regard
22 to enemy forces in the area?

23 JW: Pretty good around Xuan Loc. The 33rd NVA regiment we pretty much
24 knew where they were generally speaking. It was pretty hard to find them, but I thought
25 the Intelligence there was pretty decent.

26 SM: Did you ever have an experience where you felt that the Intelligence wasn't
27 good enough or you wish you had received better Intelligence or a more thorough
28 Intelligence briefing?

29 JW: Yeah, we can get into that when we talk about An Loc, because that's a
30 special little situation. Before you want to get into that, this might be a good time to take
31 a break if you want.

1 SM: Alright sure. I'm going to leave the phone on, but I'll just pause the
2 recording. A real quick question about the enemy forces you encountered, your first
3 experiences in Vietnam. What was your evaluation of those PAVN forces?

4 JW: My only really direct observation of them was on the ambush in February.
5 Like I said before it was a textbook ambush. Like something out of Building Four at Ft.
6 Benning. Exactly how to do it. Very expertly conducted. My impression was they
7 pretty much had their act together.

8 SM: How did that contrast with your perception of the ARVN unit you
9 supported?

10 JW: Like I said it depended on the unit I was with. In that particular case,
11 obviously my experience colored my perception of that particular battalion. But other
12 battalions I had been out with seemed to be fairly proficient at what they were doing.
13 Once again if they were well led at the battalion and company level.

14 SM: What were the weapons that you encountered at Xuan Loc, that is enemy
15 disposition of forces and enemy weapons?

16 JW: I'm sorry, say again please.

17 SM: When you were under attack in particular with that ambush, was it primarily
18 small weapons? Were there any heavy weapons, mortars?

19 JW: Mortars, RPGs, recoilless rifles, 57s, machine guns, RPDs and the small
20 arms AKs what have you.

21 SM: How heavy were the casualties that the ARVN unit sustained? Do you
22 recall?

23 JW: I don't remember that there were any KIAs. But there were about between
24 15 or 20 in that particular incident, WIAs, which one of them was me. I happened to
25 have a young PFC with me who was a signal guy, who just wanted to go out on an
26 operation. And he later determined that that was not the operation he really wanted to be
27 on. He wasn't hurt. It was the last operation he went on, though.

28 SM: Anything else? I guess the appropriate question would be what were the
29 most important lessons you learned and the most important things you took away from
30 your experience at Xuan Loc that you took with you to An Loc? Is that correct?

31 JW: Yeah. Never separate yourself from your radio.

1 SM: Anything else?

2 JW: Nope.

3 SM: I guess that's a good enough one too.

4 JW: Actually the biggest worry there, once we got around. On any ambush
5 ultimately you're going to find the edge of it. We were able to bounce around it. They
6 were focusing on the battalion, so we were able to get around the edge of the ambush and
7 essentially get behind them and head to the...I knew generally where the outpost was on
8 the road. The way we were headed you were going to run into the road sooner or later,
9 ultimately if you continued walking. So, it wasn't a matter of not knowing where we
10 were. But the biggest concern was that there was a pink team of Cobras. They were
11 working the contact and I did not have any contact with them. And a bunch of
12 Vietnamese running through the rubber looks like a bunch of Vietnamese running
13 through the rubber and you can't really tell which side is which. I was afraid they were
14 going to roll in on us and they didn't see us. I mean because I had no way of contacting
15 them. I had been talking to them earlier. I remember their call sign was Top Hat 10.
16 That's all I remember. I just knew this guy was going to roll in on the group I was with,
17 but he was actively engaged elsewhere.

18 SM: Alright, well I guess what we should talk about next is your transition over
19 to An Loc and the unit that you found yourself working with there. I guess that leads into
20 the Easter Offensive, correct?

21 JW: What had happened was we had sent a two-battalion task force from the
22 52nd Regiment. It essentially was the 52nd Regiment, less one battalion that had gone up
23 with three advisors to be opcon to the 5th ARVN division, which was headquartered at
24 Lai Khe. There apparently was some Intelligence that there was going to be some attack,
25 so they had to again thicken the forces up along the Cambodian border. Which the 5th
26 ARVN had the primary responsibility for us at An Loc and Loc Ninh. The 52nd ended up
27 working, setting up into two small firebases between Loc Ninh and An Loc out in the
28 rubber plantations to the west. Then on the first week in April, the EASTER Offensive
29 started on the 31 March at Quang Tri and then a couple days later they struck at Loc
30 Ninh, which was just over the border from Snuol, Cambodia. There was a regiment and a
31 couple other units, armored cavalry troop, all from the 5th ARVN division, there were at

1 Loc Ninh. Essentially that battle lasted about 48 hours. Ultimately they were overrun;
2 all the Americans were either captured or killed, except for one who E&Eed to An Loc.
3 Shortly after taking Loc Ninh they forced the 52nd off their firebases. And in the process
4 of moving in contact back to An Loc basically withdrawing under contact. The three
5 advisors were wounded. One of them pretty severely. Took a mortar round, part of a
6 mortar round in the mouth and was in pretty bad shape. So the U.S. advisors stopped and
7 laagered up and the attempt was made for about two days to extract them. Ultimately
8 they were extracted under heavy fire by a LOH. The first LOHs that had gone in had
9 been shot down with both crewmen lost. So, make a long story short, these three guys
10 were pulled out. The remainder of the task force is back in An Loc with no advisors.
11 Our O-6 says, 'Anybody want to go up there and take their place?' So, the cav squadron
12 advisor and myself, I had been off the crutches for a few days said, 'Well, we'll go do it.'
13 So, off we went. We took off in a jeep and drove to Saigon and then up to Lai Khe,
14 where we caught a helicopter that flew us into An Loc. That was on the 12th of April.

15 SM: What were the biggest differences working with the Vietnamese units at An
16 Loc versus Xuan Loc?

17 JW: Tremendously different situations. I mean from the next day, the North
18 Vietnamese attacked with tanks and massive amount of artillery. For that point for about
19 the next four months it was more like World War I than anything else. We were in
20 bunkers, they were attacking almost constantly. You know 4,000 to 10,000 rounds a day
21 artillery. At one point, we only held about a half a grid square. So, it was an entirely
22 different situation than in Xuan Loc. I saw unspeakable acts of bravery on the part of
23 some ARVN soldiers. The first tank that was killed, was killed by a Ruff Puff, a local
24 guy, who stood out in front of a T-54 and pumped two LAWs into it until it stopped
25 moving. By and large he's standing out there in fatigues and that's it. Probably one of
26 the bravest things I ever saw.

27 SM: You mentioned that in the questionnaire. I did want to ask you more about
28 that. That sounds like quite a phenomenal individual. Can you describe more the
29 circumstances surrounding? How he came upon being in front of a T-54?

