

**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with John Pierce  
Conducted by Steve Maxner  
April 18, 2003  
Transcribed by Jennifer McIntyre**

1           Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. John  
2           Pierce on the eighteenth of April, 2003 at approximately 11:10. We are at the Sleep Inn  
3           conference room in Charlottesville, Virginia. Sir, first thanks for consenting to this  
4           interview. Why don't we start with a brief overview of your early life and if you would  
5           just tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

6           John Pierce: 8-5-46, was born in a hospital in Biddeford, Maine, and grew up in  
7           Kennebunk, Maine.

8           SM: Okay. What was like it growing up there?

9           JP: Typical '40s, '50s, I guess pretty small, low travel environment, pretty  
10          parochial thinking I guess, probably consistent with the time. I guess, worldly exposure  
11          was not super great, but probably in the liberal northeast better than other places. But  
12          lower middle class, my dad was a planter in the Portsmouth Naval shipyard. They built  
13          submarines and, pretty middle class, reasonably, fiscally conservative, mediocre social  
14          outlook, nothing extraordinary.

15          SM: What did your mom do?

16          JP: She was a housewife most of the time. Then she worked in guidance office in  
17          the high school and then as an assistant to the tax assessor, part time, but that was after I  
18          was grown. She was a stay at home mom when I was a kid, typical of the time. It was  
19          that transition time before women went to work as a full part of the workforce, but that  
20          started just as I was reaching junior manhood. Unremarkable growing up period, I guess.

21          SM: What was the population there about while you were growing up?

1           JP: Five or six thousand, something like that at the time. It's probably twelve,  
2 fifteen now. Not large but a fairly eclectic community, a lot of transient. It would  
3 quadruple in the summertime.

4           SM: Oh, okay for vacations.

5           JP: Vacation destination.

6           SM: It was right there on the coast.

7           JP: It was fairly affluent, probably a full third of the community was vacation  
8 homes, all of the ocean front you know. From the Walkers and the Bushes to you name it  
9 now. We got head of IBM (International Business Machines) and all this. It's that very  
10 broad range.

11          SM: Why don't we take a short break?

12          JP: Sure.

13          SM: Okay. Well, what would you do growing up for entertainment, for fun, you  
14 know what kinds of things? Would you do a lot of fishing or hunting?

15          JP: I did some fishing and hunting. That was kind of, fishing and hunting was a  
16 family background. I guess our, the bulk of our entertainment, we camped. A few times  
17 we didn't do a lot of traveling, within Maine we did some camping, but it was limited.

18          SM: Were you in the Boy Scouts or anything like that?

19          JP: Nope, no Boy Scouts. I started in the Cub Scouts, but I wasn't a particularly  
20 organized activity guy. I'm still not. As far as growing up as young adulthood I was a  
21 particular hell raiser and drank and chased women I guess was the sport of the day, but I  
22 guess that's about like a lot of people. But I enjoyed all things technical. Not in  
23 particular, I wasn't a remarkable student in high school or anything like that, but I did  
24 okay I guess. I started in a technical school after high school, lasted about three months  
25 in an oceanography program. That was interesting, but we ended up being kind of servile  
26 kids to this technical school and maintaining their boat. I ended up paying tuition and I  
27 was out chipping paint on their anchor chain in November weather and I decided that  
28 wasn't the way I wanted to spend my money. So I bailed out of there. I had about a  
29 hundred bucks in my pocket and went to California and spent the best part of a year there  
30 I guess.

31          SM: Well, what attracted you to oceanography?

1           JP: I don't know, just the technical interest of—I had a little bit of a technical  
2 bent, not particularly biological, but a little technical bent. I was a scuba diver, certified  
3 scuba diver. Nothing in particular, evidently it wasn't too strong.

4           SM: Well, it was strong enough to draw you to that school.

5           JP: It started me at the beginning. I just, I guess I was—

6           SM: What did they promise you in terms of the school? What was the purpose of  
7 going to school there? I mean obviously for them it was—

8           JP: Well, an associates degree in oceanography, but I really don't know and I  
9 think that's part of the reason. I wasn't—I didn't have any idea what and to this day like  
10 I said I'm in my fifth career. Every one of them have been successful to one degree or  
11 another and I'm happy with it, but I'm not happy being in any one situation. I think the  
12 reason I went to the technical school is the college was too big and too broad for me to  
13 carve down at the time. The technical school was easier and more discreet, ability to  
14 manage it better. Even then when I got there, there wasn't much there I didn't think. So I  
15 did the California thing and we were out there for a year or so, working restaurants. Did  
16 quite well.

17          SM: That's quite a change, Maine to California.

18          JP: Yeah, it was quite a change, San Fernando Valley of all places.

19          SM: Wow. What made you decide to jump on a train, plane, automobile,  
20 whatever it was?

21          JP: Bus. (Laughs)

22          SM: Bus, and get—

23          JP: A friend of mine had gone out there and was working in a hospital out there.  
24 I went out and joined him and we just partied and played. He got drafted when we came  
25 back and then I got drafted within a few months of that. I didn't like the sound of that so  
26 I went to the local recruiting office and said, "What else is there?" They said "You want  
27 to take this ARWAB (Army Rotary Wing Aptitude Battery) test," and that was the rotary  
28 wing aviator test. I said, "Sure," and I took it. They said, "You're off to flight school."

29          SM: Wow. Now, so you graduated probably in '64.

30          JP: '64, '64. This was in '66 I guess.

1           SM: In high school, in school generally what were your favorite subjects? I  
2 know you mentioned technical stuff but—

3           JP: I didn't, I don't think I had any favorite subjects at the time. I was pretty  
4 much rebelled against everything.

5           SM: Okay. Did you play sports?

6           JP: Yeah, I played sports, football and track. I played in the band, played a  
7 trombone for a while until high school and then that conflicted with the sports and that  
8 was the end of that. Decent amount, played the all-state band and all those silly little  
9 things, but I enjoyed that. But education wasn't on the forefront at the time. There's so  
10 many other things going on. I was a C student, I think because of lack of interest more  
11 than capacity. Eventually after I got out of the service I went to college and I got my  
12 undergraduate degree in a year with tripling up in each semester. I graduated second in  
13 my class. So I did fairly well there but it was—the interest was there and the attention  
14 and the focus at the time you know was after that. It was just a total lack of interest in  
15 high school. I think math and the sciences, statistical functioning, systems—systems  
16 engineer now is part of one thing I do, is part of a career, but process thinking is kind of  
17 my way up right now.

18          SM: Okay. Well, what was it like growing up in Kennebunk with, during the  
19 Cold War and especially with the Navy producing submarines there? Was it an ever  
20 present atmosphere? Where you guys, your city, your town is right there on the forefront  
21 of producing war material to fight against the communists.

22          JP: I don't think that was, I don't think understanding in that way was it. It was a  
23 duck and cover was the big thing you know.

24          SM: Okay, I was going to day duck and cover drills.

25          JP: Yes, duck and cover drills was about the only function and understanding the  
26 relationship of that, the geopolitics was, there was no connection for me anyway. I think  
27 just before I went in the service I was starting to get an understanding of we're more a  
28 country of ideas and concepts than things and places. I don't think I understood that well  
29 at all when I was young. Even you know in Vietnam and during Vietnam the geopolitics  
30 of it, very little understanding of that.

1           SM: Well, how aware were you of major events, Cold War events like the Cuban  
2 Missile Crisis, October '62?

3           JP: Aware of that, sure, aware of that, fairly good understanding what it was all  
4 about, understood the communist threat to some degree, but not a sophisticated, deep  
5 understanding, basic understanding what it was but nothing deep.

6           SM: Well, stuff in the newspaper, stuff on the news, was this dinner conversation  
7 in your family very much?

