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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with J.C. Fischer
Conducted by Steve Maxner
April 20, 2001
Transcribed by Shannon Geach**

1 Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. John
2 Christopher Fischer a.k.a J.C. Fischer on the twentieth of April 2001 at approximately
3 10:00 Lubbock time. We are in the International Cultural Center in Lubbock, Texas. Sir,
4 why don't you go ahead and begin by telling me when and where you were born and
5 where you grew up?

6 John Christopher Fischer: Well, I was a military brat. I was born in San Diego,
7 California, in 1939. My father was transferred shortly after that to different places. I
8 don't remember all of them from the early years. But he was transferred around. I know
9 that one time we were at the Presidio in San Francisco. I knew that we were at Fort Ord,
10 California, and other places because of what was told to me later on in life. I know that
11 at one time we went to Arizona for one of the Army Air Corps bases there. My father
12 was in the Army when the Army Air Corps came into being. He chose to go into the
13 Army Air Corps. He stayed—he was in the Army Air Corps during the Second World
14 War. After the Second World War when the Army Air Corps was going to split off from
15 the Army and become the Air Force and the Army, he decided to stay with the Army. So
16 he stayed with the Army. I know we lived in Oklahoma and several places in Texas
17 during his military career. We ended up in Fort Sam Houston. Well, San Antonio, Fort
18 Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas, is where I eventually joined the service and went on.

19 SM: Growing up as a military brat, did you enjoy that lifestyle? Is that one of the
20 reasons why you decided to go into the military yourself? You didn't mind moving
21 around and things like that?

22 JF: I didn't mind moving around. I enjoyed that. In fact my father had a basic
23 training unit at Fort Sam Houston. During the summer when I was off from school I used
24 to get to go down there and watch the soldiers. They even—some of the people even

1 taught me how to fire the weapons and clean them and take care of them. It was boot
2 camp for me in the summer time. I went on the marches with them and the bivouacs and
3 everything else. So, I kind of had a good taste of military life. When it came time for me
4 to be the right age, I just hey, I'm going in the military. That's what I did.

5 SM: Was there anything that you enjoyed about school? You mentioned before
6 that you left school early. But I was just wondering even though you left early if there
7 was anything you did enjoy, but it just wasn't enjoyable enough?

8 JF: I was literally bored with school. There was no enjoyment in it whatsoever
9 with me. That's why I quit high school in the tenth grade and went on active duty with
10 the Navy. I might say that after the year, I was in the Navy for a year and they came to
11 me and they said, "Well, we can't promote you to a seaman first class until you've
12 completed your high school." So they sent me down to take a GED (general equivalency
13 diploma) test. When the results came back they were a little shocked. They said, "Well,
14 the level of the test that you graded at is way above the level of education that you've got.
15 You've scored too high for your level of education." So, they had me go in and take
16 some kind of smartness test. I don't know what they call it. They said I had an
17 extremely high IQ for a non-high school graduate. I don't know. I guess I was just bored
18 in high school and that's why I quit.

19 SM: So you passed your GED.

20 JF: With flying colors.

21 SM: And got promoted?

22 JF: Got my promotion to seaman first class. Eventually I became a leading
23 seaman. This is one of the seaman that's senior to the others and is kind of used—he
24 used to teach the younger sailors what they're to do and how things run on a ship. Just
25 before I got out of the Navy I took my test for third class, petty officer, but I knew I
26 couldn't be promoted to the third class because I had not re-enlisted. This was back
27 when you just didn't make rank real fast. You had to have four years in the Navy before
28 you could even be a third class petty officer. But I went down and took the test. The day
29 I was signing my paperwork to go home they told me. They said, "You passed the test."
30 I said, "Well, I've decided to go. I'm going to go". So I got out for a year. Stayed out of
31 the Navy for a year and then a year later- See, I got out in '60, June of '60 and I didn't

1 like civilian life. I made it through about eleven months of civilian life and I said no, I
2 don't like the way these people work. There's no teamwork. There's no respect for each
3 other. There's no fellowship. You just don't have the camaraderie in a civilian job. So I
4 decided to go back in the service. At that time the Navy was not taking prior service
5 people back in to the Navy. But the Army recruiter came over and says, "Hey I've got a
6 job for you." I said, "Oh, okay. I'll take it." So I went into the Army. Basically what I
7 became I had my infantry basic and then I had my infantry advanced training. I trained in
8 the infantry for several years. The rank wasn't too fast in the infantry. In fact, it was
9 extremely slow. So I transferred over. One of the fields that was open was artillery. I
10 transferred over to artillery. Just after I transferred the rank became very slow in the
11 artillery. I transferred into military intelligence after that. I stayed in military
12 intelligence for a year and half before I went to Vietnam.

13 SM: Now, what did you do in the Navy?

14 JF: In the Navy?

15 SM: Mm-hmm.

16 JF: I was a diver in the Navy. I was a qualified scuba diver. I also worked with
17 special weapons, which was nuclear weapons. I was not in charge of them, but whenever
18 nuclear weapons were being moved between ships or if they were being loaded or
19 something we had to have a special officer, a special petty officer and a special seaman
20 out there to handle these weapons. Everyone else was kind of cleared from the area
21 because of the classification of them. I used to run the wenches loading them into the
22 cargo bays of the ammo ships. That was basically my job handling nuclear weapons and
23 then going down and tying them down and preparing them for shipment or something
24 like that. Then when they got some place we would unload them. That was basically
25 what I did. I handled a lot of small boats when I was in the Navy. I was a gig coxon. I
26 was actually a bosun's mate. As a bosun's mate, you're a jack of all trades. So any job
27 they gave you, you were supposed to be able to do and that's what we did. That's what I
28 did when I was in the Navy. That's the background I had. Some of the intelligence work
29 that I was doing, it was just very minor stuff, nothing big about it, but I learned a little bit
30 about intelligence. Then that's how I got into some of the things that I got into later in
31 the military.

1 SM: When you were working with special weapons and loading and unloading
2 atomic or nuclear weapons, these were not weapons that were fired from a ship, these
3 were just transport?

4 JF: Yes, they were transported. We had no way of delivering nuclear weapons at
5 that time from the ships. So we would carry them to specific places and drop them off. I
6 never knew what happened to them after we released them. We had to make sure that the
7 serial numbers matched. Everybody had to triple, quadruple sign for this and that. When
8 you worked with those things, nobody could be around. I never saw so many guards in
9 my life except when we were unloading nuclear weapons overseas. I mean tremendous
10 guarding. Even the Navy installation where we were at, at the time when we off loaded
11 some nuclear weapons in Hawaii one time they closed the post. They wouldn't let
12 nobody on or off. Of course they wouldn't let anybody around our ships either, but they
13 closed the post so that nobody could get in and take pictures. We had patrol boats in the
14 water and everything. I think they overreacted, but that was the way they did things.

15 SM: Was most of your sea duty for those—let's see you were in the Navy active
16 duty from '57 to '60, so three years. Was most of that in the Pacific?

17 JF: Yes. It was all in the—

18 SM: Was it all in the Pacific?

19 JF: Yeah. It was all in the Pacific. Yeah.

20 SM: Where else besides Hawaii did you go?

21 JF: We were in Kwajalein Island. We were at Guam. We were at Midway. We
22 went to Japan, Okinawa, Taiwan. At the time it was called Formosa, I'm sorry. It's
23 Taiwan now, but it was called Formosa at the time and we went to Australia.

24 SM: Did all of these include delivering nuclear weapons or just a select few?

25 JF: No, just a select few. But the ship still made ports of call throughout places.

26 SM: What were the most important lessons or the most important things you took
27 away from your three years experience active duty in the Navy that helped you later on in
28 your military career in the Army? Was there anything that kind of transferred over?

29 JF: What I really learned a lot about as a bosun's mate is I learned how to handle
30 small boats, LCVPs (landing craft, vehicle, personnel), LCM (landing craft, mechanized),
31 pewter boats, Mike boats, LCUs (landing craft, utility), landing ships like that. I also ran

1 a motor well boat and I also ran a captain's gig. So I was able to handle small boats and
2 navigate on my own, which came in handy later on. I learned how to handle cargo,
3 especially very sensitive cargo. Loading and off loading, how to tie it down, how to
4 brace and shore it up on a ship and things like this for movement. I carried on some of
5 that to my other military career in the Army.

6 SM: I would imagine it also helped as we get later on and look at your advisory
7 work with the 17th river boats that was probably important.

8 JF: Oh, that was very important, yeah.

9 SM: That year or so or less than a year, eleven months that you had between your
10 Navy career and your Army career, what did you do as a civilian?