30 JW: What was in An Loc was the Binh Long province capital headquarters. Of
31 course, that meant there was a province advisory team there as well. So, there was a

1 province chief, who at that time was a Marine colonel named Tran Van Nhut. Who I
2 actually saw at Texas Tech, not last spring, the spring before last at the last conference
3 that I went to there, who came out as a general in '75 and now lives in L.A. He was one
4 of the good guys. I mean he was tremendous, absolute fearless leader. Some of his local
5 Regional Force, Popular Force who were securing that compound that we were in with
6 their families in the bunker behind them the tanks attacked into that position. He stepped
7 out of the bunker and unloaded two LAWs in to the lead tank, which by that time was
8 caught up in barbed wire, which slowed them down obviously. But from that particular
9 point on we were under siege until basically June, middle of July. All that siege warfare
10 entails. I mean artillery 24 hours a day, repeated attacks almost on a daily basis.

11 SM: How much did you find yourself calling in fire support? In support of the
12 ARVN divisions?

13 JW: Almost daily there for the first month.

14 SM: Compared to what happened at Xuan Loc, how much fire support did you
15 actively call in at Xuan Loc?

16 JW: Not very often.

17 SM: Can you describe any of the missions and how effective you thought they
18 were?

19 JW: Usually it was working pink teams, Cobras. There were prep fires more than
20 anything else, areas that we were going to go into. Interestingly enough the first place I
21 was wounded was an area that had been struck by TAC air and was still burning when we
22 moved through it; shortly thereafter we encountered the ambush that I already talked to
23 you about. The TAC air in An Loc was the reason that it held that and the fact that when
24 the ARVN were cornered they fought tenaciously because they had no choice. Either
25 fight, die, or give up. There were three choices, that was about it. The North Vietnamese
26 were not taking too many prisoners, so that narrowed it down to two.

27 SM: How about the South Vietnamese, did they take many prisoners?

28 JW: We weren't in the prisoner taking business in that particular situation. We
29 did capture a few; we captured a sapper lieutenant. I remember at that particular time we
30 were in pretty bad straits inside the city, because the air defense situation was such that
31 we couldn't get air drops in. We were running out of food and ammo. We captured this

1 young lad and we were trying to figure out where they were getting all this ammo and all
2 the material they were throwing at us. We just decided to ask him, 'What are you
3 subsisting on?' He said, 'Fruit cocktail. Your Air Force gives us more than we could
4 eat.'

5 SM: Your Air Force, is that we said?

6 JW: Yeah, the airdrops were falling outside the perimeter. At that particular time
7 the position we held was half a grid square. They were dropping from what had to be
8 over 8,000 feet because of the .57 mm anti-aircraft guns were good to about 7 grand.
9 And consequently there were some problems with the chutes. So, most of the stuff was
10 falling outside our perimeter and into their area. That later changed when they brought
11 two riggers in from Okinawa who went out and recovered some of the bundle apparatus
12 and found out what the problem was. Whatever it was, I'm not a rigger so I don't know.
13 They went back to Okinawa, went back to Tan Son Nhut, worked with the riggers there.
14 They changed their delivery means and then we started getting the things that we needed.
15 But for the first three weeks there we were virtually out if everything.

16 SM: So, it wasn't a question of whether or not they could drop accurately from
17 8,000, it's just that for some reason, the rigging as it was being performed was not
18 adequate to the task.

19 JW: Well, there were some mechanical difficulties. The air defense umbrella
20 was unbelievable. It was like 12:00 high when anything flew in that direction. .57 mm
21 anti-aircraft gun is a pretty substantial weapon against high altitude. You know at 7,000
22 feet if you're going to drop stuff accurately you're going to have to get down there.
23 You're not going to drop it from 20,000 feet. In order to drop that stuff they were
24 bringing them inside the air defense umbrella. I had a classmate from A&M who flew C-
25 130s. He said he got back to Tan Son Nhut and his plane had 57 holes in it. Essentially
26 what they ended up doing was using ribbon chutes and dropping from a little higher. The
27 ribbon chutes don't have that much drag on them. They don't drop directly like a stone,
28 but there's not much drift to them. And that started working then. Interestingly enough
29 they use the same techniques in Bosnia. Here a couple of years ago when we first went
30 in there in order to make sure the air drops are reaching the right people and not the
31 wrong folks.

1 SM: What about patrolling? Did the ARVN units do much patrolling? If so was
2 it daytime, nighttime? I would imagine a lot of contact if they did.

3 JW: We didn't do a lot of patrolling. By and large we were in bunkers. We were
4 on a berm line that virtually went around about a half a grid square area. That's where
5 we were pushed into after the first week. There was house-to-house fighting after the
6 initial attack on the 13th. They basically crunched us down into that smaller area. Then it
7 was primarily something less, about 3,000 guys surrounded by about 30,000 guys. So,
8 there wasn't a lot of patrolling. By the way I think you've got several copies of my
9 monograph there. If you want the details of the battle I wrote.

10 SM: Oh, do we? I didn't realize that. I wish I had known that before the
11 interview.

12 JW: Actually it was my Master's thesis at KU and then the Army published it as
13 a monograph.

14 SM: Oh, cool.

15 JW: So, if you can't find the copies give me a call. I've got a box full of them by
16 my desk and they're all free. You know Army gives everything away.

17 SM: That's right. I'll make sure I make a note of that in your file. So, the next
18 time I talk to you I'll be better prepared for that. Well, what about external ground
19 support? You mentioned the air support you received in terms of resupply and you
20 mentioned you're calling supporting fires. It sounds like you guys are basically under
21 siege; how about ground units coming and trying to create some kind of relief on the
22 flanks or something?

23 JW: First of all, there are no U.S. ground units left.

24 SM: I realize that, Vietnamese?

25 JW: There was actually one up somewhere around Da Nang or Chu Lai,
26 somewhere up there from the Americal. And then there's Task Force Gary Owen at Bien
27 Hoa, which was about two battalions. Primarily all they were doing was securing Bien
28 Hoa air base.

29 SM: I mean Vietnamese.

30 JW: They moved the 21st ARVN division from the Delta and flew it into Lai Khe
31 and they told them to move up the road to open the road, which was QL-13, the highway

1 to An Loc. They never were able to do that. They took some tremendous casualties
2 because essentially what happened was three divisions attacked An Loc. An Loc, there
3 were at the height about 4,500 folks. Three divisions against 4,500 folks are not very
4 good odds. So, in terms of what we were able to do proactively was hold what we had,
5 put in air strikes and hope that somebody was going to relieve us from the south. One of
6 those three divisions ended up sitting in positions across QL-13 between Chon Tanh and
7 An Loc. The ground forces were never able to break through. But in the process of
8 incurring tremendous amounts of casualties, the 21st did tie down that 3rd Division that
9 might have made the difference in the main attack on An Loc had it been free to join the
10 other two divisions. So, although they didn't open the road I still think that they were
11 one of the reasons the city didn't fall because they kept the combat ratios against An Loc
12 at least workable given fairly decent flying weather and the fact that TAC air was stacked
13 up to 30,000 feet on a continual basis. Virtually General Hollingsworth who was the
14 senior guy in III Corps rounded up anything that could fly and that could carry anything
15 that would blow up he sent in that direction as fast as he could send it on a daily basis.
16 So, there was Air Force, Marine, Navy, attack helicopters, you name it. B-52s, AC-130s
17 from Thailand. Just tremendous amount of TAC air support. And on the 10th of May
18 there was a B-52 strike every 50 minutes for 24 hours.