8           JP: No, I don't think so. I think that's a big turnaround compared to today. I'm  
9 totally immersed in that kind of thing today, wasn't then. I don't know if it was the  
10 quality or family understanding of the importance it was or of just in general in that area,  
11 I don't think it was, basic existence and survival was more paramount than I think than  
12 understanding the broader context of geopolitical conditions. I think it was that kind of  
13 a—the whole community was a lower middle class community. Like I said the travel  
14 was limited. I don't think we were as diverse as we are today. I mean it's been a huge  
15 change in just the past twenty-five to thirty years, even my own understanding of things. I  
16 don't think it was there then. Probably again to my lack of interest in education and the  
17 history of it, that's kind of hard to explain that to a history major. I see the value in  
18 history now, much that I didn't at the time, but its been a practical understanding as  
19 opposed to theoretical understanding at the time. So that's with that one.

20           SM: How did the assassination and death of President Kennedy affect your  
21 community, your school, you and your family?

22           JP: Well, that was pretty traumatic. Kennedy was the young president and  
23 everybody was—it was our, our president kind of thing. I remember that very  
24 specifically when I heard about it standing on the steps of the high school. It was quite a  
25 shock. But I think it was more of a—instead of an intellectual reasoning understanding,  
26 it was more of a gut level of context we took it on. That was a tough situation, but since  
27 then I've had time to reflect on it, not as tough as I thought it was at the time. It was  
28 difficult but and more emotional then, but looking back on it still a very difficult and  
29 tragic situation, but I don't think he's quite the figure now that he was then by any means.  
30 So it's quite a change.

1 SM: Did he reflect or did you have the feeling growing up that he reflected your  
2 generation and the idealism of the youthful generation of Americans? Did you feel that  
3 way towards him? You said he was our president.

4 JP: I guess that was it, more, yeah a more pragmatic view, but then again coming  
5 from Eisenhower to Kennedy, a drastic turnaround, but also the more I've read about  
6 Eisenhower, he did some tremendously innovative things that you wouldn't imagine  
7 looking at the surface of it. Whereas Kennedy looking at the surface, you think all these  
8 wonderful things, but the depth wasn't there. So it takes times and maturity I guess to  
9 look at both of those people in the appropriate context. But of course Kennedy at the  
10 time was an emotional, young and time probably improves the view a little bit, gives you  
11 some perspective. He was definitely the—you thought a pragmatic view, but maybe that  
12 wasn't all the case.

13 SM: Well, what did your folks think when you graduated high school and made  
14 the decision to jump out to California? How did that go over with the family?

15 JP: Pretty turbulent up there. I don't think by that time I could do anything else  
16 to surprise them. I'd done some wild and crazy things, but nothing exceptional I mean.

17 SM: Typical young stuff.

18 JP: Typical young stuff, yeah, nothing. I wasn't a hoodlum or anything, but I just  
19 did about everything I could to defy and defeat parental oversight, but I guess they  
20 figured I could sow my oats the way I wanted. They weren't happy with it by any means,  
21 but they let it go. They didn't have much choice either. (Laughs)

22 SM: Yeah, you're eighteen, right.

23 JP: Yeah, that's it, eighteen and clueless I guess is what it was, but it was part of  
24 the fabric, you know?

25 SM: Yes, sir. Just after you graduated high school, I'm assuming that you  
26 probably graduated in the June/July time frame in '64, of course August '64 you got the  
27 Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson's decision to escalate American involvement in the war.  
28 This is probably just as you're getting ready to start the oceanography program.

29 JP: Yep.

30 SM: How much did that affect you?

31 JP: None whatsoever.

1 SM: Did it blip on your radar screen at all?

2 JP: Gulf of Tonkin was out here somewhere. I understood the overview of what  
3 was going on, the incident itself, although I don't think there's a real clear understanding  
4 of that even today. So that's still way out of whack. It was probably as confusing then as  
5 it is now. Thirty years later we can't understand the actual—as a matter of fact I don't  
6 even think we have the actually transcripts of what the government understands yet.

7 SM: No, some of it has not been released.

8 JP: It didn't have much impact on me at the time, very little. I understood what  
9 was going on, but again true political machinations of any kind did not particularly strike  
10 at my center the way they do now. But I also think that those kind of things didn't  
11 percolate through society with the speed, rapidity they do today just because of  
12 information and how it affects people. I don't think information affected people and  
13 became relevant in their own personal contacts the way it does now. A lot of people it  
14 still doesn't, but to me today things that happened yesterday impact immediately today.  
15 You got it. That's it. Everything is on the network. You've got to believe it.

16 SM: Immediacy of communication.

17 JP: Immediacy of communication, absolutely and immediacy of impact and  
18 relevance. We communicate much better and things are articulated to the extent that we  
19 understand their impact on our lives quite rapidly today. That was—I don't know how  
20 many orders of magnitude back you can push it, but thirty years ago it was several orders  
21 of magnitude back, at least in my case anyway. I'm sure there are other people had more  
22 vision and more than me, but it wasn't on my radar screen.

23 SM: Well, certainly when you graduated—well, actually it would have been your  
24 senior year of high school some time you would have registered with selective service.  
25 The draft would have been—

26 JP: I did do that. There was quite a bit of contention about registering. I guess, I  
27 think it was that summer. I can't remember. I worked in the, it was called the Shaman  
28 Inn, in Kennebunk Quarters, quite a well known resort at the time with a couple of other  
29 folks. Some of them were adamant about they wouldn't register for selective service. I  
30 never did figure out their reasoning. A lot of them claimed political understanding, I  
31 think a lot of them were just basically afraid and that's not a bad thing either. But I think

1 some had true beliefs. I just don't know what they derived it from. I had a basic, you  
2 know it's my part to do and I was going to do it kind of thing. There wasn't any real  
3 super pressing conviction other than it was part of the concept was the contribution in  
4 that sense. I wasn't going to walk away from it. That was the idea.

5 SM: Did you have many close family members that had served in the military,  
6 World War II?

7 JP: My dad was an Air Force pilot in World War II, but that was it.

8 SM: Did he talk very much about his experiences, and what theater, which  
9 theater?

10 JP: He never went anywhere. He broke his leg on a horse, somewhere in  
11 Oklahoma I think it was and ended up being a flight school instructor. So he never went  
12 overseas.

13 SM: Wow.

14 JP: Just as he was about the get deployed to go.

15 SM: My goodness. Where was he going to be deployed? Do you know?

16 JP: I don't know, no idea, no, no idea.

17 SM: So your decision to become an aviator though was not necessarily inspired  
18 by that?

19 JP: Not particularly. I think the decision to become an aviator was anything but  
20 walking with a pack on my back was the idea. I said, "What else I can do?" and they  
21 said, "How'd you like to go to flight school?" and I said, "You're damn right I would."  
22 I'm a little bit of a lazy individual.

23 SM: Pragmatic.

24 JP: I guess. Well, yeah, flying's better than walking any day no matter what you  
25 do. So that's why I took that ARWAB test.

26 SM: This was out—you did that out in California, is that or—?

27 JP: No, I did it in Maine. I'd come back.

28 SM: Oh, you'd come back to Maine.

29 JP: When my friend got drafted we came back and he got inducted. Then I  
30 worked here for another—timing is months here and there—for some period of time.  
31 Then I got my draft notice and went and did the ARWAB thing.



1 SM: And this is 1966?

2 JP: 1966, yeah. Cause '66 to '67 was basic and flight school and then '67, '68  
3 was Vietnam.

4 SM: Okay. How much were you keeping track of Vietnam at this point? You  
5 know especially with the potential of being drafted. Were you paying very much  
6 attention?

7 JP: Reasonably aware I guess of what was going on. It was just starting to  
8 become a newsworthy thing I think in '66. When was it we changed in the advisory  
9 capacity? About '66 wasn't it? '65, '66, it came actually hot involved.

10 SM: LBJ really started turning up the heat in late '64, '65.

11 JP: Right. That's when it started becoming newsworthy and then of course you  
12 had the early Ia Drangs and those kinds of things in '66. I was aware then that it was  
13 more than a consultative action. So I wasn't going in totally unknown or anything like  
14 that. There was a lot of discussion about it, starting even then before I went in. Like I  
15 said several friends had bailed and taken off for Canada, guys three or four years younger  
16 than me.