11 JF: (Laughs) I took a job with Sears Roebuck and Company working in their
12 warehouse as a delivery man in a deluxer. The stuff that we delivered if something got
13 scratched or something I'd go out and fix it. But the money just wasn't there for
14 livelihood. The other thing that I felt that I missed—we learned to work in the Navy, we
15 learned to work as teams. The ship didn't get loaded unless everybody pitched in. That
16 meant from the skipper, whatever his rank might be at the time. Our skipper was a
17 lieutenant commander, what we call in the Army a lieutenant colonel. He came down
18 and took his shirt off just like the rest of us and helped us load. All of our officers
19 pitched in. We got used to working as teams. When we were at sea, if we had to
20 resupply a ship at sea with ammunition, everybody had to pitch in. Everybody had a job.
21 Even then the skipper would come down and he would pitch in and make sure things
22 were being done and help out and everything. These are things that I had really missed
23 from the military, the union that you had with everybody else. We learned from each
24 other. Everybody knew what my weaknesses were. I knew what everybody else's
25 weaknesses were. So, when it came to doing work on the deck, hazardous work, I knew
26 okay we don't put this guy in charge of this job because this is his weakness. But he's
27 great over here, so we'll put him over here and take this guys that's over here, which is
28 his weakness and put him over here where he's the greatest. You had to work like that
29 and that's what I missed. The fellowship, at nights we would go on the fan tail and sit
30 there. A couple of guys played guitars and another one an accordion and we'd sit of a fan
31 tale smoking and singing songs and talk about home and talk about school and things like

1 this. So this was missing in the civilian world. At the end of the day, everybody went
2 home. You were on your own. If you didn't have friends or something, associates that
3 you could go to, you had nothing to do. That's what I felt from the military. I learned
4 the companionship, the camaraderie and the teamwork. That carried over from the Navy
5 into the Army for me.

6 SM: When you went into the Army in 1960, and you wanted to go back to the
7 Navy and they weren't taking back prior service. Army guy said, "Hey we can take
8 you." Did you purposefully choose infantry?

9 JF: Oh, yeah. I purposefully chose infantry. I don't know why at the time, but I
10 knew it was the combat arms. I knew if there was a war or anything the infantry would
11 be the first in the line. I felt that I had this warrior instinct. My father had fought in two
12 wars. He fought in World War II and he fought in Korea. I used to sit around and listen
13 as a kid to their war stories and things that went on and all this. I always thought I want
14 to be a soldier. I want to fight a war. This is my country and I want to defend it. That's
15 why I went into the infantry.

16 SM: When you say you listened to the war stories, was it just your father or were
17 there other people that you interacted with and you listened to?

18 JF: His buddies would come over to the house and they would sit there and drink.
19 They would talk about flying a B-17 and getting the tail all shut up and what they had to
20 do to stay in that air and all that. Wow. For a little kid I think it was fascinating.

21 SM: Absolutely.

22 JF: They would talk about the amphibious landings in the Pacific that they were
23 involved with and the things that went on over there and how hard the Japanese fought
24 against them and how hard they had to fight to take over. I don't recall them ever talking
25 about blood and guts. Most of it was funny stuff about the war stories. "Do you
26 remember when so and so did this or that or the other? He got shot in the butt, because
27 we told him his butt was too big and sure enough he got shot in it." That was a big laugh
28 for people and things like that. I guess war intrigued me. Of course I used to go to all the
29 World War II movies and see all that. Geez, look at John Wayne and Audie Murphy and
30 all these, wow. I guess I was oriented towards the military from my childhood. That's
31 why I guess I did what I did.

1 SM: What were the biggest differences when you finally did get on active duty in
2 the Army? What were the biggest differences between serving in the Navy and serving
3 in the Army from your experiences? Besides the fact that in the Navy you're at sea, and
4 in the Army you're on land.

5 JF: Probably the biggest difference and the most problems I had was the military
6 jargon in the Navy, this was a deck. In the Army it's a floor. That's a bulkhead, in the
7 Army it's a wall. That's an overhead, no that's a ceiling. The latrine was a head. So, I
8 had a lot of trouble reorienting myself. The guys in the Army used to hassle me and tease
9 me a lot about it. "Hey swabee, are you ever going to get over this Navy stuff?"

10 Wearing the uniform, our uniforms were different. We went from a pull-over shirt where
11 you had to do a square knot in your tie that was worn down low as to a foreign hand knot
12 that had to go up around your throat and choke yourself to death. Wearing the uniform
13 was different. Basic training, as opposed to boot camp. The thing in basic training that I
14 found from the Army and the Navy, we did more calisthenics in the Army, more physical
15 exercise. We trained on more weapons and we were schooled more heavily on the
16 weapons. After basic training of course we went into advanced individual training AIT.
17 I went to AIT infantry. That's where we really focused on infantry tactics and we
18 focused on infantry weapons. You had of course two types of weapons in the infantry.
19 You have your individual weapons. Then you have your crew served weapons.
20 Individual weapon was your rifle, your pistol or your flame thrower or machine gun or
21 whatever. But a crew served weapon was the heavy .50 caliber machine guns, the
22 mortars, the .30 caliber machine guns, the rocket launchers and things like this. You had
23 to operate one of those. To even get one of those things into position to operate it didn't
24 take just one man to get it there. You had to have one or two men carrying ammunition,
25 another man carrying the barrel, another man carrying the receiver, another man carrying
26 the tripod set this thing up and put it together. It was very quick. That's where the
27 teamwork came in. So these were some of the differences with the types of weapons.
28 Where on the ships we had, I think in boot camp we learned to fire a rifle. I think that's
29 all we fired in boot camp. When we were on the ship we had five-inch guns. During that
30 combat situation everybody had to handle a five-inch gun. In the infantry you don't have
31 five-inch guns.

1 SM: What would you say was more of a challenge for you personally? Was it
2 Navy boot camp, Army basic training or were there just difficulties in both, kind of wash
3 out?

4 JF: They were very much the same as far as that went. They weren't all that
5 difficult because my father had been in the military and I had done a lot of military things
6 before I went in the military. So it was a walk through for me really. I guess the hardest
7 part was getting up at three o'clock in the morning after two hours of sleep. That was
8 probably very difficult. But I fell right in with it. I already knew how to do the
9 calisthenics and the exercises and things like that. It wasn't that difficult. It was an easy
10 transition for me.

11 SM: What was the greatest challenge for you personally in your training in either
12 the Navy or in the Army?

13 JF: Well, you're talking about many, many years ago.

14 SM: Well, if you can think of anything.

15 JF: It's hard to think back to that time and think of what the challenges were. I
16 guess the biggest challenge was just worried about not being able to complete boot camp.
17 What if I fall on my butt and I can't complete this? Personally it would be very
18 discouraging. So I think the challenges came at the beginning of training. You would
19 look at this and you'd say, "God am I going to be able to do this?" Well, you get through
20 that. Then you go into another phase of training. You're going into a bigger field. You
21 look at everything that you have to learn to do and you say, "I'll never learn to do this."
22 You get through that and you go in to another phase of training. It's the same thing, but
23 training was a challenge because every time you advanced up the training got wider, the
24 scope of what you were doing got wider and broader. Just being able to get in there and
25 do the job and learn it. They didn't just stick you in a job and say learn it, they taught
26 you. The process of learning actually is a very big challenge sometimes. Especially
27 when you go in and you say well in the next six weeks we're going to learn how to do the
28 next sixteen thousand tasks. Three weeks, four weeks and I'm going to learn sixteen
29 thousand tasks? Geez, but you do. Those are the biggest challenges.

30 SM: After you got into the thick of Army training, did you have any second
31 thoughts?

1 JF: No. I never doubted what I was doing. I guess I had the upbringing of a
2 military family. So I was very proud to wear my uniform. I wore my uniform whenever
3 I could. I took immaculate care of my uniforms. I wouldn't have ropes hanging off of it.
4 I wouldn't have the brass unshined. I would always have my shoes shined. I'd always
5 have the creases in my shirts and my trousers and everything. You might have heard of
6 the phrase soaping the crease. That's where you took a special kind of soap and literally
7 ironed it in your crease to look just like a knife-edge. I mean that's just the way I'd been
8 brought up. That's the way I looked at my uniforms. Whenever I wore my uniform, I
9 wanted to be sharp.

10 SM: You did your infantry training at Fort Benning, Georgia. Is that correct?

11 JF: Yes.

12 SM: Where was your first duty assignment in the Army? Your first unit, do you
13 remember?

14 JF: Golly. Yes I can, now that I think about it after all that AIT and everything. I
15 remember it was in Texas. It was in a very strange town in Texas, just south of Dallas,
16 Fort Worth area. They had an air defense command post there. They had us on guard
17 duty because it was a classified installation. We became the guards for the installation. It
18 was a high security area. I guess with my previous background I guess they felt that I
19 was not a security risk. Of course I had to go through security clearances. My father had
20 obtained a top-secret security clearance in the Army. When I went in I had no trouble
21 obtaining one either. So I was highly qualified to go into secure areas. So my first duty
22 assignment as an infantryman, there was no war going on, so there was no place for
23 infantrymen to be used except in mundane type jobs. I ended up in security at that
24 installation there. From there I went to Presidio, San Francisco. I was at the Presidio for
25 a while. I was also again a security guard for an air defense command post on Mount
26 Tamalpais. After I'd been there awhile they were looking for people to go into the 6th
27 Army honor guard. That was at Presidio, San Francisco. I went and applied. The day I
28 went down of course I had on the immaculate uniform, everything spit shined and
29 everything in the right place. Oh, yeah this is a good troop. He's strike, he's sharp. So I
30 spent nine months on the 6th Army honor guard, which I found out was a whole lot
31 tougher. Because whenever you had parades, you were always out there. For every