19 SM: Wow. How about dealing with casualties? I would imagine first of all that
20 given the heavy bombardment and the attacks and things like that on the base that you
21 had a number of wounded. How did you deal with them? Were they medevaced and
22 how did you get new men in or did you?

23 JW: We didn't get much in. My regiment started out before I would say the end
24 of March with about 1,100. We ended up with 400. Casualties, at least in the first couple
25 weeks there was nothing going in and out of An Loc. We were able to get some
26 wounded south of town and there is where we had the infamous Olympic wounded
27 incident where the stretcher bearers dropped the wounded guys and jumped on the
28 helicopters. That did in fact happen. But I will also tell you for every guy that did that
29 there were five guys who stayed up and fought until they were either wounded or
30 relieved. But we couldn't get medevacs in. Anything that flew anywhere near An Loc
31 was either shot up or shot down. Interestingly enough the guy, I guess it was last spring.

1 The unknown soldier of Vietnam that they determined was the Lieutenant Blassie from
2 St. Louis, he was shot down at An Loc in an A-37. I remember the day he was shot
3 down. I don't know why he was unknown. Because we saw the plane go in. We knew
4 exactly where it was. We just couldn't get out there.

5 SM: Ok. Anything else that you want to discuss with regard to your stay at An
6 Loc?

7 JW: It was just a fairly significant emotional event. It was very, very close on a
8 number of occasions. There were essentially three major thrusts to take the city. And the
9 normal mode was an attack, lull, attack cycle because the North Vietnamese weren't
10 really used to maintaining that level of combined arms warfare. If they could have kept
11 the pressure on continually, the situation in the end might have been different. But
12 normally they would mount a major attack by elements of two divisions. Attack air
13 would enable us to hold it off and then they would kind of recede for a few days to lick
14 their wounds and put them selves back together and then they would come back in again.
15 This cycle went on for virtually the whole time we were out there. The three major
16 attacks were 13 April, 20 April and 10 May. And those were all-out, go for broke attacks
17 that in fact were all three broken by air power. But don't get me wrong. All the air
18 power in the world wouldn't have made any difference if the South Vietnamese didn't
19 hold their positions.

20 SM: Right. The important thing is the coordination and support.

21 JW: That was done by the advisors. I mean we weren't advising anybody. I
22 didn't have to advise a guy to stay in a bunker. That was pretty self-evident. But I did
23 have a radio and I could talk to the FACs who controlled all the aircraft in the area. I
24 could talk directly to the AC-130s specters.

25 SM: I would imagine that was particularly effective?

26 JW: All the TAC air and the B-52s, the TAC air and in all its forms and the B-
27 52s were unbelievably effective. Because basically we were talking about when you own
28 half a grid square and you have virtually three divisions surrounding you, it's not a big
29 Intelligence challenge to figure out where the bad guys are. You just dump the ordnance
30 in any direction and you hit somebody.

1 SM: Was there anything in the equipment supplies that you didn't ever receive
2 and wish you had? I mean you talked about some of the problems with aerial resupply,
3 but those were corrected. But I mean actual equipment that you never even really saw or
4 saw so rarely it was kind of like it wasn't even there.

5 JW: We had no artillery about the second night of the main battle because they
6 were all destroyed. There were only six tubes there and they were destroyed. So, the
7 biggest thing we had were mortars and machine guns. By and large what we were doing
8 was holding the guys off on the main attacks while the TAC air hit their marshaling and
9 staging areas. And hit them as they got up and headed for the wire. So, it wasn't too
10 sophisticated. They did drop some strange things. We got some XM-202, four pod flame
11 rockets, nobody knew what the hell they were or even how to use them.

12 SM: Four pod flame rockets? Would you describe those a little bit?

13 JW: Have you ever seen a LAW? Well, they look like if you took four LAWs
14 and tied them together in a box configuration and then put a casing around them. That's
15 what they looked like. What they had was this very strange looking, like a flat base that
16 had four foil colored projectiles on this base and you slammed the base with these four
17 projectiles in the back of this launcher and then fired it like a LAW. But they air dropped
18 them to us. Nobody had ever seen them. They were XM-202s, which meant they were
19 experimental at that point. It ended up the South Vietnamese put them in front of their
20 claymores, which were fairly effective. When the claymores went off they ignited the
21 flame rockets when they exploded. So, that wasn't exactly the way they were supposed
22 to be used. But that was probably the strangest thing that happened.

23 SM: How about other accidents involving weapons and equipment?

24 JW: The only other thing we were bombed one night by an A-6 on a sky spotting
25 missions, which is basically you punch in the target when you leave the end of the
26 runway. I'm not an aviator so I don't know all the ins and outs but generally speaking
27 you punch in the target on your inertial guidance system or whatever the guidance system
28 you're using for your aircraft. It goes to that point, drops the bomb and turns you around
29 and heads you back. In that particular case, the calibration was off they ended up
30 bombing inside our perimeter. Luckily we were all in bunkers so nobody was hurt.

31 SM: Any other friendly fire incidents either at Xuan Loc or An Loc?

1 JW: No, in that particular case we were calling TAC air in pretty close, but we
2 didn't have any alternative. It was either bring it in close or they were going to overrun
3 us. I'm not aware that we bombed our own folks, but realize of course we were also in
4 pretty good bunkers. I was in an old Special Forces A-team bunker that had 12-inch
5 concrete walls. Some of the other folks were in less prepared positions, but generally
6 speaking there was a certain amount of motivation to improve positions as we went along
7 because the amount of artillery we were taking.

8 SM: Anything else you want to discuss about An Loc?

9 JW: I could go on forever, but you could read the monograph and probably
10 makes more sense. By and large, I came out with my regiment along about June or the
11 end of May we started being able to essentially [expand the perimeter because] the North
12 Vietnamese had culminated. They were still fighting but they had lost the initiative
13 because the TAC air and the B-52s had just wrought tremendous amounts of damage on
14 them. So, they were beginning to lose the momentum and we were beginning to push the
15 perimeter out. At that particular point, they were able to get some forces in to replace the
16 units that had been attrited down, like mine for instance. So, I came out with that bunch
17 and then I went back in a couple weeks later with a fresh regiment. That was the 43rd
18 Regiment. That was the third regiment out of that division that I had gone with. They
19 were pretty good. They had pretty good leaders. The situation had stabilized, but we
20 were still taking artillery. We were still having contacts and I was there then until the 9th
21 of July when I was wounded the second time. Then I was dusted off to 3rd Field in
22 Saigon [hospital].