17 RV: Really?

18 JP: Yeah, my brother's age. They went to Canada when they were sixteen or  
19 seventeen.

20 SM: Because of the war?

21 JP: Yeah.

22 SM: Whoa.

23 JP: Like I said, that guy I worked with, he was totally, totally against it. I never  
24 did figure that out. This one particular guy and I'd worked together for a year or so,  
25 drank and raised hell and chased women and we were kind of inseparable for a year or  
26 two. Then that thing came directly between us. It was just like night and day. I just  
27 couldn't walk away from it and he couldn't stand the thought of being involved. To this  
28 day I've seen him a few times and just doesn't even speak or anything, totally different.  
29 Hey, I guess that's his choice. I don't regret mine.

30 RV: Now, did he go to Canada?

1           JP: I don't know what he did. He got somehow on some kind of, he got married  
2 or some kind of a deferment and he skulked under the bar somehow. He ended up being  
3 a plumber's helper and still is I guess, but strange turnabout. He seems to have paid a  
4 price just to—when I run into him I think poor guy I feel like, he's just never gone  
5 anywhere economically or anything else. I don't know if that was a turning point or  
6 what, but I felt bad for that.

7           SM: Choices we make.

8           JP: Choices we make. Yeah, I guess.

9           SM: What was your family's position on the war? Were they supportive of  
10 President Johnson's decisions? Do you know, do you remember?

11          JP: I guess so, but I don't, and again I feel—I may have referred to this earlier,  
12 but I don't think my family was wordily or pushed my brother and I to be that way.  
13 That's one thing I miss as part of the family I think. They were very parochial, local, not  
14 risk—risk averse I guess would be the thing.

15          SM: They were risk averse?

16          JP: Risk averse I think, not in the war sense but in just a personal sense, its like  
17 not, not in a major way. I guess my dad was more of a risk taker, but my mom was very  
18 conservative and held back. I think that's a tone of, I don't want to say narrow  
19 mindedness, but was unhelpful in the growing up sense. I wish we'd have been pushed to  
20 be broader thinking. I've tried to do that more later in life, but it was a hindrance  
21 growing up. But as far as their views on the war I think they were accepting, not pro or  
22 con, but accepting because it was a leadership thing. I think probably that was the  
23 mentality, you know political leaders and doctors know all. That was the mentality of the  
24 time and the mindset. I think my folks just bought right into that and are to this day. I  
25 don't think they respect their own opinions or respect their ability to understand and go  
26 out and learn and form a critical opinion of political positions or the doctor's opinion or  
27 not. I think they accept those kind of leadership positions. I think that's changing  
28 drastically now and we all, or a lot of us do, but I think that will die out with generations  
29 but it hasn't yet, somewhat there. But as far as that war went, they were supportive of me  
30 and what my choice was because I think they were more supportive of me than in a war  
31 situation of any kind. I don't think they had an understanding of the war and what it was

1 about. My mother asked me today. She said, “What happened when you went there?  
2 What was that all about?” I said, “Ma, I just,” I can’t explain to her. We had a  
3 discussion the over night, they were over you know and I said, “God, you’re so liberal.”  
4 She’s a registered Republican, but thinks it’s a travesty to think that anybody would  
5 invest in their own, take social security money and invest it in the stock market or any of  
6 those alternative programs. I said, “Ma, you’re so damn liberal.” “Liberal, I’m a  
7 conservative.” I said, “You’re conservative with a nickel, but for god’s sake, it’s a damn  
8 liberal, unbelievable.” She said, “Well, I don’t understand.” I said, “No, you don’t.  
9 That’s just the problem.” It’s funny, but it’s not. It’s funny and it’s sad too, but it’s just  
10 the way it is. You’re not going to change those kind of things, eighty year old people. I  
11 think that’s the—a lot of political confusion went on there. But I think basic support for  
12 country and leadership, but I don’t think with a good understanding of it is probably the  
13 reason.

14 SM: Well, after you learned that you were going to be able to go to flight school,  
15 how much time did you have left to prepare yourself, you know do whatever you wanted  
16 to do before leaving for the Army? Do you remember?

17 JP: No.

18 SM: Probably not very much time.

19 JP: A month or so, maybe, thirty, sixty days maybe.

20 SM: Where did you go to basic training?

21 JP: Ft. Polk, Louisiana.

22 SM: What was your introduction into the military like? Because as you said,  
23 you, like, you were a free spirit. So here you go from free spirit to—

24 JP: Yes, but I wasn’t—I didn’t find my free spirit damped by the military at all. I  
25 mean it was—I think the military for me was kind of a game. I didn’t—the regimen was  
26 there, but it really wasn’t because it was all bullshit. It was you did the thing, you played  
27 the game, you got by. It wasn’t all that bad. I think they used to refer to Ft. Polk as the  
28 place if they were going to stick an enema in the world they’d put it in Louisiana. It was  
29 very different as the real low-class military town, pretty sorry place, but the basic training  
30 was fine. I didn’t have any problem with that. I was surprised that I didn’t I guess

1 maybe like you said the free spirit thing, but I wasn't your hadash free spirit type, but I  
2 didn't have any—I got along relay fine in the military, in basic.

3 SM: What was the most challenging part of basic training for you? Was there  
4 anything challenging?

5 JP: I don't think there was anything real challenging at all. I think it was—

6 SM: You didn't have any problems with marksmanship or PT (physical training)  
7 or anything like that?

8 JP: No, it was just all of that. God, I was eighteen years old, tough as a nail.  
9 Nothing was any problem. Everything worked out I guess.

10 SM: What was the make up of your class?

11 JP: Very diverse. I think that's probably when I started getting somewhat bit  
12 better exposure to breadth of people and cultural breadth of the U.S. from—we had a guy  
13 that came to basic on his white mule. He lived right there in Louisiana, and tied the damn  
14 thing up there. It was, this damn white mule was tied up right there in Leesville. Then  
15 we had guys from the Midwest and California. It was a good, broad cross-section of  
16 folks. But again I think started to note it was mostly low mid-class bunch of guys that  
17 got drafted. It wasn't—there weren't a lot of guys from Phillip's Saxoda there. (Laughs)  
18 That was noticeable.

19 SM: Were they all draftees or were some of them, like you that were volunteers?

20 JP: Yeah, there were a few volunteers. I mean I was a draftee by proxy.

21 SM: Right, but.

22 JP: No, I volunteered, yeah.

23 SM: I think that's an interesting point. Of course a lot of the people that did  
24 volunteer did so more to have more control over their destiny in the military, control over  
25 what they did.

26 JP: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

27 SM: Did you find that that was the case with others guys in your class in basic?

28 JP: Oh, well I think a lot of guys in my flight school were similar. They were  
29 trying to control their destiny as opposed to—it wasn't whether they went or not, it was  
30 how they went about it. It was the execution more than the process. They didn't have  
31 much choice in the process, but how they executed it was—there were some better

1 choices you know. I guess that was the situation. But there were a lot of—I would say  
2 the predominant, ninety plus percent were either draftees or volunteers, but they weren't  
3 controlling their destiny. They were just there. There was not a lot of thought given as  
4 far as controlling their destiny you know.

5 SM: Well, and of course some guys chose to accept the draft notice as opposed to  
6 volunteering because you had to incur additional time then, correct?

7 JP: I don't remember, probably did. I never gave it a thought. Any time flying is  
8 better than anytime walking. (Both laugh)

9 SM: True, true. But when you went, when you accepted warrant officer and  
10 flight training, what was your obligation, like three years?

11 JP: I think it was a couple years, two or three years, three years maybe. I don't  
12 remember. I was—

13 SM: Okay.

14 JP: It may have been something initially. I think it was a couple of years. We  
15 went to flight school and washed, you were only a couple year obligation and if you got  
16 the warrant it was three years on top of that or something, but I'm not sure of the exact  
17 timing. It was kind of irrelevant as far as I was concerned because—

18 SM: You were going to get to fly.

19 JP: I was going to get to fly. That was as interesting as anything and I hadn't,  
20 nothing than a war or anything else I was going to fly a helicopter. That was high time  
21 for me, as far as I was concerned, yeah. Sure.

22 SM: Absolutely. Now when you were going through basic in '66, how much  
23 were your instructors talking about Vietnam? Were they incorporating it very much in  
24 the training?