1 military function you had to show up. You had more uniforms issued than you'd ever
2 seen before. Everything had to be perfect. That was the only way you got into an honor
3 guard. I was getting ready for reassignment after that. Somebody said something about,
4 "Why don't you put in for the 3rd Infantry regiment in Washington D.C.? This is the
5 Presidential honor guard in Washington D.C." I said, "No, don't want any part of that. I
6 want to go to Europe." So I went to Europe and did back up. First time in Europe I
7 ended up at Baumholder, Germany, in the infantry. There all we did was train to fight.
8 Then they had an air defense command post that was some people got into that had
9 broken through the security one time down in Würzburg. Because I'd had guard duty on
10 highly classified installations before I got shipped down there. I was in the infantry, but
11 assigned to the artillery air defense command of missile artillery. I stayed down there for
12 a while and then I got shipped to another place in Germany for a big air defense
13 command post where we had air police security and Army security. That was Birkenfeld,
14 Germany. I stayed there for a while. Vietnam came along and I started hearing about
15 what was going on in Vietnam. I went to my commander and I said, "I want to put in an
16 application to go to Vietnam." He said, "No. We need you here." I said, "This is what
17 I've trained for. I want to go to Vietnam." He said, "No can't replace you." So I put in
18 the request to go anyway and he disapproved it. Of course once the company commander
19 disapproves it everybody up the line automatically does because they don't want to
20 override a company commander. It kind of made me a little angry that they wouldn't let
21 me go. I sat down and wrote a letter to the secretary of the Army. I don't know where I
22 got the balls to do that with, but I did. I sat down and wrote him a letter. I said, "I want
23 to go to Vietnam and the people here say I'm too important to be in Vietnam," I said,
24 "But I want to go." Not in those words, but that's just the gist of it. I got a very nice
25 letter back from him. He says, "I've forwarded your application for reassignment to
26 Vietnam to the United States Army here. If they look at your records and decide that
27 you're qualified and they want you, I'm sure they'll send you. If they feel that you are
28 more needed in Europe, then young man, I want you to do your duty." About three
29 months later here come my orders for Vietnam.

30 SM: What did your CO (commanding officer) say?

1 JF: My CO had been informed that I had written to the secretary of the Army
2 because the letter came down through the chain of command. My CO called me in and
3 he was upset at me. But he made the comment he said, “Now I understand how badly
4 you want to go,” he said, “that you would go and write a letter like this.” I said, “I want
5 to.” He says, “Well, get ready.”

6 SM: You’re going.

7 JF: He says, “You’re going.” That’s how I come to go to Vietnam.

8 SM: What do you remember about some earlier activity? Not in Vietnam, but in
9 terms of heightened political and almost military activity. In particular the Bay—not the
10 Bay of Pigs invasion, excuse me—the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, do you recall when
11 that happened? Do you remember where you were? Was anybody in your area or were
12 you put on alert?

13 JF: When was the Cuban Missile Crisis?

14 SM: That was in October of ’62.

15 JF: I was in Europe. Yeah, that’s right. We were in Europe at that time. We
16 were put on high alert status over in Europe. That was something I had forgotten even
17 happened. In fact I think I was in Birkenfeld, Germany, at the time. We went on
18 heightened alert and everything. We were taken inside the air defense center. They even
19 taught us to do some of the jobs in there on our free time. But we were on a higher alert
20 status when that was going on. We had gotten alerted. The infantry guards there at the
21 installation had gotten alerted that we may be moved to Florida because they were going
22 to move a bunch of artillery, air defense artillery units to Florida and they needed guards.
23 I guess it never came about. Everything folded up. I knew there was a lot of saber
24 rattling, that’s what we called it. What we phrased it in the military at the time was that
25 everybody’s got a case of the indigestion so they’re rattling their sabers. That’s politics.
26 I’m not involved so whatever happens, happens. The politics that went on I guess in the
27 earlier part, I never paid attention to them. I was too involved in my military career.

28 SM: What did you hear was going on in Vietnam when you made your decision
29 to put in your paperwork to go? What did you think the United States was trying to
30 accomplish there?

1 JF: The war was not too highly publicized at that time, but what I understood of
2 the assignments to Vietnam at the time is the people that were going to Vietnam were
3 being assigned to Vietnamese units as advisors. I was a little old spec-4 at the time. I
4 thought gee, get to be an advisor man. I guess that'd be cool. Help somebody learn
5 something, be a teacher. That's what I looked at as the advisory duty was being a
6 teacher. I thought that was cool. I said, "Yeah that's where I want to go. I want to go do
7 that." But we heard that they were building up, the build up was going on in Vietnam at
8 the time. They were sending more forces over there and they were getting ready to send
9 in combat forces. That's why I volunteered. I got my orders for Vietnam and I packed
10 all my gear up in Germany and came back to the States. They made me wait in the States
11 thirty days before they sent me to Vietnam. During that thirty days I was given a
12 passport and all kinds of documents that I needed, shots and stuff like that. I turned in all
13 my uniforms except for the khaki uniform I was wearing. That's what I flew over to
14 Vietnam in was my short sleeved khaki uniform. It's the only uniform I had. When I got
15 to Vietnam we landed at the air base there. They took us over to Long Binh. They
16 started issuing all this combat gear that we were used to having anyway. Didn't bother
17 me I was used to having it all the time anyway. One day they came in and they said,
18 "Sarge, with your background you're being sent over to USARV." I said, "Well, what's
19 that?" They said, "That's U.S. Army Vietnam." I said, "I thought everybody was going
20 to USARV." They said, "Yeah, but you're going to special troops." Immediately I
21 thought, oh, they're sending me to Special Forces. Well, that wasn't it. I made the
22 comment, I said, "Why are they spending me to Special Forces? I don't have any
23 training for that." They said, "No, no, no special troops". Immediately came to my
24 mind okay, we're going to be gophers. "Go do this and go get me a cup of coffee and
25 polish my shoes." I thought oh God, this is not what I came to Vietnam for. But that's
26 not what they were. We went out on special operations for USARV. We did special
27 programs for them. We'd go out in villages or something and try to teach the people
28 things, which was what I had wanted to do. I think that my later experience, one that
29 came about with USARV as the special troops is the one that really opened my eyes what
30 was going on in Vietnam because I was listening of course to everything that was being
31 told to me by the U.S. government as this is true man. This is the word. This is the truth.

1 This is exactly how it's happening. I was assigned with the unit as a guard for a combat
2 engineer unit to go up to Cam Loc Valley, which was up around Phan Rang and Cam
3 Ranh Bay. We were told that what we were doing is there was a village that wanted to
4 get away from communism and they couldn't in the area where they were. So we were
5 going to set up the groundwork and build a village down in Cam Loc valley for these
6 Vietnamese people to move in to. We were going to build them new homes and
7 everything like that. So what we had to do was we had to go in. We had to clear the area
8 and make sure the VC (Viet Cong) were out of it and things like this. No mine fields
9 around. We did. We literally built concrete blockhouses with thatched roofs and all this.
10 I learned a lot about construction. We did all this work, took us about six, seven months
11 in there. One day they started bringing in the Vietnamese villagers that were going to live
12 here. I saw this one woman. She had two babies in her arms, two little bitty babies. She
13 was on the back of a deuce and a half and I reached up to help her and she glared at me
14 and ripped loose with some Vietnamese. Of course I didn't understand it. We had an
15 interpreter there. I said, "I'm just trying to help this woman." He said to me he said,
16 "She does not want to be touched by an American." I said, "What's the problem here?"
17 He said, "Don't you know?" I said, "No." He said, "These are people that have been
18 moved off of land that they had lived on for hundreds of years, their families. They're
19 being moved by the Vietnamese government against their will." All this time we'd been
20 told we're doing something special for these special people that want to move. Now I'm
21 learning that these people were being taken off their homesteads. Their village was
22 burned to the ground. The gravestones were taken up, everything. The place was
23 literally destroyed. These people were not happy with us. He told me, he said, "This
24 woman is saying this because the American soldiers are here." This was the first time I'd
25 heard that the people weren't happy with us being in Vietnam. That kind of opened my
26 eyes a lot to what was going on. Then of course I started getting nosy and I started
27 talking to people. Right after that I got transferred down to Saigon. I went down there to
28 pull security at the air base at Tan Son Nhut. That's when I put in my application to go to
29 MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam), because I wanted to get out of
30 USARV. I felt they weren't doing—with the propaganda that the American government
31 was putting out, I didn't feel we were doing that. I felt we were doing something

1 different to that. So, I put in for MACV because I'd heard some advisors talk about what
2 MACV was and what they were doing. So I put in for that and got assigned to MACV
3 because they were needing advisors badly. That's how I got into MACV. I went over to
4 MACV and I got this briefing. I don't remember how many days I was there or what, but
5 I got a briefing from the people who were running MACV. A lot of the briefing was
6 teaching us some of the customs of Vietnam, not much language training at all. We were
7 going to have to learn that on our own. We were learning the customs and the way their
8 military was formed and their chain of command and some of the idiosyncrasies of the
9 Vietnamese people. But one thing that sticks out in this whole briefing of I don't know
10 many five, six, seven days of briefings was that we were going to go into a Vietnamese
11 unit and we were going to tell them and teach them how to fight this war. I thought, great
12 this is really an opportunity. Well, another disappointment. When I got to the unit that I
13 was being assigned to, which was the 17th riverboat company down in My Tho, I ran into
14 the captain, this Navy captain that was in charge of this boat company. He spoke some
15 English and I spoke a little Vietnamese by then. In our first discussion, in our first
16 meeting, he was telling me about his war experiences. I was hearing war stories from this
17 dude dated back to the '40s. How he had fought the communists, how he had fought
18 against the Japanese, he fought against the communists, he fought against the French, he
19 fought against the English. He said, "Here I am again fighting against the communists."
20 I thought to myself this guy has got to have twenty some years experience fighting wars.
21 Why did they tell me I'm down here to teach him how to fight this war? Here again was
22 this disillusionment of why I was there. I guess somewhere along in there I stopped
23 trusting my government. I don't know exactly when that happened, but I got to when
24 they told me something I just didn't believe a word they were saying. It was like you
25 can't trust them. Every time they say something in Vietnam you'd find out something
26 different. You knew that somebody was lying to you. I think for me that was
27 discouraging.