23 SM: Ok. What was your evaluation of the ARVN soldiers at An Loc?

24 JW: Except for the odd cowardice you saw when people dropped stretchers, they
25 withstood a tremendous amount of hardship. The bottom line was when it was all over
26 they still held city and the North Vietnamese didn't.

27 SM: In the questionnaire I asked a question about drug use and American
28 soldiers. What about drug amongst Vietnamese soldiers that you served with?

29 JW: I don't have any knowledge on that. To tell you the truth I never saw it. I
30 didn't experience it. But of course I didn't live with the South Vietnamese for a year. So

1 based on my limited experience and when I was around them I didn't see that. That
2 doesn't mean it didn't happen; it just means I didn't see it.

3 SM: Ok. Well, let me ask you a strange question here about recreation. You
4 mentioned that you did see Bob Hope, December of 1971.

5 JW: Right.

6 SM: Let's see, *Maggie Mae* by Rod Stewart is the music that you must associate
7 with the war and the Stones. What kind of effect did seeing a U.S.O. show have on you
8 when all this is going on around you? This massive war and South Vietnam trying to
9 fight for its survival.

10 JW: The only one I ever saw was Bob Hope. I've always been a fan of Bob
11 Hope, because I think he's given a lot to this country just by whether the conflict's right
12 or wrong he's always there or he was always there to support the troops, and that's what I
13 appreciated the most. He certainly didn't have to do that. Nobody was making him do it.
14 I think he's one of the great American heroes for all that he's done for the servicemen
15 throughout our most recent history.

16 SM: Was the Bob Hope Show effective in helping lift your morale, lift your
17 spirits and those of the soldiers around you?

18 JW: Oh, I think so. All you really wanted to feel is somebody really gave a shit
19 whether you were there or not. There's this big ongoing controversy whether troops were
20 spit on when they come home or all that. I don't think that was the issue. The issue more
21 often than not was just indifference. You know you've just come through probably one
22 of the most significant emotional events in your life or you will ever experience in your
23 life and you come home to people who don't really care. They don't care where you've
24 been. They're not really interested in what you've been doing. There's a certain amount
25 of that, 'Ok, so what?' And coming out of that particular situation, those kinds of
26 questions probably are more damaging than somebody overtly saying or spitting on you.
27 Maybe the spitting stories are apocryphal. I don't know. I didn't experience that. I did
28 experience the indifference.

29 SM: Is there anything else that you want to talk about your in-country
30 experience?

1 JW: Nothing other I guess that the second time I was wounded was much more
2 traumatic than the first.

3 SM: How so?

4 JW: Number one there were four Americans killed. The Vietnamese killed them
5 all in a matter of nanoseconds. One was an American general who lived until we got to
6 3rd Field but he died on the operating table. But he was essentially dead already. The
7 back of his head was gone, there was nothing much left of his brain. The other three U.S.
8 officers were killed instantly. This was another guy in front of me. I could touch both
9 the guys that were killed when I came to. I was basically...my hand was in the shell
10 crater. So, why it didn't get me and it got those guys I'll never know, something I've
11 wrestled with for a number of years. Then I spent three weeks in the hospital at 3rd Field.
12 Among other things I had a busted eardrum and had a directional hearing loss. Couldn't
13 go back to the field. Frankly I think my bosses figured I was a two-time loser and they
14 didn't want me to be a three-time loser and things had quieted down. I ended up being
15 the Division Training Center Advisor for a couple of months I guess before I PCSed. In
16 that I actually did some advising because we were setting up training programs. You
17 know, patrolling and range firing and those kinds of things. So that was pretty much it
18 for twelve months. Fairly eventful.

19 SM: Yes, sir. When you left, how did you feel getting on the plane and going
20 home?

21 JW: Frankly, I was glad to get out of town. There was a lot of uncertainty by
22 December. I left on December the 2nd or 3rd and the offensive had kind of shot its wad
23 and the peace talks were ongoing and there was lots of discussion about this is about to
24 be over. Strangely enough, some people were still coming to Vietnam. So, when I got to
25 Camp Alpha there were guys that were coming into Vietnam and I was leaving. So, it
26 was kind of mixed signals. But it was pretty apparent that frankly to me it felt like we had
27 won. The North Vietnamese had attacked with everything in their inventory less one
28 division left in Laos and they had lost. There was no doubt at An Loc who won and who
29 lost. Three North Vietnamese divisions had been absolutely almost atomized. And the
30 South Vietnamese were pretty shaky but they were still in control of the territory. So, I
31 felt a certain amount of relief for going home. I had been wounded twice so there was a

1 certain idea that I was lucky to be getting out in one chunk and then the other thing was I
2 think we did a pretty decent job here. Maybe these guys will survive.

3 SM: And upon leaving looking back on your one year in Vietnam and looking
4 back at what you had earned. Did you have any thoughts at all about the general
5 American effort, the general American strategy and whether or not in the larger picture,
6 the larger terms we were really doing anything effective there?

7 JW: Oh, I think so. I mean the EASTER Offensive was a battle to the death. I
8 mean it was clear. There was no nuance involved. It wasn't political posturing. It was
9 pretty much, 'I'm going to kill you unless you kill me first.' And the bottom line is the
10 South Vietnamese, although shaky, were left standing. And at that point I think that
11 victory; however you define it, was in sight. Unfortunately we gave it away at Paris. I'm
12 not too objective about that particular assessment. But I've always wondered if at that
13 particular point, particularly after the Christmas bombing which came later in December,
14 if we had got a lot more B-52s and a lot more bombs and if you don't remove your troops
15 from South Vietnam they're going to be coming again. Maybe we could have forced the
16 issue. As it was it was tantamount to leaving North Koreans south of Seoul when we left
17 there and said, 'Ok, you're on your own,' and that's essentially what we did. So they
18 were doomed from that point on. When you add in the fact that we then cut off funding
19 to South Vietnam and Nixon leaves office they are doomed to their ultimate fate at that
20 point. But it starts in December of '72.

21 SM: How were you received upon your return to the United States?

22 JW: Indifference.

23 SM: Was that in general both on the military side and the civilian side?

24 JW: The military side was kind of strange. In the military it was kind of like,
25 'Ok, that crap's over, let's move on to something else.' I actually had an assignments
26 officer tell me, this was in '73. They came out to Ft. Ord where I was a company
27 commander in basic training. And they brought all the records and they were doing file
28 evaluations. I got five OERs in Vietnam and three of them from general officers and I
29 was feeling pretty good about myself. So, he's thumbing through my file there and I got
30 three reports as lieutenant. He looked at those and does his whole ho-hum act. Then he
31 takes the next five and he kind of thumbs them all together and then turns them over in

1 the folder and goes to the next file. I said, 'Hey, what about those in Vietnam?' The guy
2 said, 'Well, you know that was Vietnam, you were an advisor and frankly you'd have
3 been better off career wise if you'd been a company commander in Germany for that
4 period.' And I was devastated.