25 JP: Oh, I guess there was some—a couple of them had been there. I don't know  
26 if—I think it was an introductory thing. Just before we went to flight school a couple  
27 warrant officers had talked to us. Some of the DIs (drill instructor) in basic had been, but  
28 it wasn't a great deal. Of course the basic was oriented towards Vietnam and that style of  
29 warfare I guess. I didn't think the—like I said basic was pretty easy. It wasn't  
30 anything—lowest common denominator stuff, keep your head down, your ass down and  
31 then everything. The instruction and the caliber people was not particularly high. We

1 had—I had a particularly good DI that was in charge of my platoon or squad or whatever  
2 it is. In Langston, who I later picked up, Medevacced in Vietnam with his stomach all  
3 opened up, of all things. I looked in the back and it was Sergeant Langston there, a very  
4 nice guy. As a matter of fact, hey would get out of basic or something like on stains and  
5 pants. I stayed at his house and his wife did my clothes up for me, just a real super guy  
6 and very nice. Then we had some terrifically sadistic assholes that were there too, which  
7 I never did figure that out. I guess its just the combination. That was just basic, but it  
8 was—

9 SM: How sadistic, how mean?

10 JP: Brutal sadistic.

11 SM: Really?

12 JP: Yeah, absolutely beat on the guys physically, brutalized them, made them  
13 sleep under the barracks in the dirt at night kind of stuff. I mean physically sadistic and  
14 brutal. Langston was totally opposite. I just happened to be lucky and ended up in his  
15 squad as opposed to this other guy. White redneck as a matter of fact, and Langston was  
16 a black guy and the nicest guy you could imagine.

17 SM: What kind of infraction would result in that kind of treatment, you know  
18 what, why?

19 JP: Just about anything. The guy was unstable I think is what it was. It was  
20 nothing would set him off. It wasn't any kind of an infraction. It was just the way you  
21 looked at him that day. I think he was, he was a vet, Vietnam—he'd been to Vietnam. I  
22 think they took him out of there at some point in the basic training for that reason,  
23 instability, but he was the worst and Langston was the best but the whole range of types  
24 there. But again that was the only thing that made life difficult in the basic situation. It  
25 wasn't bad at all.

26 SM: What did you enjoy most about the training? Was there anything in  
27 particular you liked?

28 JP: No, it wasn't—there was nothing. It was just an X month period you had to  
29 get through and do all the—through the checklist. It wasn't interesting. It wasn't bad, it  
30 just was you know.

1 SM: When you graduated from basic and went on to your initial flight, was that  
2 at Ft. Walters? Where was that?

3 JP: Yeah, Ft. Walters in Texas, right, yeah.

4 SM: In Texas.

5 JP: '67, 3, I think it was, I'm not sure. One of the threes, A, B, C, something.

6 SM: What was that transition like? Because you're immediately promoted after  
7 basic to like E-5 or E-6 or something?

8 JP: E-5 and there was no rank. It was just a pay grade only. There was no rank  
9 with it. It was just you were WOC, warrant officer candidate and that was—you got the  
10 initial pay grade just to help you maintain some standard of living. That was good. I  
11 truly enjoyed that. I guess the officer silliness was all you know just typical chicken shit,  
12 but the flight school was interesting. I had, about a sixty year old guy, civilian as an  
13 instructor, very capable guy, very laid back, cool. I was the second guy in the class to  
14 solo in about, I don't know, very few hours. I really enjoyed that. It was a lot of fun.  
15 We did—

16 SM: What were you trained in?

17 JP: It was a TH-55 at Ft. Walters. I don't know how many hours we got there.

18 SM: Well, what was the most challenging part of your initial flight training,  
19 primary flight?

20 JP: I guess the flying home, learning to hover was about the most—

21 SM: Was it?

22 JP: Yeah. Of course flying in straight and level standard flight, you're not—  
23 there's not a lot of coordination required, but hovering you're all three axis and you're  
24 working all the time, both feet and both hands and coordinating the throttle with power  
25 and motor RPM (revolutions per minute) was probably the most difficult thing, but once  
26 you got it, it's one of those things that clicks. Then you're in there. Of course turbines  
27 are a lot easier to fly and all automatic throttle correlation. Even today in recip and like  
28 a—oh, what's the R-22? It's that little recip helicopter made in California, not  
29 RotorWay, but it has a light combing. It has an exceptional throttle correlator on it. It's  
30 almost like a turbine to operate. You don't have to do any throttle correlation. It's all  
31 automatic with a recip engine, which is surprising.

1 SM: Wow, that is.

2 JP: But that's the, that was the most difficult thing as far as learning to fly I think.  
3 Then after that it's just fine tuning the skills, maintaining altitude and air speed and those  
4 finer motor skills so you don't vary off from the perimeters you want to stay at. But once  
5 the gross things are overcome fine tuning those is not difficult. It's just time, seat time to  
6 do it. I guess the hovering and the staying over a spot in the ground was a thrill at first,  
7 because you're all over the place. But having a guy that was sitting over there and laid  
8 back and giving you room to get out of control and pull it back together was a nice thing  
9 to have.

10 SM: Now, contrast that with some of the other instructors that were there that  
11 your classmates worked with. Was there a lot of difference between the instructors and  
12 the attitude and that?

13 JP: Oh, I think so. The same range as it was in basic training DIs. There were  
14 people that were hyper-nervous. I just happened to get, another time I got a lucky time I  
15 got a guy that was laid back and let you make your mistakes and give you room to correct  
16 them in addition to making the mistake. When you get out of control, he didn't just grab  
17 it away and say do it like this. He was comfortable enough with his ability to recover a  
18 situation that he let me get way far out of shape for me, but it was still well within his  
19 ability to correct. I found that instructive as I went on to do the same thing later on, but I  
20 think that was valuable for a student to be able to recognize. You need those far winging  
21 errors to recognize your making an error and then be able to pull it back because if you  
22 don't, you don't get far enough into a mistake to know what you've done wrong, you  
23 never know how to correct it. So, that was an instructive ability. There were—

24 SM: What was his experience?

25 JP: I don't remember. I don't remember. He was a multi-talented aviator, fixed  
26 and rotary wing and several thousand hours time and was flying as a civilian instructor,  
27 quite a nice guy. It was a very relatively short time I had him. I don't even remember his  
28 name or any of those kinds of things, but I remember the attitude and the comfort I flew  
29 with him. So that was good.

30 SM: The lessons he passed on to you?



1           JP: At least that lesson, I think that was a well—I think the other—most of flying  
2 is not an intellectual pursuit, the way that lesson was, but most of it's pretty technical.  
3 You can learn out of book. It's those kind of lessons that you can't. There's a little more  
4 depth there than just the surface thinking of it. That was, I found valuable with him.  
5 From then on through there and Rucker too and the rest of the people were unremarkable.  
6 I don't even remember any of the other people but him I do.

7           SM: Well, when you were going through your primary flight and you mentioned  
8 that some of the stuff was I guess basic officer harassment stuff, warrant officer candidate  
9 harassment.

10          JP: Oh, just, (mumbles) well, I don't know if it's harassment, I guess it's just part  
11 of the program. It wasn't, they just—

12          SM: They can't make it too easy for you. They got to give you some—

13          JP: No, they've got to give you something to keep you occupied I guess as much  
14 as anything, but there wasn't—

15          SM: How long did that last? Was it the whole time you were there or did they  
16 slowly ease up on you as you were getting through flight training?