28 SM: Let me ask you some clarifying questions real quick. When you first arrived
29 in Vietnam and eventually went to work for USARV, what kind of briefings did you
30 receive upon arriving in-country? Where did you arrive in-country?

31 JF: I arrived at Tan Son Nhut.

1 SM: Tan Son Nhut.

2 JF: Yeah. As to briefings we were told we could go downtown, go on pass and
3 go to town. But we had to stay away from the women because all of the women were VC
4 and they were full of venereal diseases. We were told to stay out of certain parts of
5 Saigon and Cholon, not to stand in groups on the street corners. Don't ride on cyclos.
6 Don't eat the food. We were given a little book on courtesies and customs of the
7 Vietnamese. They said, "Well, you really don't have to read the book. We'll brief you
8 on it." They briefed us on it. The Vietnamese didn't like their women messed with. You
9 didn't harass the Vietnamese downtown and things like this. We went downtown and the
10 girls messed with us. We didn't mess with them. The girls were climbing all over us
11 because they wanted our money. I was glad when I went up to Cam Ranh Bay because
12 when I went to up to Cam Ranh, I got away from the city of Saigon and Tu Do Street. I
13 had gone to some of the restaurants in Saigon because I wanted to learn the food and I
14 wanted to learn some of the customs. Man, the food was good. I never got sick from it.
15 I tried to stay out of any places that were off limits. Saigon was bar after bar after bar
16 after bar. You would walk by a bar and four or five girls come up and try to drag you in.
17 "Buy me Saigon tea," and all this you know. No, come on. This is not what I'm here for.
18 We had a PX (post exchange) there. You could buy a lot of stuff at the PX. I would go
19 down in Saigon where the black market was and you could buy stuff on the black market
20 you couldn't get in the PX. You could buy stuff on the black market that was being
21 bought in the PX put on the black market at twice the price. I figured with other
22 experiences I'd had in the military I said, "Well, this is about par." The people are just
23 trying to make a living.

24 SM: What did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam
25 when you first arrived? How did you understand the mission?

26 JF: According to the briefings we were there to help the Vietnamese win the war
27 between the north and the south. The communists were overrunning the lower portion of
28 South Vietnam because they wanted to take over and unite the Vietnamese people into
29 one country. The people in South Vietnam did not want that. They were not able to fight
30 the war by themselves. So we were there to help them. That's basically the bullshit that
31 was put out by the government.

1 SM: When did you start questioning that?

2 JF: When I got assigned to my advisory team down in the Delta.

3 SM: That's '66.

4 JF: Yeah. That's when I started questioning what was going on. Because here I
5 was, I was an E-6 in the United States Army. Here was this Vietnamese captain that had
6 twenty years of combat service and I was supposed to teach him how to win the war.
7 That was a bunch of phooey. That's exactly what it was. I eventually found out that
8 what I could do is I could help the Vietnamese in other ways and that's what I did.

9 SM: Again when you were with USARV and working with the special troops,
10 how much time did you spend in Saigon? You left eventually as you pointed out, went to
11 Cam Ranh Bay and worked around there. How long did you stay in Cam Ranh?

12 JF: Let's see. We were in Saigon maybe—

13 SM: I guess it was Cam Loc Valley.

14 JF: Yeah. We were in Saigon maybe two weeks. We went to Cam Ranh Bay.
15 Oh, while we were in Cam Ranh Bay we helped an air defense artillery unit set up its
16 operations on one of the hills around the base there. We did pull some security around
17 the air base on the beach. They had a big beach out there, beautiful white beach. We
18 were put out on guard duty in our swimsuits. It was kind of nobody around we were just
19 out there to be guarding it. So we'd go out there in our swimsuits and walk in the water
20 because it was so hot. Nothing was happening. It was funny. They had us out there in
21 the daytime guarding this beach, but at nighttime they had no guards on the beach, which
22 did not make much sense to me. That's when you should have had the guards there I
23 thought. But no. But somebody with infinite wisdom in the higher echelons was not
24 doing that. But we spent, I guess I spent most of the year in Cam Ranh. We went up to
25 Nha Trang several times. There was an island out there in Nha Trang called Hon Tre
26 Island. There was an air defense unit being set up out there. The Navy Seabees were
27 setting up a unit out there. We went up there to clear the island. The only thing we did
28 was scare the hell out of the monkeys. There was no people on the island, no evidence of
29 people being on the island or anything. So we sat around and played poker and searched
30 for souvenirs for several months while they were building on Hon Tre Island. I really
31 wasn't happy with that because I wasn't in the war. There was nothing going on as far as

1 the war. I think the closest I came to the war was after we finished at Hon Tre we went to
2 Cam Loc valley to start that project. We found some areas where the VC had had
3 campsites, but they were old and abandoned. We never had any contact. We had a little
4 contact a couple of times, just little skirmishes. That was my first contact with Aussie
5 troops. We met some—

6 SM: At Cam Loc?

7 JF: At Cam Loc. I think it was Cam Loc. C-A-M-L-O-C, Cam Loc Valley. That
8 was our first time that we ran into Aussies over there, Australians. They had been doing
9 some operations up inside of Cam Loc Valley way up by Nha Trang. We're going down
10 to Phan Rang so they came through the valley. We asked them about the valley and they
11 said it's clear. It was a piece of cake walk through. They did not run into any VC units
12 or anything. That was no big worry of ours. Of course then I said after that I was a little
13 disillusioned with USARV and what we were doing. So I applied for assignment to
14 MACV and got it. Then I went to the Delta. You had some other questions there about
15 what I was doing.

16 SM: Especially with the special team and the special troops and your work in
17 Cam Loc. How long were you there in Cam Loc? You mentioned the woman who felt
18 hostility towards Americans and everything that had been happening. Did you encounter
19 others that felt the same way like she did?

20 JF: Yeah. From those trucks, the people getting off at the trucks were extremely
21 hostile to us. They didn't want us to help him. The interpreter that was there, I would
22 say what did this man say. He says, "You people did a very bad job of building the
23 houses." I said, "We built them the way they were blue printed." Well, that's not the
24 way the Vietnamese build a house. I said, "Well, that's not my fault. Vietnamese in
25 Saigon designed these houses. Why are they taking this out on us?" "Well, you're
26 Americans."

27 SM: You're the foreigner on the soil.

28 JF: You're the foreigner on the soil. Yeah, that's the way to look at it. You're
29 Americans. They don't want you here. I thought, what a bunch of crap. Why are we
30 here if the Vietnamese don't want us? Later on with MACV when I was down in some
31 of the villages and I had learned to speak a lot more Vietnamese, I heard it from a lot of

1 Vietnamese. “Why don’t you people just go home, leave us alone and let us live our
2 lives?” I even a couple times tried to explain to them. I said, “Well, if we just pull out,
3 the communists are going to take over.” They said—a lot of them living out in the
4 villages, not where the government was, but they were living out in the hamlets, way out.
5 They said, “You people don’t understand. If you’d just leave, the war will stop and we
6 can go on and do our farming and live our lives on our land that we’ve lived on for
7 hundreds of years.” I thought, this doesn’t coincide with what I’ve been taught. I was
8 dealing with a lot of mixed feelings I guess at that time. I was a young kid. Sometimes I
9 even got the attitude. What are we doing here? What was that old song? Please Mr.
10 Custer, send me home. What am I doing here? I developed an attitude because the
11 people really didn’t want us that I was finding in the villages. Now this might not be true
12 everywhere. But a lot of the contact I had in the little villages, they didn’t care who was
13 in charge of the government. Whoever was in charge of the government was going to be
14 corrupt anyway. They would just pay their taxes. As long as they were left to live on
15 their land, that’s all they wanted. I think this is where politics came in.

16 SM: Just one last question about your USARV. How long were you at Cam Loc,
17 months, a couple of months?

18 JF: Probably three, four, five months. Some of that stuff just went so fast we
19 didn’t even pay attention to it.

20 SM: When you put in your paperwork to go to MACV, did you know
21 automatically that you were going to become an advisor, or did you think that maybe
22 you’d be doing something else?