5 SM: Wow.

6 JW: It was sort of like hey that little shit's over let's just move on. It was never
7 really a factor in my military career that I could tell. There was a couple of ideas.
8 Everybody went, so no big deal. Well everybody didn't go, particularly in my year
9 group. Then it was, 'Well, that was an aberration, let's move on to something else.'
10 Now that's only my experience and it may be just my experience, but that's my
11 impression.

12 SM: As your career progressed was that perception reinforced?

13 JW: Pretty much.

14 SM: Did you ever talk about these types of issues with your fellow officers,
15 especially the Vietnam Veterans?

16 JW: A few, but there aren't a lot of my peers who went to Vietnam, surprisingly.
17 Probably my class, if you went to Germany in 1969, then you stayed a full tour. That
18 made it 1972, the war's over. So, some of my classmates who went to Ft. Bragg for four
19 months and went. A lot of those were OBV-2 guys. You know non-RA and they just got
20 out when they came back. So when you looked around at my peers, many of my peers
21 didn't go to Vietnam. And if they didn't go there wasn't anything to talk to them about.

22 SM: What about superiors, your commanding officers?

23 JW: In terms of what?

24 SM: Officers that you interacted with that were senior to you that did have
25 Vietnam experience. Did you ever discuss these types of issues with them?

26 JW: No.

27 SM: It's just, 'Let's just not talk about it anymore.'

28 JW: That was pretty much it.

29 SM: Wow. How did you feel about that?

30 JW: Well it was and remains a fairly significant issue in my life obviously. That
31 was pretty high on my personal radar screen. I never really could understand why what

1 was done or what I did there or what anybody did there wasn't important in the grander
2 scheme of things. I often, before the great desert war here and some of the other things
3 we've been involved in, most of my peers had never heard a shot fired in anger. So their
4 discussion about what you do and don't do in combat were purely academic. It was hard
5 for me to relate to some of those discussions. It's pretty difficult to describe to tell you
6 the truth.

7 SM: The whole notion of here you volunteered to go do what soldiers are
8 supposed to do and upon your return you're treated as if not just your sacrifice, your
9 volunteerism to be involved in the war, it's irrelevant to your career. And in fact might
10 even be detrimental since you didn't get the command time in Germany versus going
11 over.

12 JW: That sounded a bit strange to say the least.

13 SM: What did you think about the '73 Peace Accords?

14 JW: I thought they sucked. That's relatively crude, but that's about as succinct as
15 I can put it. There was a window of opportunity there that we did not seize. It seemed to
16 me that after spending all of that treasure in blood and not only American blood, but
17 South Vietnamese blood we basically gave it away in the interest of getting out of there.
18 I've always wondered what would have happened if we said, 'We're not leaving. We're
19 not doing anything until you remove the remnants of those divisions out of South
20 Vietnam. And when I see them go north of the DMZ, then we'll talk.' But there was no
21 effort to do that.

22 SM: Was this a topic of discussion amongst you and other officers that you were
23 associated with at the time?

24 JW: No.

25 SM: How things were winding down in Vietnam?

26 JW: Not a lot. I have to tell you that not a lot of people talked about Vietnam.
27 Either my peers or my seniors or anybody else. There was sort of a general sense of,
28 'Hey, let's put this crap behind us and move on.' I'm sure everybody had their own
29 private thoughts as I did. And I watched all of this from Ft. Ord, where I was
30 commanding basic trainees. The Peace Accords and I was there when they fell in April
31 of '75. The whole thing was just sickening.

1 SM: What about family and friends outside the military? Was it pretty much the
2 same thing?

3 JW: In what way do you mean?

4 SM: Talking about some of your feelings? Some of your experiences? Your
5 doubts?

6 JW: Not something I talk about.

7 SM: Is it something that you've been able to talk about with your dad now that
8 he's opening up about Korea?

9 JW: Not a lot.

10 SM: Just out of curiosity how similar, how close do you find his experiences with
11 the Korean War compared to your experiences in the Vietnam War? Are there any points
12 of commonality?

13 JW: No, not really.

14 SM: Let me go ahead and change CDs. This is the end of the first part of the
15 interview with Mr. James Willbanks.

16 SM: This is CD number two, the interview with Mr. James Willbanks. Sir, why
17 don't you go ahead and tell us what were the most important things you took away from
18 the Vietnam War personally. That helped you as a human being and also been though it
19 wasn't something that was necessarily counted as a plus for you as an officer in the
20 ratings system or the promotions system, what did you take away from your Vietnam
21 experiences that did help you as a professional soldier?

22 JW: Probably the main things is, in the absence of a war a lot of things that we do
23 in the military in terms of training, in terms of education, classroom work...all those
24 kinds of things are purely academic exercises. Unless you've experienced them in
25 combat, I mean you can talk about leadership in combat. You can talk about technical
26 proficiency. You can talk about planning and operations and all that sort of stuff. But
27 unless you've experienced it, it's purely an academic exercise. So what I took away from
28 my Vietnam experience is there's a reason we do these kinds of things that we do in
29 terms of training and education. That there are reasons we do things leadershipwise in
30 order to do the right thing. There are reasons that you pay attention when you are having
31 training and all those kinds of things. I guess to make a long discussion short here, is that

1 this is a real business that we're in. You need to know what it is that you're doing
2 because it's for keeps, when it's for keeps. That's probably the biggest thing.

3 SM: What lessons do you think we should take away from the Vietnam War as a
4 nation? What are the most important things we should be thinking about in terms of our
5 Vietnam War experience as a national experience?

6 JW: I think the biggest thing is you have to try to determine when you get
7 involved in those kinds of situations, what's the end game look like? What's the end
8 state supposed to be? How do we know we're finished? Then once you decide that in
9 terms of a national strategy, you have to figure out what the instruments of power in
10 terms of military, diplomatic, economics and what have you, how you're going to use
11 them. Hopefully in concert to achieve that end state. In Vietnam if the end state was a
12 free and independent South Vietnam, certainly the 1st Cav, 173rd, 1st Infantry Division et
13 al as the military instrument have a certain amount of play in achieving that end state, but
14 they don't have the only part to play. I think in our situation in Vietnam we applied
15 purely a military solution to a much more complex problem. I don't think we really
16 addressed the roots of some of the ills that caused our difficulties there in terms of trying
17 to achieve that end state. Once the 1st Cav, 173rd and those folks arrived on the scene
18 everything else sort of took a backseat to it. Consequently I don't think that the
19 instruments of power were used in concert to address the whole situation. And a military
20 instrument was incapable of achieving the overall end state by itself.

21 SM: In particular, do you find these lessons relevant especially given the types of
22 missions American forces are finding themselves engaged in? Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo?