17          JP: I guess they eased up or you learned how to game it better. That was the  
18 whole thing. I think the whole military was that way as far as I was concerned. It was a  
19 gamesmanship thing. You were gaming the system as opposed to—I'm going to step out  
20 of my thing and step into my management-consulting role. Instead of being a part of a  
21 system that was performance oriented and a culture that was directed that way, it had too  
22 much structure and hierarchy, just the same way that business and management are  
23 overcoming today with flattening the organization. I think the military has done that  
24 quite well, flattened it and taken out a lot of the hierarchy and the BS that probably  
25 contributed a lot to the whole failure of the military, you know, Vietnam and just post-  
26 Vietnam when they redid it so to speak. I think they'd taken a lot of that out of it and a  
27 lot of that silliness and function of organization that was missing was probably put in.  
28 They took a lot of the fluff and extraneous crap out of it. I think that was one of the  
29 reasons I got out too, after, when I did. I had about seven years. It was just, I thought,  
30 poor leadership and poor. It just wasn't a good structure, didn't appear to me at the time.  
31 I think it was because it was so easy to game. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe I was just

1 being—I didn't recognize I was just being—I was good cannon fodder for helicopter  
2 pilots which were a disposable commodity probably, but finding it so easy to game the  
3 thing. It was technically good, and basically kept your mouth shut and didn't slap  
4 anybody around. You went on your way and that was easy enough. You got to do  
5 whatever the hell you wanted to do. You went out Saturday night and had a good time  
6 and flew during the day. So life is good. What's wrong with that? But as far as the  
7 officer and that stuff, I guess that was my free spirit overcoming again. I think there  
8 could have been a—and I think it has changed drastically since. There is a lot better  
9 sense of mission. When they put an aviation branch into the Army was a good thing. I  
10 think they've done a lot of things since that are good, but I think we were in—when you  
11 move from a World War II, Korea, Cold War into an air mobile thing in the span of time  
12 that those things happened, there was a lot of things left undone and not well done. So  
13 that was—of course hindsight's wonderful, but even at the time it seemed like there were  
14 a lot of gaps. They were doing a lot of that stuff just to keep time full while you weren't  
15 flying. I mean, you just had to do something. So you polish and spit and do all this stuff,  
16 but it was just time filler more than productive time. I think they could have done—I  
17 think they could have done a lot more quality class work in geopolitics, understanding the  
18 world and having us understand it better. I think that would have been much more  
19 beneficial in some of the foolishness that we were objected to, subjected to. But it wasn't  
20 there. It was a little bit of, very little bit about it, but it wasn't done from anybody with  
21 any in depth knowledge. I mean, whoever got tapped on the shoulder, said you're going  
22 to instruct this tomorrow. It wasn't particularly well-informed instruction I guess at the  
23 time.

24 SM: Were there any accidents while you were there?

25 JP: I'm sure there were. I'm sure they banged a few up.

26 SM: Student banged axis?

27 JP: Yeah, I'm sure they did, but nothing that I particularly remember.

28 SM: Nothing major. Yeah, nothing that you remember that's major.

29 JP: Well, there was a few people got killed in flight school. I don't know if I was  
30 in a class or at a time that it happened or not. I don't remember. I had to put one, put a  
31 fifty-five down somewhere for—I don't remember what it was for. We had some kind of

1 a failure and they came out and picked it up. I soloed with another student somewhere,  
2 solo on cross-country or something. We put it down. They picked it up, but nothing  
3 unusual.

4 SM: Did you have a—you had a night—?

5 JP: Yeah, that was a fun flight. I remember that. That was—

6 SM: How'd that go?

7 JP: Went well, no problem, a little night cross country, the mountains, zipped  
8 around, but that's one of those milestone things you do. First night solo is, it's  
9 interesting. I used to love night flying when I was in Savannah and go out of the way to  
10 do it. It was a lot of fun, but it's the first one I always remember, especially in that little  
11 tin can run by a bunch of washing machine motor rubber bands. It was incredible, damn,  
12 but stayed together pretty well. But, yeah you feel pretty alone up there at night in that  
13 little tiny bug, flying around.

14 SM: I can imagine so. Well, what was the Huey transition like? You went down  
15 to Ft. Rucker. After you finished, you graduated from Ft. Walters, went to Ft. Rucker.  
16 Of course you got your warrant rank when you graduated from—

17 JP: No, not until you get out of Rucker.

18 SM: Not until Rucker?

19 JP: Not until you completed the whole thing, yeah. You're still a WOC down  
20 there. We did the instrument course first I think. I think it was in TH-55s, we did that in,  
21 got our instrument rating. Then got the Huey transition and then that was the end of it. I  
22 don't remember how long we were there. It was a shorter period of time I think than the  
23 other, but I'm not sure, much more interesting. The instrument flying was a lot more  
24 challenging than basic flight instruction. Of course the Huey transition was even better.  
25 That was turbine, more sophisticated machinery. That was very interesting. I spent a  
26 little more time in that. I was just more interested because it was a little more technically  
27 adept, but enjoyed that too, had a good time there and spent a lot of time in Panama City  
28 and went to Mardi Gras. I had a good time in the south. Ft. Rucker was a little more  
29 upscale than Leesville, but Dothan wasn't too much at the time. It was fun.

30 SM: What was the most challenging part of the Huey, flying the Huey or was it  
31 just so much better?

1           JP: I don't think the Huey was—matter of fact I don't think the Huey was  
2 challenging. I think the Huey was much easier to fly. It's just a much more stable  
3 platform, engine, flight control systems, hydraulics, you name it. It was just much better  
4 airplane to fly once you got used to the difference in reaction that was probably a little  
5 slower reacting than a fifty-five as far as the whole. It's the difference between flying a  
6 Cessna 150 and a Beach Baron. A 150 is like flying a tobacco can, rattly and vibrates  
7 and is all over the place. The Huey's a lot more stable and easier to fly than—very  
8 enjoyable, very enjoyable. Flying the thirteen, having to do throttle correlation and do  
9 instrument stuff was a little more difficult, again another thing to get through.

10          SM: What about instrument? What was challenging about that?

11          JP: Just a—that was an intellectual overcome, believe the instruments kind of  
12 thing as opposed to flying the seat of your pants kind of thing. That was difficult for a  
13 tactile person, but eventually did it. I mean, I became an instrument examiner after  
14 several years and knew all of that stuff in depth. The first exposure was challenging, but  
15 it was a good challenge and it was a fulfilling thing to do. But again I don't think any of  
16 it was particularly challenging because it didn't have—flying is still a pretty superficial  
17 thing. It isn't like a research project where you gain some real in-depth knowledge or  
18 deeper understanding of anything. It's technical and A to B kind of thing. But it was  
19 gratifying in a—brain cramp here, the word I'm trying. What is that word? The gut  
20 feeling of it was very satisfying. Once you could do this and you'd mastered it, it was  
21 pretty satisfying, but beyond that there was no more. I mean, whether it's a Huey or a  
22 fifty-five or a 747 or whatever, the only thing then is just a different set of knobs and  
23 dials. The perspective is not going to get any different.

24          SM: You're still flying.

25          JP: You're still flying, but that's a perspective that a lot of people don't have too  
26 is looking down on things. It's a very nice thing.

27          SM: Well—I'm sorry, go ahead.

28          JP: Go ahead.

29          SM: I was just going to say when you were going through the Huey portion of  
30 your training was this, was there very much emphasis again on the, by the instructors on,  
31 okay when you're flying in Vietnam, you know this is how we're flying today, this is

1 how we're flying here in the United States, but you know when you fly in Vietnam  
2 there's going to be a whole different set of circumstances and these are some of the things  
3 you need to keep in mind? Was there very much?

4 JP: We had a—there was a, I guess it was called a tactics portion of the course.  
5 Once you had done your instruments and your Huey transition they did a tactics portion.  
6 We flew a—oh, it's an old A model Huey. God, they were ancient. We did some Slick  
7 flying in those and then we flew some Charlie models. They were ancient too. We could  
8 barely get them off the ground, high D a day, but we did. There was a little low-level  
9 course there somewhere which we flew up this creek a few times. We fired a couple of  
10 tow missiles and basic stuff like that. But it wasn't very long and not very in depth and  
11 probably not—it was a minimal exposure, valuable, but not too much. I don't think they  
12 could have ever expected the range of things you would do to capture in a shorter period  
13 of time as they had like that. It was here is a few things in and out of confined areas.  
14 Here's what happens when you're overloaded, which you'll be all the time and a few  
15 things like that, but other than that for the range of work we did, you never could have  
16 captured that range. It was a very broad range of things we did.

17 SM: What model Huey were you trained on? Do you recall?

18 JP: What's that?

19 SM: What model of the Huey were you trained on? Was it the B model or—?

20 JP: I think we—well, we had some B models and C models and A models in  
21 there, but we ended up with the Bs. Then we ended up in Ds and H models finally which  
22 had some, finally got some horse power in Vietnam.