23 JF: I knew they needed advisors. They were sending the information out to the
24 units about requesting if you have anyone that’s qualified or thinks they’re qualified that
25 might want to be an advisor please forward their names to MACV headquarters and that.
26 When I put my name in my name went on the list. I think it was within a week, week and
27 a half. I got called and told that I was being transferred to MACV and I would report the
28 next day. I cleared my unit in one day and checked into MACV the next morning. At the
29 time we went into Copler Compound. That was the MACV headquarters then in Saigon.
30 We went into Copler. I think the first day at Copler we just drew some bedding and got a
31 room to sleep in and things like that. The next day our briefings started. Of course they

1 started out with all these great things that we were going to do as advisors and what we
2 were going to accomplish and how we were going to help win the war and things like
3 that. Our briefings lasted for five days. They gave us booklets that we were supposed to
4 read at night and all kinds of things that we were supposed to—dos and don'ts with the
5 Vietnamese customs and the Vietnamese. Our final briefing before we drew our
6 equipment to go out into the teams, our final briefing now was the one where the Army
7 colonel came in and told us how a great of a job we were going to do as advisors and how
8 we were going to train these people and teach these people. We were going to set up
9 training programs to train the people and their weapons and get their new weapons for
10 them and orient them to the weapons. It sounded great what we were going to be doing.
11 The next day I flew out on a caribou. One of those little two engine planes. Australians
12 were flying it. I think both of them were drunk as hell. The airport at My Tho was about
13 a hundred feet long, water at both ends. The pilot had to put the engines in reverse before
14 the wheels touched the found. Both pilots had to stand on the brakes to stop the plane
15 before it ran off the end of the runway. They came back and said, "Who's going to My
16 Tho?" I said, "That's me." They said, "Here you are." I grabbed my duffel bag. I
17 remember the weapon I had been issued was an M-1 carbine from World War II. This
18 was not a big weapon, but that's what the advisors were supposed to carry because we
19 weren't supposed to be fighting. That was only for self-protection. They put me off on
20 the airstrip there, nobody else there but me. They turned the plane around and took off. I
21 waited for three hours before a jeep finally showed up. They said, "Are you the advisor
22 that's"—I said, "Yeah I guess so." They said, "Well, come on, get in the jeep." They
23 took me to the team headquarters there in My Tho. I talked to Colonel Showalter. He
24 was our senior advisor at the time. He asked me if I really wanted to go out to this Navy
25 unit. I said, "Well, I really do. That's what I'm sent down here for." He said, "But
26 you're in the Army." He said, "You don't want to be assigned to a Navy unit." I said,
27 "Is there something else you want me to do?" He said, "Well, we need somebody to
28 handle our command radio program here in the team headquarters." I said, "Doing
29 what?" He said, "Manning the radio at night and things like this." I said, "Colonel I did
30 not volunteer to come down her to advisory duty to be in the headquarters and operate a
31 radio." I said, "I want to go out and advise this team." "Well, you're an Army sergeant,

1 you don't know anything about the Navy." I said, "Sir, I spent time in the Navy. I know
2 what I'm doing." He said, "Well, you're only an E-6." I said, "Well, this is an E-6 that
3 doesn't want to operate a radio. Can you get that through your head?" He said, "Well, if
4 you're going to be difficult, we'll send you out in the morning." I spent the night there at
5 the team house, had pretty good food. The next morning a jeep took me down the main
6 street of My Tho. We made a left hand turn and we went through the marketplace and
7 we went through the school area. We went across a couple of canals. We went out in the
8 boonies. I said, "Do you know where you're going?" "Oh, yeah. I know where I'm
9 going." Pretty soon we got to this little bitty compound and it was a Navy compound.
10 This is where the boat company was. They opened the gate for us. We went in. He
11 dropped me off. He said, "See you later Sarge, good luck." I said, "Okay." Dumb,
12 dumb. I don't know. I really felt lost. These Vietnamese came out and started talking to
13 me and I said, "I don't understand Vietnamese." Finally, the Vietnamese captain came
14 out, Dai Uy, very polite gentleman. He was always a gentleman to me. He came out and
15 I recognized his Vietnamese rank right away. I popped to him, gave him a salute. He
16 returned it. He said, "I'm very honored that you salute me." I said, "Well, you are an
17 officer. I always render a salute to an officer." He said, "That's very kind of you, very
18 noble of you. But from now on please do not render salutes to officers. You are an
19 advisor. You do not have to salute us." I said, "Dai Uy I'm here to help you." He said,
20 "I know why you're here sergeant. You are not going to teach me anything about the
21 war. I have been fighting the war for twenty-five years, but you can help my people.
22 Everything you learned in Saigon, forget it." This guy's been around already. He
23 introduced me around to all of his officers. They were very courteous and very
24 respectful. I found them honoring me. I couldn't understand what this was all about. I
25 really never understood the attitude of their respect for me. I guess because I was an
26 American. I don't know. I was always respectful of them. I never, never tried to be
27 pushy or anything like that. I was always trying to be respectful to them because I'm in
28 their country. I think they respected that. We always had a lot of fun though.

29 SM: Were you instructed in any way concerning the relationship between you
30 and your Dai Uy as you put it? In terms of the relationship between an enlisted officer,
31 advisor, Dai Uy?

1 JF: I was just told that I was going to be going down to this Navy boat company
2 and that I would be their advisor.

3 SM: Advising them about?

4 JF: Advising them on how to fight the war. I did not know the make-up of
5 advisory teams at first. But I learned later that a lot of teams consisted of four or five
6 people. I did question this one time after I'd been there a while. I said, "Aren't there
7 supposed to be other advisors out there with me?" I was told yes. You're supposed to
8 have an officer. You're supposed to have an NCO (noncommissioned officer) that's a
9 medic. You're supposed to have an NCO that's infantry qualified. You're supposed to
10 have an NCO that's intelligence qualified. You're supposed to have a petty officer that's
11 boat qualified. You're supposed to have a petty officer that's Naval intelligence
12 qualified. I said okay, that's six people. The colonel looked at me. He said, "But
13 sergeant, you fill five slots. The only thing that you can't fill is being the officer." I said,
14 "Colonel, do you realize I'm out there by myself?" He said, "Can't help it Sarge. That's
15 all we've got. We don't have the advisors to give you." It was just the situation I was
16 being put in, I started feeling uneasy. But the Dai Uy out there made me feel at home. I
17 got a surprise the second day there. The Dai Uy and I were talking. By this time I'd
18 already decided I'm not going to teach this man the war. He knows how to fight it. We
19 were sitting there talking in his office. All of a sudden there was this hell of a commotion
20 outside. Somebody was knocking on his door. He told them to come in and they said
21 something to him. He said, "Okay. Co Van, come on, come on. We've got your first job
22 for you." My first job, what am I going to do? My first job! They took me back to the
23 back of the compound where the families lived. Over there when the unit had a
24 compound, the families lived with them. That I didn't like, but that was their culture. I
25 found out there was a wife back there getting ready to have and give birth to a child. Dai
26 Uy told me this. I said, "What am I supposed to do?" "You're the Co Van, you're going
27 to deliver the baby." I said, "Dai Uy, I'm not a fucking doctor". He said, "Oh, you're Co
28 Van you can do anything." Where did this guy get this? What am I going to do? So, I
29 thought real quick. What can I do? I'm not a doctor. I don't know what to do for this
30 lady. I told him I said "Listen, I'm going to need my radio." So he sent one of our
31 enlisted men to get the radio and bring it down there for me. I got down there and this

1 woman was ready to deliver. They pulled her dress up and they said, "See?" Man, what
2 am I going to do? The guy had gotten there with the radio and I picked it up real quick
3 and I keyed up. I gave the call sign to the base camp, to the team headquarters. They
4 came on the radio and they said, "What do you need?" I said, "I need the medic on this
5 radio and I need him right now." "Oh, what's going on down there?" I said, "There's a
6 woman giving birth down here and they want me to deliver this baby." "That's your
7 responsibility." I said, "Hey motherfucker, I am not a doctor. I don't know anything
8 about this." "Okay, we'll go get the medic for you." So Sgt. Tom Woods was the medic.
9 Sergeant Woods comes on the radio. He said, "What's going on?" I said, "I'm down
10 here and I'm suppose to deliver a baby." He said, "Oh, yeah." I said, "What do I do?"
11 He said, "Well, I'll talk you through it." He started asking me questions. I got one of the
12 Vietnamese to hold the radio and key it for me. It was a breech baby. He told me how to
13 reach in. I said, "I'm supposed to stick my hand's in this lady's you know what?" He
14 says, "Yeah." He says, "Reach in there, wiggle your hands in there." I said, "My hands
15 aren't clean." He said, "It won't matter." He said, "Everything's dirty anyway." So, I
16 got a hold of the baby and I turned the baby and I said, "What do I do now?" She started
17 screaming and the baby started coming out. He said, "Go on instinct." I'd never been
18 married, never had a child. Never been at a birth. So, we got the baby out and he told me
19 how to tie off the umbilical cord and how to cut it and everything. He said, "Don't leave
20 because you've got to deliver the after birth." I said, "What's the after birth?" It's funny
21 now. I was scared shitless. Anyway we got the afterbirth out and we got the baby all
22 cleaned up and put the baby in her arms. All the Vietnamese were patting me on the
23 back. "Good job, Co Van. Great, great. You're a great man." I thought these people
24 don't know how close I came to peeing in my pants. That was one of my first
25 experiences. I found out after that I had to as far as the Dai Uy was concerned I had to
26 officiate at every birth, every death, every wedding, every engagement. Before an
27 engagement could take place I had to give my approval. I didn't understand why they
28 were putting me in this position. Because I was an NCO in the Army, but I guess it's
29 their culture. I did whatever I could, you know. That was kind of my introduction to
30 advisory duty was deliver a baby. It was kind of funny because I had not met the medic
31 before I went down there. I didn't know his name was Tom Woods until I guess it was

1 1973. I ran into this guy over at the VA (Veteran's Administration) hospital in Temple.
2 We got to talking about Vietnam and I told him I was on an advisory team and he told me
3 he was. He told me what team number. I said, "Well that was down in My Tho. That
4 was the team I was on." He said, "Well, what did you do?" I said, "I was the advisor to
5 the riverboat." He said, "Oh, you're that kid that had trouble with his first birth." I said,
6 "Was that you Tom?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Man, I'm glad you were there."