23 JW: Oh, absolutely. This is what I teach at the staff college. We talk about
24 instruments of power and end states. That's national strategy. The thing that's troubling
25 is that we've become involved in some part of the world with no definite end state in
26 mind and no idea of how to use the instrument of power in concert. It's often easier then
27 to just supply the military because there are readily at hand deployable and all you have
28 to do is give an order.

29 SM: How well received are these types of analyses currently in your teaching
30 environment?

1 JW: Extremely well received. Most of the students I've got have been involved
2 in Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti, Panama, you name it. They've seen what these more
3 amorphous uses of the military to achieve decidedly ill defined end state results for the
4 guys on the ground at sea and in the air. They clearly understand the importance of
5 trying to decide what does the end game look like. I can tell you that at least from my
6 perspective the military is not going to achieve the stability in Bosnia over a protracted
7 period of time. It's been built on 600 years of unrest, but it is probably the easiest short
8 term answer to send the military there. Ergo we send the military there.

9 SM: How receptive are your students and how receptive do you think the Army
10 is to a more integrated system of dealing with these types of issues in terms of not just
11 addressing the military aspects, but more importantly the political, social, cultural
12 aspects? Do you think the Army has learned enough from Vietnam to do a better job at
13 addressing those particular issues, which are so important in counterinsurgency?

14 JW: I think the Army has, and those are hard won lessons. I'm not necessarily
15 sure that the political masters have learned that in all cases and every instance. Like I
16 say, it's very easy to call the chairman and say deploy the 1st Armored Division to
17 Bosnia. That's easy enough, you can give that order. The issue is often more complex
18 than having the 1st Armored Division go to Bosnia. The 1st Armored Division is not well
19 equipped to address the social and cultural ills that have plagued that part of the world for
20 the last 400 or 500 years.

21 SM: So do you think that we've done an adequate job of learning the lessons of
22 Vietnam or are there still things we need to keep looking at and trying to evaluate and
23 integrate?

24 JW: Depends on who you're talking about.

25 SM: Politically and militarily and also socially. Because of course in a
26 Democracy, the military is the representation of the people.

27 JW: Absolutely. I think the military has learned its lesson. It was a much easier
28 day or time during my day in the military because we had a clearly defined enemy and
29 that was the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. That's a stabilizing factor as ironic as
30 that might sound, but at least we knew who we were going to fight. In the end state if
31 there was a conflict, it was fairly clear as well. When you get involved in Haiti and

1 Kosovo and Bosnia and Macedonia and the list goes on and on and the potential list goes
2 on and on maybe it's not so clear. I think the fact that we have more and more
3 administration, not talking about the current ones who have less and less military
4 experience have more and more tendency to use the military as an expedient means
5 because it's easier to send the military than it is to deal with some of the more thorny
6 issues that take a more in depth solution for you to address. If that makes sense?

7 SM: It does, but aren't you talking about the current administration? The amount
8 of deployments under the Clinton/Gore administration has been phenomenal. They do
9 turn to the military as kind of a fix-all solution. I mean they have. Do you not agree with
10 that?

11 JW: Well, yeah. We have to talk about the current administration in numbers of
12 the deployments, but the same situation will face a new administration as well it will be
13 determined. What happened is to be determined on how they feel the situation and how
14 they feel that they have particular opportunities for solutions. What particular arrow they
15 pull out of the quiver. I would submit to you that the military is the easiest arrow to pull
16 out.

17 SM: But not always the appropriate arrow?

18 JW: No, I'd certainly agree with you there. If you want to talk about ethnic
19 cleansing and stuff I can certainly stop that with an armored division tomorrow. I cannot
20 stop the inclination to do that with the military, you know, six years from now. So it's a
21 real quandary there. That's what we deal with on a daily basis. Given the fact that you
22 might not want to go to Kosovo, that's irrelevant. We have civilian control of the
23 military. You salute and move out or you vote with your feet. So it's incumbent upon
24 our students then to figure out how to go and make peace in places like Sudan or other
25 places we might get sent. That's what I deal with on a daily basis. Given that situation,
26 regardless of whether you agree with it or not, how do you make the best situation of it?
27 One would hope, at least from a military standpoint that the civilian masters are looking
28 at all sides of the issue. You know one of the problems in Vietnam wasn't a problem that
29 could not be solved by the 1st Cav. And that was the corruption of the South Vietnamese
30 government. Until that was addressed by other military instruments of power on the U.S.
31 side in terms of bringing influence to bear, that wasn't going to change. It didn't make

1 any difference how many North Vietnamese the 1st Cav killed. I think at least in my
2 mind part of the problem with that and the way the military was used there lies with the
3 Joint Chiefs of Staff. And at some particular point the military leadership has to stand up
4 and say, 'Given your end state here's the X percent of the solution I can provide. I
5 cannot address the remainder.' I don't think that was done in Vietnam.

6 SM: Do you think it's being done now? Basically we're talking about the
7 development of the national strategic level of having a goal, a way of defining victory
8 towards that goal and a way of defining when you achieved the goal. One of the big
9 debates about current deployments is especially to places like Bosnia and Kosovo, Serbia,
10 do we actually have those in place? Do we generally know what we're trying to
11 accomplish? What national security interests are involved and how do we know when
12 the end game is going to be there?

13 JW: Sure. That's a big problem. The short term you want me to separate the
14 warring factions and institute a zone of separation I can do that. Now, do I have to do it
15 for the next 300 years? Or is there something else involved here? The best thing the
16 military can do is to set the preconditions for the success of the other instruments.
17 Whether they be diplomatic, economic, informational or whatever. But more often than
18 not it ends up being the answer to a question that it can't answer.

19 SM: What about some of the other complex issues involved here? There I think
20 are some interesting correlations and issues between Vietnam and some current
21 deployments. In particular of course recently there have been some allegations of some
22 rather troubling behavior on the part of Americans, in particular members of the 82nd
23 Airborne Division in Kosovo. Not whole scale slaughter and murder, but one of the
24 problems with leading men in foreign countries in combat, in high stress situations is
25 there are going to be problems and conflicts and potential atrocities. Do you think that, at
26 least in your teaching environment are you guys discussing these issues as well?