23 SM: Yeah, but not in training?

24 JP: No, not in training. No. These were all old beat up war birds that were well  
25 beyond their time. Right.

26 SM: Then one last question. At what point in your training did you get your  
27 orders and you knew where you were going to Vietnam? Was it at the very end?

28 JP: At the very end. I think you got your orders and your warrant and your  
29 graduation and all within a couple of days. Yeah, a couple of days. I got the Cav notice.  
30 That was it, thirty days.

1           SM: What were your thoughts when you got your notice? You're definitely  
2 going to Cav, you're definitely going to Vietnam?

3           JP: The Cav was definitely a well renowned place. The first—well, I guess it  
4 wasn't the first, but it was the first division size A model operator. They were all—  
5 everybody was chattering about the short life expectancy of helicopter pilots, but I mean  
6 that was a lot more talk than reality I guess. It wasn't all that bad. But, not a bad thing. I  
7 wasn't—I was proud to go to Cav I guess because it did have a little renown to it. I think  
8 there was an understanding, there was a little more freedom of action there than there  
9 were in a lot of places that had more controls on what they could and couldn't do, where  
10 they were and where they wouldn't, and the operations. I went through a thing the other  
11 day and picked off all of the Cav operations that were going on during that '67, '68 time I  
12 was there and the operational orders for it. We had a much more free reign than a lot of  
13 folks did, a lot of search and destroy and free fire and not, no, no-fire zone kind of stuff.  
14 A lot of harassment and restrictions were put on other units. So that was a positive thing  
15 to my kind of thinking. We weren't—you got to defend yourself and do what you're  
16 there to do anyway as opposed to just riding around thinking and somebody taking pot  
17 shots at you. So that was good.

18          SM: Now, did they talk about rules of engagement in your training, that there  
19 would be rules that would restrict your activities? Do you remember that in the training?

20          JP: I'm sure they did. I'm sure they did, but it didn't make any sense until—

21          SM: Until you got to Vietnam, yeah.

22          JP: Until you got to Vietnam what the rules of engagement were. Of course then  
23 we got some talk on it, but again we didn't have—our rules of engagement were not  
24 super-strict in the Cav. We did have fairly liberal rules of engagement. We were limited  
25 in some areas and at different times and it was on and off where you were but—

26          SM: But in general.

27          JP: In general I didn't think that was an impediment to us accomplishing a  
28 mission. So it was pretty good. I'll have to—I don't think you needed to be a wild and  
29 crazy shoot-em-up all the time, but the ability to counteract what was happening was  
30 valuable. We had that most of the time. We had some areas that were no fire here, no  
31 fire there, but it wasn't an in general, it didn't feel like it damped the operation of what

1 we were trying to accomplish, but was compatible. I also don't—maybe that plays into a  
2 larger sense of understanding the population after watching this, this latest war for three  
3 weeks. I don't think there was as good an understanding as there is today of the  
4 indigenous reasons and being and trying to understand the population where you were,  
5 what was going on. That's a tremendous leap forward today that even with the  
6 shortcomings it has, it's much, much better than we had of where we were and what we  
7 were trying to accomplish. They could have done a lot better cultural understanding of  
8 where we were and what we were doing. That wasn't well done. We could have had  
9 language school. I kind of wish I could have spoken Vietnamese. It would have been  
10 much better. I don't think that would have been a—I think that would have been a very  
11 big help. But it wasn't. So the only thing you had to divide you was rules of  
12 engagement, kind of thing. That wasn't as—it probably isn't the best way to  
13 communicate or interact with the local population, but it was there.

14 SM: Now did you—did you have any desires to go on to other aircraft after you  
15 transitioned into the Huey, whether it be observation helicopters? Well, I guess they  
16 didn't have the Cobras yet so the Cobra transition—

17 JP: Yeah, we had Cobras then.

18 SM: Oh, you did?

19 JP: Could have been, yeah could have been there. No, I—

20 SM: You wanted to stick with the Huey.

21 JP: I was perfectly happy with it. It would have been fun to shoot a few rockets  
22 now and then or something. I got to—I flew with the C company guys once or twice you  
23 know and did that, but I don't know. I guess a utility helicopter is more and a utility  
24 mission, you know what I mean. What the hell can you put in a Cobra? There's nothing  
25 you can do with it. At least the Huey you can Medevac or you can hold somebody's  
26 chow in there. I just felt like we were warriors, but felt like we were accomplishing  
27 something in far as support of everything going on, you know from, whether it was a  
28 Medevac mission today or Med extraction or a combat assault or logistics food mission.  
29 When you see a grunt get a thing of hot chow, it's a very rewarding thing. Making sure  
30 they're re-supplied, this and that and the other is a valuable service I guess. So that

1 was—I was perfectly happy doing that. It was no—and we got plenty of excitement too.  
2 There was no, there was no lack of that.

3 SM: They still shoot at you.

4 JP: Yeah, they still shoot and you still go into a hot LZ (landing zone), but again  
5 I—it was probably one of the most fun times in my life. I can't say that war is a good  
6 thing. It's a horrible tragedy, but as far as thrilling, exhilarating thing it's, there would be  
7 nothing to top it. I did a project a few years ago. We had, in Maine we had a public  
8 utilities commission caught our regional Bell company which was Ninex and Bell  
9 Atlantic at the time doing a little creative bookkeeping. They took twenty million dollars  
10 from them and said, you got to do some public purpose thing with this. This is like a big  
11 fine. So what they decided to do is connect every school and library in the state of Maine  
12 to the internet. This was like eight years ago, nine years ago. I wrote a proposal to them  
13 to do all the training for that with all the educators and librarians. I got the contract. That  
14 probably was the closest thing to the excitement that I'd seen in flying in a combat  
15 experience, just the total change in people's lives when these educators have been  
16 enclosed, encased in a classroom for several years with no outside exposure. Then you  
17 throw the internet in there. Well, to these eighty-year-old librarians, giving them a web  
18 browser and email, it was just an incredible catharsis for a whole population. We trained  
19 like three thousand educators and about twelve, fifteen hundred librarians in a year and  
20 connected them all in a year. Every one of them with a frame relay connections in every  
21 school and library in the state of Maine, every building, every classroom. That was an  
22 incredible experience.

23 SM: Wired every classroom?

24 JP: Every classroom, wired every class with cat five wire. This is before  
25 wireless. I mean, wireless we could have done it in three months but—

26 SM: That's slower speed though.

27 JP: We did it with cat five. No, it was higher speed than the cat five was at the  
28 time. I mean a FRAD (frame relay access device) was only fifty-six K, FRAD  
29 connections.

30 SM: Oh, for crying out loud.



1 JP: But we got it all done. Oh, they're all on T-1s now and everything, but what  
2 I'm saying that kind of experience approached the other.

3 SM: That's amazing.

4 JP: It was an incredible thing there. That's the same—I thought I'd done the  
5 most thrilling thing I was ever going to do with flying in Vietnam, but this was a close  
6 second. Still the flying was pretty exciting stuff, pretty wild stuff.

7 SM: Well, we're—it's about twenty minutes after twelve.

8 JP: No problem.

9 SM: So you want to take a break?

10 JP: Whatever, let's finish it if you've got a couple minutes.

11 SM: Well, I need to take a break.

12 JP: Okay.

13 SM: Okay this will end the interview with John Pierce on the eighteenth of April.

14 SM: This is Steve Maxner, continuing the interview with Mr. John Pierce on the  
15 eighteenth of April, 2003 at approximately 3:45. We are in Charlottesville, Virginia. Sir,  
16 why don't we pick up with your trip over to Vietnam and if you would just describe what  
17 that was like and what the trip over, flying?