7 SM: How many births did you have when you were there?

8 JF: One a week I guess. There was a lot of them. But after that first one it
9 became common. I learned a lot about medicine there because my people would get hurt.
10 There was not a medic around. We had a Vietnamese medic, but he wasn't very well
11 trained. So, a lot of times I had to get on the radio and call Tom Wood. I said, "I've got
12 this guy down here, his leg's blown off. What do I do?" He said, "You know how to do a
13 tourniquet? Get something and put a stick in it." I said, "Yeah." I said, "I can do that."
14 He said, "Pour some sulfur powder on it. Call a helicopter to pick him up and send him
15 in here." That's what I did. So, that's how I learned medicine in the Army was doing
16 these things with guidance from Tom Wood.

17 SM: Just out of curiosity, when you were with USARV did you have much
18 enemy contact? Did you have to deal with casualties or wounded?

19 JF: Very little. We had very little enemy contact. Most of it was patrolling,
20 searching, not finding anything. Once or twice we got into a little scuffle, little firefight.
21 A couple of guys would get hit or something. The medic was there to take care of them,
22 put them on a helicopter and evacuate him out. For the amount of time I spent in
23 Vietnam I can probably tell you that I never spent more than four hours over that full
24 period of time, four or five hours in contact with the enemy. You would make contact
25 with the enemy. They would shoot at us. We'd shoot at them and they were gone. Or
26 they would shoot at us, we'd shoot at them, kill a couple of them and it was over. We
27 didn't get into any set battles where we had to defend a position or take a position. It was
28 small contacts. I think one time the biggest contact we ever ran into might have been a
29 twelve-man patrol.

30 SM: Where was that?

1 JF: That was down in Cai Lay district, which was there near My Tho. We had
2 taken our boats up. Cai Lay had gotten hit the night before by a probing attack. We took
3 our boats up on the river and anchored just below Cai Lay. We had landing craft. We
4 went up to see if we could find any of the VC. We ran into the VC patrol I guess about
5 twelve men maybe. That's what I was told because I didn't see them. I never saw them
6 that time. What happened was is that our point man came around a curve in the trail and
7 the VC were coming the other direction. It was so sudden it scared the crap out of
8 everybody. The VC ran that way and we went this way. There wasn't even a shot fired.
9 Pretty soon I said, "Why are we running?" The guy told Dai Uy, he says, "I was scared."
10 Dai Uy explained, he says, "It was a round a curve, weren't expecting anything." He
11 says, "We all got scared." He said, "Why did you run Co Van?" I said, "I was following
12 you." Not even a shot fired. We used to go out and set up ambushes at night. We would
13 go to a village where there was a lot of VC activity. We'd set up an ambush and nothing
14 would happen there, but something would happen over at this village. So, we'd go set up
15 at that village. Then they'd come back to this village. I got the feeling that the VC knew
16 where we were going to set up our ambushes. I really got that feeling. In all the time that
17 I was over there we never had an ambushed tripped, never. One night we got a jeep with
18 a starlight searchlight on it. It wasn't a searchlight that you turned on, but it was a black
19 light. We all had night scopes. We were driving up and down the river in our Mike boat,
20 which is noisy as hell at night. We took some fire form the shoreline and we returned it.
21 We went in. We found two bodies and we found a whole bunch of bloody trails, but that
22 was about the extent of that one. Honestly I don't think it lasted five minutes. We sure
23 did expend a lot of ammunition and we took a lot of bullet holes in our boat. We had one
24 guy hit on our boat, got hit in the shoulder. That was the only casualty we had, was one
25 man. He was just wounded. It wasn't even bad enough, we didn't have him evacuated.
26 We called the base camp, told them we were coming in. They met us down there with a
27 jeep and took him to the hospital. But when we examined the site, like I said we found
28 two dead and just some blood trails.

29 SM: How were they dressed?

30 JF: They were all in black pajamas.

31 SM: What kind of weapons?

1 JF: One of them had an SKS carbine and the other one had an AK-47.

2 SM: The whole time you were there, whether with USARV up near Cam Ranh
3 and Cam Loc or down in the delta, did you ever run across any regular Army North
4 Vietnamese soldiers, PAVNs (People's Army of Vietnam)?

5 JF: We ran into some down in the Delta.

6 SM: What time period was that about?

7 JF: That was just before I left in '68.

8 SM: So, not early, not in '66, '67?

9 JF: No. Uh-unh.

10 SM: It was in '68.

11 JF: What we were doing mostly, most of our patrols at night were on a river.
12 We'd take our boats. We had two LCVPs, which were the old Higgins boats mounted
13 with two .30 calibers. We'd put five or six troops in each one with M-16s or whatever
14 rifles we could have for the units. We had some BARs (browning automatic rifle). A
15 couple of the Vietnamese were big enough to handle the BARs. We had our big Mike
16 boat. It had two .50s and two .20 Mike-Mike (.20 millimeter) on it. It had a deck mortar,
17 .82 millimeter deck mortar. What we would do is we'd be running around during the
18 day, back and forth on the river. When it started to get dark, we would slip into a canal
19 and tie up on the side of the beach, along the bank line. We would put out a small patrol
20 on the bank to make sure that the VC didn't come in on the bank side and ambush us.
21 We'd sit on the river and I had a starlight scope. I would look for sampans coming down
22 the river at night. If they were on the river at night, they were targets. Our rules of
23 engagement were very simple on the river. If they were moving a boat at night, you
24 could open fire on them because they were considered—somebody bothering you?

25 SM: No.

26 JF: Okay.

27 SM: It was Mrs. Zumwalt. I was just nodding to her.

28 JF: The rule was that if they were on the river, you could open fire. It really
29 didn't seem fair because we had those .50 caliber machine guns and those sampans
30 weren't that big. You could really chew one of them up quick. Most all the time you'd
31 chew one up at night and the two guys would get away or else they'd be dead. When you

1 open up with two .50 cal's and about thirty-five M-16s on a little sampan, there's not
2 much chance there's going to be anything left. If there were weapons on it, they probably
3 slipped off and fell into the water and we weren't going to go diving for the damn things.
4 So, we didn't. One time I recall we were out and it was a big sampan that was coming
5 down the river. When we opened up on it, we got a secondary explosion. So we figured
6 it had ammunition on it. Most of the time it was just search, go look for him, see if we
7 could find him. In '68 the time that we ran into the North Vietnamese unit we were out
8 on a patrol. I'm trying to think. I don't have my book in here. We were in the southern
9 portion of the plain of reeds in Chau Duc. We were in the Chau Duc district. We were in
10 the northern portion of Chau Duc district. We had taken our boats up there. Ninth
11 Infantry Division had gone up there with us with some of their Monitors and their
12 Merrimacks and their troop boats. They didn't put any troops up shore. We took a patrol
13 in, Dai Uy and I and twenty, twenty-five people I guess. We went into the plain of reeds.
14 Now the plain of reeds was a swamp, literally a swamp. So we were maneuvering around
15 in there. We spotted five men in khaki uniforms. We knew they were NVA (North
16 Vietnamese Army) because we could tell by the uniform. We pulled back and we went
17 to the boats. I called in right away to the boats. I said, "I've got a contact." I gave them
18 the count that I had, which was five and the direction they were moving. The Monitors
19 and the Merrimacks went in and set up an ambush. Sure enough there was at least five
20 platoons behind those five men, five or six platoons. There was seventy or eighty people
21 walking down there. The Merrimacks set up their ambush. They called us and they say,
22 "Okay. The last man's past." So we moved our boats back up to the area where we
23 figured they had gone down. We were a covering force in case they turned around and
24 tried to get back through. They let loose. They killed them all in the first round of the
25 first volley of fire. Because those Monitors and Merrimacks they were armed with .20
26 Mike-Mikes (.20 millimeter). They were armed with .50 cal's. They were armed with
27 105-howitzers. The 105-howitzers were firing the beehive rounds. They just blew the
28 whole unit away. They took credit for all the kills because they had killed them. It didn't
29 matter to me. I remember one of the people that was in there was a paymaster because
30 they got a roster of five or six units in the Delta and the names of everybody in those
31 units. They used that intelligence to warn other people in other districts. They went out

1 searching for them and found a bunch of them, but that was the only time we ran into
2 NVAs.

3 SM: A couple of clarifying questions real quick. You did describe the Mike boat
4 and what were the other two boats?

5 JF: The LCVPs.

6 SM: I'm sorry, LC—?

7 JF: V-P.

8 SM: VP.

9 JF: Those were the old what they called the Higgins boats, the old landing craft.

10 SM: How many boats total were in this 17th Riverboat company?

11 JF: Three.

12 SM: Three boats. Just the Mike boat and the two LCVPs.

13 JF: Yeah.

14 SM: How many people, soldiers or sailors?

15 JF: We had fifty-five.

16 SM: Their contingent of family members, how large was the overall compound?

17 JF: How large was the compound?

18 SM: Yeah, to include the families and anybody else.

19 JF: I would say our compound was probably about seventy-five to a hundred
20 yards long and about fifty yards wide.

21 SM: How many people total?

22 JF: I never counted them. But just about everybody was married and everybody
23 had about three or four kids.

24 SM: So, a couple hundred?

25 JF: Oh, yeah, probably three, four hundred people on that compound.

26 SM: What was the relationship like between your Dai Uy and the people and the
27 soldiers that he worked with?

28 JF: He was a very strict disciplinarian. He made them tow the line. He didn't
29 book with any back talk or anything like that. I was afraid that his and my relationship
30 was going to be a little strange because see, I was an NCO and he was an officer. I felt
31 that he might resent. At first there was some resentment because they had not sent an

1 officer of equal rank. They still believe in the caste system. You belong in classes. I
2 was out of my class when I was talking to him. But after I'd been there a couple, three
3 months he and I started getting along just perfect. I didn't try to tell him how to do
4 anything. But when we went out, I would get the support that he needed. I could call in
5 gun ships. I could call in artillery. I could get it faster by my calling than what he could.
6 That helped. I was able to get medcaps, have you ever heard that phrase?