27 JW: Absolutely, every day.

28 SM: My Lai and the Vietnam experience.

29 JW: Not so much things as overt as My Lai, but the kinds of things that are going
30 on in Kosovo and Bosnia. I mean one of the big problems is if you take the military out
31 of the aspect of doing the things that it is trained to do, at its essence as troubling as it

1 might seem to a large part of American society, it's close with and kill the enemy. That's
2 what it traditionally has been, in most cases in our history. The problem is if you train
3 guys to do that, then you put them in something less than that situation soldiers don't have
4 an on and off switch. I got an e-mail from one of my friends or one of my students from
5 last year who is a lawyer in Bosnia right now, who was out conducting his business in
6 one of the communities there and got involved in the wrong end of a rock throwing
7 contest where pieces of concrete were being thrown at the American soldiers. You know
8 if you've got these young lads and lasses out there and you're teaching them to be
9 aggressive soldiers, if you don't have a very disciplined unit and you get involved in
10 those kinds of situations there's an opportunity for something abusive there. I think that
11 was the case in the 82nd and what they're going to find out when they look at that unit is
12 that it lacked discipline and that leadership was faulty. In that particular case that on/off
13 switch comes to play fairly quickly. There's no doubt in my mind that there is a problem
14 in that unit and it needs to be nipped in the bud fairly quickly. But the difficulty is you
15 take guys out here on the tank range and you run them down range and tell them to kill
16 everything in sight and then you take them over here and say, 'Ok, now I want you to be
17 a peace keeper and win the hearts and minds,' it's a little difficult translation sometimes.
18 Particularly if there is a threatening environment and a forced protection issue there. It's
19 not so hard to get off the boat as the Marines did coming back from Desert Storm and
20 going to a place like Bangladesh on Operation SEA ANGEL to relieve suffering in a non-
21 threatening environment where they don't even have to take weapons ashore, as opposed
22 to take them and dump them in the middle of Kosovo and say, 'Ok, make peace and
23 demonstrate that we're having regional stability here.' So, those are two different kinds
24 of ideas. But they're the same set of troops.

25 SM: So how do we address this as a nation?

26 JW: It's a good question. I don't know the answer to that. We try to deal with it
27 on a regular basis. The best thing the military can do is try to make the best of the
28 situation that they are plopped down in, because ultimately the decisions are made by the
29 civilian decision makers. So if you're put into a peace keeping situation, how do you do
30 that? One, you try to achieve your part of the end state and two, you to protect the force
31 at the same time. Those are mutually dichotomous in some situations. By and large

1 whether you want to go to Kosovo or not, you can either go or you can take your uniform
2 off. Those are the decisions that you get to make. That's the situation that we're going to
3 deal with. Short of the Chinese coming up some power projection capability in the next
4 five years we don't have immediate threat from a peer opponent. Consequently the
5 things we're going to be involved in are the things that our civilian masters tell us we're
6 going to be involved in. That runs the gamut from fighting forest fires to separating
7 warring factions, to passing out wheat in Somalia. If you can't determine what the end
8 state looks like then you end up with something that looked like Somalia. Half way
9 through that missions having fed X million Somalis, we should have declared victory and
10 went home and everything would have been fine. But we hung around for a few more
11 months, then the mission changed, but the force structure didn't change. We went from
12 passing out wheat to trying to find Farah Adid and ultimately we lost a bunch of Rangers
13 in some fairly intense contact there that they were unequipped to deal with.

14 SM: As a historian I know you will identify with this question. This isn't new
15 though. In terms of American deployment of the 20th century and the late 19th and the
16 rest of the 20th century, there's been a tremendous amount of activity with regard to
17 politicians sending American forces out to create stability in various regions of the world.
18 In particular especially in our back yard. The various Marine deployments in the first 20
19 or 30 years of the 20th century. The notion that the military forces are used to suit the
20 political means or ends of a particular administration. This has been an ongoing situation
21 especially since we became a global power at the turn of the century. So, I guess I'm
22 curious, do you think that there are valuable lessons that we should be looking at? Since
23 you're an instructor at the college there, should we be looking at those types of issues as
24 well and those types of experiences to try to draw appropriate lessons and conclusions on
25 how the military should be effectively dealing with the situation?

26 JW: We use case studies all the time for doing that. I don't think the intention is
27 necessarily for the military to figure out how to do these kinds of things. As you say
28 we've been doing military operations other than war since the beginning of our history
29 starting with the Whiskey Rebellion.

30 SM: Yes.

1 JW: I don't think that's necessarily the biggest problem although there is a
2 certain amount of emphasis on tactics techniques and procedures. How do you institute a
3 zone of separation between warring factions in the former Republic of Yugoslavia?
4 Well, that's decidedly different than taking a tank down. Tank table 8 at the National
5 Training Center. But we do have a body of knowledge that says how to do that. The real
6 tension here becomes when you have the civilian decision makers who don't really
7 understand capabilities and limitations of the military that apply that military force to
8 achieve an end state that they cannot achieve in this application of power. We have all
9 the power in the world. We can do virtually anything you want to. Although that
10 capability is decreasing on a daily basis in terms of the force draw down and what have.
11 Our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are meeting themselves coming and going.
12 That's why we're hemorrhaging people out of the service now. Not because they don't
13 like the job. Most of these people are highly motivated. It's the fact that the young lance
14 corporal gets tired of being gone all the time. You know, we've got kids on the west
15 coast who come in from a deployment, spend two weeks and they're back out for another
16 six months. Now who wants to live like that? Particularly if you can't make a good case
17 for that deployment in that young kid's mind. There's nothing that a young soldier or
18 airmen or Marine or sailor likes than to be doing something real that they can see. If you
19 talk to any of those kids that came out of that SEA ANGEL thing, when they came back
20 from helping the Bangladeshi people they felt like they had done something real and
21 something useful. But when you send them on these deployments that seem to have no
22 end in sight that don't contribute to any kind of end state, it's pretty hard felt.

23 SM: That sounds an awful lot like Vietnam, to a point.

24 JW: Well, it certainly does. And you asked a question earlier about what the
25 senior officers are doing. I don't know the answer to that. I'm not privy to those kinds of
26 conversations. I do know that watching C-SPAN 2, the only service that almost
27 continually points out the problems is the Marine Corps. General Krulac, until he retired
28 this summer as the Commandant of the Marine Corps, was very vocal in pointing out
29 those things that number one, are his responsibility under U.S. code in terms of providing
30 military expertise in his particular service to the civilian decision makers. And he gets
31 lambasted in the media for being disloyal. There is a problem there somewhere. You

1 know, do you want the truth or do you want loyalty? So, I don't know the answer to that.
2 We try to deal with that on a daily basis. We talk about these issues and in the generic
3 sense we certainly do not enter into the specifics or personalities in the classroom, but it's
4 the kind of thing these folks are going to have to deal with. Because these are the leaders
5 of tomorrow. There will be 10 or 15 general officers out of this class in 10 years. That's
6 traditionally the way it goes. At some particular point the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs
7 sat in this classroom. So, a young major at about their 12 or 13th year of service, they
8 need to start thinking about these kinds of things. Because prior to that time they're
9 pretty much where I was in Vietnam. They were down at the bottom of the food chain
10 reacting and not really considering the strategic political, military scenarios being
11 involved. They were the executors. This is kind of the break point in their careers where
12 they become part of them. But it's very important we talk about these kinds of things.

13 SM: Yes, sir. Closer to home on our backyard, the narcoterrorists issue?
14 Narcoterrorism in particular the current American support most of it not public in terms
15 of the American forces that are down there and advisors and things like that. Some of it is.
16 But the amount of support that we're providing the Columbians in particular? Is the
17 American role in support of those types of operations discussed much there?