18 JP: Twenty-two hours rings a bell. I think we stopped in Hawaii and maybe  
19 Guam. Faint memory, no particular memory other than I know we got shot at landing in  
20 Tan Son Nhut, but other than that there was no particular memory. That was just a  
21 whirlwind three days of replacement depot, processing stuff that was, let's just get it  
22 done, get from here to there, wherever we're going to be. That was the only thing I  
23 remember of that, nothing remarkable. Then they flew me up to An Khe. I don't  
24 remember how, 123 maybe, I'm not sure. A replacement thing there and I ended up  
25 eventually in my unit which was not in residence there at the time. They happened to be  
26 in bunks on the LZ English residence. So I spent a couple of days in An Khe and then  
27 finally somebody remembered, hey, we got a guy there. Let's go get him and bring him  
28 out here. I finally ended up in the unit.

29 SM: Now what month did you leave, in what month?

30 JP: I was a June to June.

31 SM: So you left in June of '67?

1 JP: June of '67 to June '68, yeah.

2 SM: When you arrived in-country, did you receive any kind of briefing?

3 JP: I think there may have been some trivial thing with replacement functions but  
4 I don't remember it. It wasn't anything that I remember.

5 SM: When you got to your unit what were your first impressions? What was the  
6 exact unit designation? Do you recall?

7 JP: Brave company, 229<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter battalion. They were in GP  
8 (general purpose) mediums in LZ English. The funny part of the thing I started laughing  
9 this morning, went up out to Walls and we took some stuff down to, we're going to  
10 barbecue tomorrow. We get two GP mediums for the tents. That's incredible.  
11 Everybody just big grins coming on their face when they saw it. But eight guys in a tent  
12 and that was just moving into a new place, the whole new crowd of people. You didn't  
13 know anybody. It was a couple of days of interesting stuff. We had a 105 battery. It was  
14 on a hill within fifty meters of where we were above us. That went off all night. Within  
15 the first couple of weeks they hit the ammo and POL (petroleum, oils, and lubricants)  
16 dump behind us. That went off for two weeks I guess continuously. So that was  
17 interesting. That was kind of the first impressions. I was there probably two, three, four  
18 days. They said all right, we're going to give you a local area checkout. The company  
19 standardization guy, we went up for a ride and flying around. He's showing me this and  
20 that. He says forced landing and he rolled the throttle off and the engine quit. So the first  
21 landing I made in Vietnam was a crash landing. I put it down in a rice paddy in auto-  
22 rotation. We just got over one dyke and nosed up against another one. I said, "Did you  
23 mean to do that?" He says, (mumbles). He was totally flustered too and didn't even  
24 realize it happened. They came out and hooked us out of there later on. That was the  
25 first flight I had.

26 SM: Now, so what happened to the power? He didn't—?

27 JP: Well, it was supposed to be on a Huey there's a flight idle position, that  
28 there's a stop. You can't actually roll a throttle off. There's a button, if you hold the  
29 button down so when you shut the engine down it rolls all the way to a complete stop.  
30 Evidently he must have pushed the button and rolled it right to the stop and the engine  
31 quit. We were only at, I don't know, we were at around a thousand feet or under or

1 something like that and just no time to get a restart or anything like that. So we had to  
2 pick a spot and put it down in a hurry.

3 SM: So he did not mean to really power it all the way down.

4 JP: He didn't mean to power it all the way down. He didn't mean to kill the  
5 engine. He meant to just roll it off. Then as I put the collective down and establish this  
6 and that he'd roll it back on and recover it, but he never did because we were fresh out of  
7 power and no restart.

8 SM: Oh, my goodness.

9 JP: That was my first flight. I said, "Geez, this is going to be a long year," but it  
10 wasn't, it wasn't bad. It was a good landing and we all walked away, but we were in bad  
11 guy country. It was interesting and they came out and a couple of guys picked us up in a  
12 few minutes and we hauled the radios out and did all the typical stuff and got out. It  
13 was—nobody got hurt, nothing happened. It was no different than any exercise, you  
14 know getting a flat tire. Same kind of thing I guess. That was the introduction. Then  
15 after that I started flying missions and flew with some of the more experienced guys.

16 SM: Now when you did that landing and you noticed, you said the nose went up  
17 against one of the paddy dykes, was it—?

18 JP: Yeah, it was—the paddy dykes are spaced. You've got to have a little bit of  
19 room to flare and gain some rotor speed back before you level it out and touch down.  
20 Just as I level out there was one dyke and I just kind of pulled it up over that one and then  
21 slid through the mud. We kind of nosed up against the next one, didn't even break the  
22 chin bubbles or anything. We just squished through the mud. That was enough to really  
23 slow us down, but we didn't you know nose over, tip over or anything.

24 SM: Then no serious damage to the aircraft.

25 JP: No damage to the airplane at all.

26 SM: That's great.

27 JP: That was great, but good thing.

28 SM: Did you have crew with you or was it just you and—?

29 JP: Oh, yeah you had a crew chief and gunner and the IP (instructor pilot). It was  
30 always a crew of four when we went most places.

31 SM: I'm sure they were surprised.

1           JP: I'm sure everybody was surprised. Poor Dan Green, he was kind of a—I  
2   guess the—I didn't realize until today that the IP before that, some other guy had just  
3   gotten shot and Dan had taken over within just a few weeks of this. So he was brand new  
4   to being the IP and thrown into the situation. He was kind of nervous I guess. He was a  
5   pretty nervous guy anyway, bit his fingernails way down. I remember that. Then that  
6   thing happened.

7           SM: Well, when you arrived in June of '67, what was morale like at the unit?

8           JP: Oh, good I guess. I didn't notice any bad morale, seemed to have pretty good  
9   time.

10          SM: Well, was it a good, good—?

11          JP: Cohesive group it seemed like. When you get thrown into a totally different  
12   situation, total people you don't know, takes a little while, but I guess I was comfortable  
13   in a few days. Everybody was—I mean, there are some people that stand off and come  
14   back, I mean personality thing, but I didn't seem to have any trouble blending in. Pretty  
15   soon everybody was drinking beer and singing songs. It was like a Boy Scout camp.

16          SM: Good tempo of operations?

17          JP: Yeah, pretty good tempo of operations. Looking back the other day I said I  
18   looked at the operations that had been done and this was a lot of search and destroy and  
19   not high intensity, strategic operations. I think it was—these were more tactical, run  
20   around, find something to do kind of missions. It didn't seem like it had a good deal of  
21   strategic integrity. I think you can sense that when the intensity goes down and when the  
22   intensity comes up, depending on when we did things like the A Shau and Tet and the  
23   Khe Sanh relief. You could tell there was a strategic orientation that you were playing a  
24   part in a big puzzle, whereas some of these other missions were less strategic and more  
25   be a presence as opposed to being a part of a strategic operation. Looking at those bunks  
26   on search and destroy areas, it was a matter of trying to sniff out the bad guys and  
27   inserting for a few hours here and pull them and insert them there, kind of busy work  
28   kind of thing. I think the sense was down and everybody was more relaxed. It was  
29   matter of fact. Then as things get more intense you get more in tune to the intensity. It's  
30   not overt, but it's sensible. You can sense the level. That was pretty low key stuff there  
31   in the Bong Son area. God, I don't know how long we were there, a few months before

1 we moved to I Corps, but that was pretty much matter of fact. We did have a pretty nasty  
2 thing over at Dak To. That was part of a larger mission. There was a lot going on there  
3 and that was a lot of action and hot stuff there. There wasn't a lot of hot operations in the  
4 Bong Son area. I mean, now and then we'd get a few pot shots but it was nothing  
5 recognizable as you were just flying, dropping just picking up. You only knew you were  
6 in the Army because you had a green suit on. You could have been driving a taxi  
7 otherwise, but it wasn't a lot of intensity that way. It was good morale. The guys would,  
8 I mean, fairly comfortable, got enough to eat. There was no, no creature comforts, but I  
9 mean you lived in a damn tent on a cot, but it still wasn't, it wasn't at all bad.