7 SM: Mm-hmm.

8 JF: Okay, medcaps. I was able to get medcaps to come out almost monthly to
9 help take care of the people on the compound with medical problems. I was able to get
10 them food. I was able to get them construction equipment. We needed construction
11 equipment. We needed to beef up our defenses. Our bunkers were bad, weren't very
12 secure. A lot of times we would go out, we had a Kit Carson scout with us. You've
13 heard that phrase too, okay. We hit some pretty big caches. We turned one cache where
14 there was like ten thousand pounds of rice. Of course an Army unit came out and they
15 scooped all the rice up and they took it. We would hit arms caches every once in a while.
16 With the arms caches all the automatic weapons we turned in, all the souvenir quality we
17 kept. The reason for that was is we could not get support for his unit out of the district—
18 what they call it—district chief because we didn't have the money to buy what he was
19 supposed to be giving us, which used to just piss me off. That's a whole new story. I
20 went to him several times and I said, "Look we need concrete. We need new M-16 rifles.
21 We need this, we need this." He told me, he said, "Well, put in the paperwork." I said,
22 "I've got the paperwork. We've put it in three times." He said, "Well, I don't know what
23 happened to it." Then Dai Uy would come back and tell me he'd say, "Don't bother
24 district chief unless you've got money to give him because he's not going to give us
25 anything unless we have money." That angered me because this was stuff that the son of
26 a bitch was given by the American government to give to his people, but he wouldn't let
27 it go unless they bought it from him. That's where the corruption came in. That part of
28 the hierarchy of the Vietnamese is what pissed me off is that. I did get my revenge
29 though. I used to take, when we'd hit an arms cache, I'd take the weapons that you could
30 keep for souvenirs and I bartered for the stuff we needed. I would go down to Dong
31 Tam, which was the 9th Infantry Division base camp. I became very good friends with

1 the port master. I could go in there and he'd say, "What do you got today Sarge"?" I'd
2 tell him, "Well, come down and take a look." He'd go down, he'd look. He said, "Oh,
3 shit I can fix you up. What do you need?" I said, "Well, we need a couple of palates of
4 concrete, a couple of palates of C-rations. We need some tin. We need some
5 ammunition." "Okay, I think I can handle that." We could get it. He'd take four or five,
6 six weapons, take them into his hooch. All of a sudden the front-end loaders would start
7 hauling shit in and putting it on our boats. We'd have to back our boat back down off the
8 beach because when you come in you hit the beach and you drop your ramp. Well, when
9 they start loading all this crap, you're going to start taking water. We would back down
10 until we could refloat the boat after they loaded everything we could get out. I was given
11 cases of M-16 rifles. Not just four or five, I mean cases, a couple of cases of them. I was
12 getting palates of concrete, the supreme mix concrete. I was getting palates of
13 ammunition that we needed. We needed ammunition for M-1s. We needed ammunition
14 for BARs. We needed stuff like that. He was giving it to us. I didn't ask him where it
15 came from. He didn't ask me where the weapons came from, but that's how we did it.
16 I'd always get one or two cases of C-rations. This was the thing that was really
17 fascinating about the Vietnamese. We could give every family a case of C-rations. They
18 could make a case of C-rations last a month, whereas a case of C-rations was good for
19 twelve days for an American soldier. But they could take a family of six and feed them
20 for a whole month on a case of C-rations. Which was fascinating to me that they could
21 make them last that long, but they could. One time we hit a good arms cache in Cai Be.
22 We'd been up in one of the canals. We'd made contact with a couple of VC. We chased
23 them, couldn't catch them. Anyway some of the guys started nosing around in one of the
24 dry spots there. We found some bunkers that hadn't been abandoned too long. We found
25 a bunker complex. One of the guys went down in the tunnel and he found an arms cache
26 with a lot of stuff in it, a lot of good, collectible stuff. We found some German World
27 War II Schmeisser sub machine guns. We found Lugers down in there. We found Red
28 Star pistols down in there, the .9 millimeter. We found SKS, CKS, AK-47s, all kinds of
29 explosives. We took out everything. Everything that we could use for training material
30 we put on a boat. Then we called helicopter in to pick everything up. Of course the
31 district chief got credit for this arms cache. It was huge. We had anti-aircraft. I think

1 there was .30 millimeter anti-aircraft, a couple of those aircraft guns in there on wheels.
2 We took a big arms cache, turned it in. It was all flown back to My Tho. They
3 inventoried everything. Well, we took all the good stuff. I went down to the RMK-BMJ
4 (Raymond International, Morrison-Knudsen, Brown and Root, and J.A. Jones)
5 compound, which was a civilian contractor. Those civilians just loved a lot of things,
6 especially weapons they could take home. I swapped—well I got the contractor to come
7 out to my compound. He built us four corner bunkers out of steel reinforced concrete.
8 All of our bunkers up until then had been made out of mud, river mud, which was pretty
9 hard stuff. After they built the bunkers we covered them up with mud again. But we put
10 a .50 cal in every corner bunker. Something we'd never had in our corner bunkers
11 before. We came across a four deuce mortar with a lot of high explosive rounds,
12 mounted that in our compound. That's where my infantry training came in. I knew how
13 to set my mortar in. I knew how to put out my aiming stakes. I knew how to build the
14 mortar pit. I knew how to set up perimeter defenses and things like this. So we were
15 able to improve on these things. We were also able to put out our—we got our concertina
16 wire put out. We mined the concertina wire in certain ways so that if they messed with
17 the wire we could get mine explosions. We set out foo gas containers. Thank God we
18 never had to use them at the compound, but we had them. That was where a lot of my
19 infantry training came in. We had been taught in infantry basic how to do a lot of this
20 stuff. I was able to help them with this. Before I got there they had two wires out and it
21 was very easy to get through the wire. Why they had never been hit, I don't know. The
22 Tet Offensive we got some fire, but most of the Tet Offensive was all concentrated in My
23 Tho. They kind of left us out there by ourselves because I guess they figured if we can
24 capture My Tho, we don't need him because it's just a small compound. That's how I
25 got back at the district chief. I told you I got my revenge on that son of a bitch. After I
26 got that four-deuce mortar in, one of my aiming stakes, I had sent four of my NCOs from
27 a boat company over to My Tho to the district headquarters compound. I had them pace
28 off where the warehouses were from the headquarters unit. Then we did some other
29 measurements. We had people walk back and forth to town, to the compound and pace it
30 off. The night of the Tet Offensive, damn we accidentally dropped eight rounds of four-

1 deuce mortar on the compound. Every warehouse got hit. (Laughs) You know what I
2 did don't you?

3 SM: Mm-hmm. Why don't you explain it?

4 JF: Explain it? Yeah. The son of a bitch wouldn't give it to us. He wanted us to
5 buy it. Right. I just figured I wasn't going to buy it and nobody else would if we blew
6 the shit out of it. So we did. We blew the shit out of the eight warehouses. Four deuce
7 mortar in every warehouse, set them on fire and fucked up everything in there. Dai Uy in
8 fact, after Tet was over Dai Uy and I walked over to the compound and stood there and
9 laughed. I think they think Charlie did that.

10 SM: Two questions about the district chief. Actually one question about the
11 district chief and another question about the VC. When you were calling in for fire
12 support, what kind of authorizations did you have to get through the district level in terms
13 of bringing in artillery and bringing in air strikes?

14 JF: I didn't go through that.

15 SM: Okay. You never did have to go through the district?

16 JF: Dai Uy had to. He had to go through his district to get permission to fire. I
17 had direct communication with the 84th Artillery out of Dong Tam. Let's just say that
18 they took home some nice souvenirs. I could call them up and I'd call in for a fire
19 mission, give them grid coordinates and they'd fire the mission. That's how I got my fire
20 missions.

21 SM: But officially you were supposed to go through as well?

22 JF: Yeah, officially I was. But officially it would have taken me four or five
23 hours to get the permission. I'm sure Charlie wasn't going to hang around for four or
24 five hours.

25 SM: No. No. I just wanted to show the dichotomy of the two.

26 JF: Yes.

27 SM: Because I was under the impression that that was the case that the district
28 chief was supposed to authorize all fire support missions.

29 JF: Yes. I was supposed to get the district chief to give me authorization for all
30 fire support. So I laid that on Dai-Uy's shoulders. Dai Uy would call the district, tell
31 them what we needed and how soon. "We're in contact. We need fire support or we

1 need helicopter support,” or something like that. I don’t know. I won’t pretend to know
2 what was going on. I did have one guy tell me that when a request came in they would
3 go over to a map, they would look at it, they would plot it on the map and then they
4 would search all intelligence reports to see if you were in contact with the VC before they
5 would fire the mission. Because the district advisor, senior district advisor for the
6 Vietnamese he had to account for every round of ammunition. So, he didn’t want to
7 waste it. While Dai Uy was calling them, I’d call the 84th Artillery regiment over at
8 Dong Tam. The thing I had to do is I had to authenticate that we were in contact. “Do
9 you have contact?” “Yes, I have contact.” “Has anybody been killed yet?” “No, but it’s
10 getting pretty hairy out.” “Oh, okay. We’ll fire one round for adjustment. We’ll put a
11 Willie Peter in there for adjustments. You adjust and give us the fire mission.”