18 JW: Well, I think there's an appropriate mission for a certain part of our military.
19 I think the larger question is how do you attack the war on drugs? Is it truly a war or is it
20 not? As long as you cannot target the demands, the supply is part of the symptoms. I
21 don't know what the military can do with regard to the question of demand. What we can
22 and can't do obviously at least within the confines of the United States is limited by posse
23 commitadas as it should be.

24 SM: Yes.

25 JW: But by in large I mean you can make all the great drug busts in the world
26 you want to, but as long as people want it, it's still going to get through one way or the
27 other. Particularly as long as it's as economically lucrative as it is. But in terms of
28 training other forces in order for their own internal security, that's the kinds of things that
29 we've always done. That's the kind of things I did. But I think the talk about 'Columbia,
30 the next Vietnam is almost laughable.' We're talking about two different things. We

1 have a lot of people in the media who throw Vietnam around without much knowledge or
2 judgment involved when they do so.

3 SM: Well, speaking of media what did you think about the role of the media in
4 the Vietnam War and do you think that the National Command Authority is adequately
5 addressed the problems that existed? Or do you think that there were problems in
6 Vietnam with the media or do you think that's all hype?

7 JW: No, I think there were problems. There's a very good book by a guy named
8 Peter Baraestrulp called *The Big Story*. I'm sure you're familiar with it.

9 SM: Yes, sir.

10 JW: About a TV guy of the TV community there who basically took his peers to
11 task and himself to task for the reporting on the TET Offensive. I will also say that while
12 I find some of the things the media did there not too positive that the military is partly
13 responsible for failing to be candid with the media in the first place. And drawing some
14 pictures of positive progress and positive action, we overstated our case and in some
15 cases lied. I think once you've done that you've co-opted yourself and the media
16 responded accordingly so. I think there was more than enough blame on both side to go
17 around. I think the media should be held responsible. The TET Offensive is a perfect
18 example. Very flashy the first days, first week or so of the Offensive were reported in a
19 sensational manner, which in fact was a sensational event. But there is no Paul Harvey,
20 the rest of the story. And ultimately the TET Offensive was a great defeat and the Viet
21 Cong ceased to exist as a significant military entity after the '68 TET Offensive, but that
22 part of the story is never given, was never given in 1968. It's almost, 'Hey these guys
23 lied to us, it's really worse than it is, so now we're going to show that it's worse than it is.'
24 When there's an opportunity to go back and correct the story, the corrections aren't made.
25 In fact in every case after the initial attack the Viet Cong are defeated and are virtually
26 decimated, but that story doesn't come out. What comes out is the 18 guys trying to get
27 in the U.S. embassy or the Marines battling to get back into the Citadel of Hue. That's
28 the kind of things you see. Or Dan Rather walking around the same burning C-130 for
29 five days making it look like the runway at the Khe Sanh is inundated by burning C-130s
30 when in fact there was only one. I think we learned some lessons there. A long amount
31 of drivel there to get to the bottom line I think. We have learned some lessons and one is

1 that you don't try to bullshit the press. I know during Desert Storm there was an effort to
2 educate the press on when you go out here and see this happening and in fact there were
3 instructors sent from Leavenworth up to Washington who met with the press pool and
4 said, 'Ok here's the kind of tactics that you're going to see. Here are the vehicles.
5 Here's the kinds of organizations.' Give them an idea. There were God knows how
6 many accredited journalists involved in this process, virtually none of whom had any
7 experience with what they were looking at. So, there was an idea, 'Ok, let's be straight.
8 Let's educate them what they're going to see.' The press pool bothers a lot of people but
9 even at that I think there were some abuses on the part of the press. Some egregious
10 bitching and moaning afterwards as well. When the Navy was told to conduct feints and
11 demonstrations out in the Persian Gulf that would give the idea that there might be an
12 amphibious operation against the Kuwaiti coast. Does the American media exercise any
13 self-discipline and not report that? Hell no. It splashed it all over the TV. And then after
14 the fact there is a whole bunch of pewling and whining about, 'We were used.' No one
15 used you. We gave you a window of opportunity and you moved to your own music,
16 which was to report it. So you can't have your cake and eat it too, to mix several
17 metaphors there. So, like I say, I think there's two sides to this particular coin and
18 considerations on both sides. I believe in a free and independent media, but I also
19 believe in a self-disciplined media. I'm not sure that we've got that in all cases.

20 SM: Well, regarding the role of the media in Vietnam and some of the
21 questionable reports that were provided to the media by the military high command, what
22 did you think about the 5:00 Follies? The emphasis on body counts, statistics,
23 quantification, but especially the body count as a measure or gauge of, were we winning?
24 Were we successful?

25 JW: The bottom line is what we had was a strategy of tactics and that tactic was
26 attrition. And attrition doesn't work unless you can kill more of them than they can
27 produce. If you're going to do that, that means that's total war and you go all out to
28 destroy as many of them as they can to bring them to whatever position you want them to
29 be in. The problem with fighting an attrition war in Vietnam was North Vietnam was
30 fighting a total war and we were fighting a limited war. Consequently, we never win.
31 They win as long as they avoid losing. So the strategy of the attrition was bankrupt from

1 the beginning. Attrition meant nothing if you couldn't have a strong and independent
2 South Vietnamese government that could win the support of the people. Attrition had
3 absolutely nothing to do with that. But it is easier to count bodies than it is to count
4 support or credibility or those other moromorphous ideas. So if you've got bean counters
5 who are in charge of the defense department they want to count beans. In that particular
6 instance, body is equal to beans.

7 SM: How about the allegations that body count figure were inflated?

8 HW: Oh, I'm sure they were. Little doubt in my mind that they were.

9 SM: Did you witness anything like that while you were in Vietnam when reports
10 were handed up from the Vietnamese forces to their higher headquarters?

11 JW: No. I really frankly was not in that kind of business. I'm sure the division
12 staff was providing figures upwards to the III Corps staff, but I was at the bottom of the
13 food chain. I didn't see any of that.

14 SM: How do you feel today about your Vietnam service?

15 JW: Oh, I'm very proud of it. It was a signal event in my professional life. It
16 basically colors everything that I am and everything that I think. It's always there.

17 SM: Is there anything else you'd like to discuss today?

18 JW: No, not necessarily. I mean, nothing comes to mind now. I'd certainly be
19 willing to talk to you later if you have some other questions that you want to follow up
20 on. Once again these are only my opinions and my perceptions. Right or wrong.

21 SM: Yes, sir. Understood.

22 JW: They're the only ones I got.

23 SM: Well, thank you very much. Certainly appreciate you sharing this with me.
24 Let me go ahead and end this.

25 JW: Let me know if you've got any follow up or anything feel free to give me a
26 call and we'll set up another time.

27 SM: Would you stand by a moment? I just want to end this officially. This ends
28 the interview with Mr. James Willbanks.