12 SM: Did you ever bring in air support?

13 JF: Yeah.

14 SM: I mean not Medevac or anything like that, but U.S. air support?

15 JF: Oh, yeah. I called in. We were down at Chau Duc and the PF—RFPF (rough
16 puffs) compound was getting hit one night. We had a patrol in the area when they called
17 us and told us that they were getting hit. They only had like twenty-five people on this
18 outpost. They said they were taking fire from three sides. Our patrol came in from the
19 one side where they weren’t getting fire. They had no Americans with them. So, I got in
20 and Dai Uy was with us. Dai Uy talked to the commander. He said he needed some help
21 because he couldn’t hold them off, there were too many. So I got on the radio and I got a
22 hold of the Sea-Wolf Compound down at Vinh Long where they stayed. I gave them my
23 call sign. Well, as soon as I gave the Sea-Wolfs my call sign they knew who I was. They
24 launched aircraft right away. They put I think six aircraft in the air. They got on the horn
25 because they were in the air. They called in an Air Force FAC (forward air control). The
26 Air Force FAC came in, came upon the line. So they would come in, make their runs.
27 The Air Force FAC would bring in some Spads to make their runs. Contact was broken.
28 We waited maybe ten minutes and spooky came in. Spooky made a complete circle, 360
29 degrees twice around our compound, sprayed it. No more problems. We went out the
30 next morning. We found no bodies, no weapons. We found a few helmets, bloody
31 bandages and a lot of blood trails. So we know we hit something out there. I don’t think

1 that lasted more than half an hour that whole thing. From the time we got where they
2 were contacted until the time it was all over. I don't think it was half an hour. It's
3 amazing. The contacts were so short. If they could hit an outpost and overrun it in the
4 first two minutes they would take it. If the outpost was able to get support and resist if
5 they couldn't take the outpost like I said within a few minutes they would break off
6 contact and leave. That's why I'm saying I don't think my contact was over four hours.
7 All the time I was in Vietnam. It just doesn't seem like we had—we had a lot of
8 contacts, but they never lasted long.

9 SM: They weren't pitched campaigns or pitched battles.

10 JF: No, they were not pitched. We could never get them into continued
11 firefights. If we could have ever drawn the VC or the NVA into a fire fight where we had
12 them pinned down and they couldn't move and break contact, we could have brought a
13 lot of support in and probably done some damage, but they didn't fight like that.

14 SM: Along those lines when you left, what did you think? I mean here's a very
15 elusive enemy. Hard to pin him down and bring what firepower was available to bear on
16 them. How did you feel when you left? Did you feel like this was a winning war?

17 JF: You want me to answer your question? Read my shirt.

18 SM: (Reads shirt aloud) Old 'Nam vet. I don't know what happened, but when I
19 left we were winning.

20 JF: That's right. We had so little contact after the Tet Offensive they had no way
21 to really fight the war anymore. If you look at the history of the Tet Offensive,
22 everybody says we lost the Tet Offensive, which is not true. We won the Tet Offensive.
23 We killed and I am saying we, the armed forces that were there, the people that were
24 fighting on the ground, killed so many NVA and VC we almost destroyed the entire
25 infrastructure of the VC and the Delta. I don't know what the body count was from the
26 Tet Offensive. It was tremendous. The VC were practically wiped out. The NVA, it
27 took them, what, five, six more years, three, four five years before they were able to
28 really mount another major attack and that didn't come until '73. The infrastructure of
29 the Viet Cong, it took them that long to rebuild what damage had been done during the
30 '68 Tet Offensive. So when I left there was very, very little contact.

1 SM: But the other side of that coin is. Of course I think it's been recognized
2 fairly well that militarily, the U.S. military, the South Vietnamese military won the Tet
3 Offensive. The defeat came in the popular perception of what was happening especially
4 in the minds of Americans back on the home front. Of course in March of '68 after the
5 Tet Offensive was over Johnson made his announcement he was not going to seek re-
6 election. Psychologically these things had very powerful effects on how the U.S. could
7 continue prosecuting the war. When you left in October of '68 had you sensed anything
8 in terms of an effect on the U.S activity in Vietnam at that point?

9 JF: No. I had not. I knew we were still getting a lot of support. I knew we were
10 being very well supported. I wasn't privy to newspapers, radios and stuff like this to tell
11 me the news. We didn't have it.

12 SM: You didn't have a portable radio?

13 JF: No. I was too involved in doing things on the compound. So I didn't even
14 have a portable radio. The only time I got to listen to a radio was I think when I went to
15 the team headquarters. Most of that was all music being played. I got some news from
16 home. My father having been a combat veteran sent me very little news from home
17 because he did not want to interfere with my feelings. In other words, he wasn't trying to
18 sway me. I think the broadcast people are the ones that said we lost the Tet Offensive. I
19 blame the media for that. The reason for that is the Tan Son Nhut incident when the VC
20 hit the Tan Son Nhut. There was a mass grave out there that was humongous. But when
21 the media got out there a couple of days afterwards and they were taking pictures, they
22 were saying look at these poor civilians slaughtered. Of course they were dressed in
23 trousers and a shirt you know, everyday wear. They had no weapons with them so they
24 were civilians, right? That's what the media was reporting. They forgot to mention that
25 these were soldiers. Prior to their going out there, they had been stripped of all of their
26 military equipment. They failed to report that.

27 SM: The media had an affect?

28 JF: The media had a big affect of the American people. I had a chance later in
29 the years to view a lot of the stuff that was filmed and sent to the TV stations. I got some
30 of the stuff. The famous picture of the GI standing there with this lighter, lighting the
31 hooch, that was staged. That was a staged photographed. They had talked he GI into

1 setting fire to the hooch so they could picture it, but that's not the story they told. So, that
2 was one thing. Another famous picture involved General Schwarzkopf, but when he was
3 a major and he was an, I believe an airborne advisor in Vietnam. When the airplanes
4 went into napalm this village, the story was that this little girl running naked, this
5 innocent child. They had done everything they could to get those villagers out of that
6 village. They would not leave the village because they were communist sympathizers.
7 They knew as long as they were there that nobody could bring artillery on them so they
8 could protect the VC. Well, Major Schwarzkopf didn't see it that way. He called in
9 some air support. That's how that child got burned. It was 'cause her family, her parents
10 were VC sympathizers, but they blamed that on us.

11 SM: Well, speaking of VC, the VC, Viet Cong, you mentioned that it was very
12 rare. I guess maybe it didn't even happen at all that the VC stumbled into your ambushes
13 when you were with the 17th Riverboats.

14 JF: Yeah.

15 SM: Did you ever come to suspect that perhaps the reason for that was there
16 might have been a VC who had infiltrated the unit and was basically tipping them off?

17 JF: No.

18 SM: You never did that or—?

19 JF: Nobody else was getting contacts on their ambushes. We would have out—

20 SM: But again the same thing, the VC infiltration of all the units.

21 JF: The VC hit—every unit that had an ambush out? No. We went out ambush,
22 after ambush, after ambush, after ambush at night. We would setup in one area. Soon as
23 it got dark we'd pick up and sneak over here. So there was no way for an infiltrator to
24 put out that information that we had moved. We still couldn't catch them because they
25 just weren't running the patrols at night. Now on the rivers every once in a while at night
26 we would get a couple of three sampans or one or two or one sampans or something. But
27 the infiltration wasn't there. The heavy infiltration wasn't there. I suspect that the
28 infiltration was going on further up like in II corps and III corps where it wasn't going on
29 down in the Delta. They may have been coming across the border at Three Sisters there
30 in the Delta and going south down to the southern part because they had a lot of contact
31 down there. But over on the eastern side of the Delta, no. We didn't have that much

1 contact. I've got some maps in my car. I can show you some of the areas where we
2 operated. It's a big area. There were times—you couldn't make contact all the time.
3 Because they knew we were out there at night looking for them. So, why put yourself in
4 that position? I guess for them.

5 SM: How many miles was your compound from My Tho or from the advisors
6 shack, the advisors headquarters?

7 JF: From the advisor headquarters?

8 SM: Mm-hmm.

9 JF: Probably seven, eight miles.

10 SM: How far were you from the next advisor, your counterpart advisor?

11 JF: That was it.

12 SM: That was it.

13 JF: Yeah. That was it.

14 SM: How many other advisors were working in the area, around My Tho with
15 other teams?

16 JF: Okay. Let me think now. I'll have to show you the map. We had Chau Duc,
17 Cai Lay, Cai Be, Binh Tran, Chao Giao), My Tho, and one other one I think. We had
18 seven compounds and mine, which would have made eight compounds.

19 SM: Each one of those compounds had an American advisor?

20 JF: Yeah. The team headquarters in My Tho had probably about ten or twelve
21 people. The team at Cai Lay, Cai Be, and Chau Duc, I think had six or seven people. I
22 never got to see the other teams. We also had a team of armor advisors in My Tho with a
23 Vietnamese armored cav regiment that was there. I don't remember if they were part of
24 our team or another team. We also had the 9th ARVN (Army of the Republic of
25 Vietnam) Regiment or 9th ARVN Infantry Division there around in that area. They had
26 American advisors, but I don't know how many.

27 SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Fischer on April 20th, 2001.