10 SM: When you first got there to the unit, I thought you did go north up in?

11 JP: I Corps?

12 SM: Mm-hmm.

13 JP: No, I was in Bong Son. I went to An Khe, which was in the Central  
14 Highlands.

15 SM: Okay, An Khe, south. Okay, so yeah.

16 JP: That was the Cav's home port whatever. Then operationally our company  
17 was in Bong Son at that time.

18 SM: So you left An Khe and then went down to Bong Son.

19 JP: Went out to Bong Son and that's where we lived and operated from, even  
20 though An Khe was the home thing and we had regular wooden barracks back there and  
21 all that, but we just didn't spend any time there. Yeah we did. We went back there from  
22 English for some period of time because, and God, I don't remember why, but we spent  
23 some period of time in An Khe in those wooden barracks and our little tavern in the place  
24 and all that. You'll see some of the pictures. But operationally mostly out of LZ English  
25 and Bong Son that first few months. Then Dak To, which was, that was the first real  
26 exposure to anything hot and crazy. I think one of the best—we used to fly from Bong  
27 Son down through Qui Nhon up through some path and out west out towards Dak To. I  
28 remember one day flying up to that pass and all of a sudden I looked out beside me and  
29 there was all these birds flying beside me. It was a whole flock to toucans with the great,  
30 big old multi-colored beaks, one of those things that you don't forget flying alongside a

1     toucan. But Dak To was the first real hot experience and actually anti-aircraft fire and a  
2     lot of ground launched stuff, whatever it was up there.

3             SM: How long were you there before that happened, before the Dak To  
4     operation? Do you recall?

5             JP: My timeline's not good. I couldn't say.

6             SM: Well, when you were first started operating down at the Bong Son Plain, go  
7     ahead and if you would describe your first, the first operation that you were a part of  
8     where you came under enemy fire? Do you remember?

9             JP: No, no I don't.

10            SM: What's the first real combat experience you ever had?

11            JP: I think the real—I mean, we probably had some small arms fire in a lot of  
12    places and we had a few hot LZs, but again combat operation is a relative term. I mean,  
13    you hear small arms fire as pop-pop-pop-pop. There isn't the close intensity being on the  
14    ground and somebody right there hearing about six go off. It's a lot less, even though  
15    you're right in the middle of it within meters of where they're shootings the intellectual  
16    distance is greater than being on the ground with no headset on or anything like that.

17            SM: Well, that's a good point.

18            JP: I'm sure we had a lot of ground small arms fire and you could see tracers and  
19    do that, but I mean without people getting hit or anything—there was very few people got  
20    hit at that time and not a great deal. I mean, one guy got a toe shot and another guy got a  
21    leg wound or something, but no major stuff from our point of view. Even if there's a  
22    bullet hole in the airplane, making that personal was difficult, at least to me. I didn't  
23    seem to have the—maybe I didn't have enough sense to be afraid or recognize the fear  
24    factor of it, but I think in Dak To we did. We had a lot of night extractions and hot  
25    insertions to start reinforcing other people where you know that was fairly large scale  
26    operation which used the resources much more intensely than missions we'd been doing  
27    down south. We'd do these little platoon insertions and six ship deals and then pull them  
28    out and go somewhere else. It wasn't a—it was kind of hit or miss. Even though yeah, it  
29    was bad guys there and they get a few kills here and a few kills there it didn't seem to be  
30    as difficult. I think Dak To was the first major encounter with,—and I think probably  
31    that was because it was NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regular forces out there as

1 opposed to indigenous bad guys in the Bong Son area. I don't think we ever encountered  
2 any major organized resistance in that area. It was all small, low level resistance whereas  
3 out at Dak To it was pretty close to the borders where they were moving stuff over pretty  
4 sincerely.

5 SM: Well, when you do get down and were operating out of the Bong Son Plain  
6 what was the general type of mission that you would fly? Was it pretty much always an  
7 insertion?

8 JP: Well, of course sometimes there were day missions of we may do four or five  
9 insertions a day, take the same group and put them here and if they wouldn't stir in  
10 anything in a couple hours, pick them up stick them there and that kind of a thing. I  
11 rotated all day and then maybe the next day you do ash and trash and you'd supply them  
12 all day and ammo and food and that kind of thing. It was as much logistical support as it  
13 was actual combat assault stuff. But I flew a lot with this one captain that had been an  
14 instrument instructor. He flew lead and I flew with him a lot. We flew a lot of leads on  
15 insertions. I don't think I'd been flying—I don't know why I got tabbed for that, but I  
16 did a lot of yellow one flying with him and a couple of other guys. That thinking about  
17 leading a flight and where you have to land and how you have to prep for it and how  
18 close you can get before the artillery stops and all that—I don't know if you've heard  
19 about it yet, but when they prep an LZ with artillery. You've got to know when that's  
20 going to stop and then use white phosphorus to signal that. They let you know where the  
21 smoke's coming from, how long it's going to be in the air and where you are relative to  
22 that. So when that goes you want to be in there. You want to be as close to the smoke as  
23 you can to make sure you take advantage of the prep, but you don't want to be  
24 underneath it when it gets there and all of those considerations. Flying that was—

25 SM: You mentioned that you'd fly yellow line. Would you describe that color  
26 system and what it meant?

27 JP: Six birds to a flight, yellow was always first, yellow, white, green, extensions  
28 on beyond that and I don't particularly remember, but groups of six in any large, typically  
29 six bird missions unless. A lot of times a log mission may be two birds or even one a lot  
30 of times depending on the enemy activity. Usually they'd put two if there was any  
31 activity. As things got safe you'd do it alone because it was just drop it in and then

1 delivery. Yellow one through six was the lead flight, six birds. Then there was a green, a  
2 white and green and very large missions, elaborate schemes beyond that, but yellow was  
3 always the first.

4 SM: Was this unique to your aviation battalion or was it—?

5 JP: Not that I know of. I don't remember. We flew a bunch of missions with the  
6 101<sup>st</sup>. It was the same there. I think they were—I think the basic air mobile architecture  
7 was probably similar, but I—it's a good question. I have no idea if it was. It wasn't  
8 particular to our battalion because the whole Cav used the system, the 227<sup>th</sup> and the 229<sup>th</sup>  
9 both used a similar system, but I don't know about other, some of these aviation  
10 companies and separate, the 101<sup>st</sup> if they did it the same. I know we did—the A Shau  
11 was with the 101<sup>st</sup> and we had huge flights of mixed division assaults that were color  
12 coded that way. It was six or eight months later but, and that was similar. But most of  
13 the missions we flew were like six bird missions. At tops twelve or eighteen if we  
14 brought another group to go together, but most of them weren't that large, platoon sized  
15 stuff, especially in the Bong Son area. In Dak To we did larger stuff because we were  
16 reinforcing under more resistance. It's amazing what I don't remember.

17 SM: Well, it's amazing what you do remember too.

18 JP: It's incredible.

19 SM: Well, in the Bong Son area, Bong Son area, was that NVA, VC (Viet Cong)  
20 combination?

21 JP: I don't remember any NVA. I think it was VC mostly, like I said indigenous,  
22 local stuff. I don't think there was any NVA there. I think at the fringes of our  
23 operational area probably was, but I don't remember running into anything of that nature,  
24 could be, but it just didn't seem—just on a scale that was the lowest scale of anything I  
25 was involved with at the time, that was marginal combat operations. It escalated from  
26 there.

27 SM: What was the heaviest weapon used against you that you know of in the  
28 Bong Son area?

29 JP: Small arms fire, that I know of.

30 SM: Just 7.62, AK.



1 JP: Yeah, probably a 7.62, at six, stuff. That's not a light weapon, but its still,  
2 even small arms fire is all I can think of. Never saw any flak or anti-aircraft until Dak To  
3 and then didn't see a great deal after that until the A Shau Valley thing. Even during Tet  
4 not much heavy stuff, all small arms fire, but no anti-aircraft that I remember. We did a  
5 lot of flying in and out of Hue and the Citadel and that stuff at that time, but small arms  
6 fire was the most we ever encountered that I can remember.

7 SM: Now when you were flying in these operations were you carrying, were you  
8 a lot of times carrying what they call blues I guess, the ground soldiers?

9 JP: Yeah, yeah. We, seven, eight, six, I don't remember. I think eight.  
10 Typically until we got fully fledged with D models and H models we were always  
11 overloaded. It was always high DA (delayed action) stuff there, just trying to get off the  
12 ground. You're always bouncing along, getting in the air until you'd hit fuel down and  
13 you could come and go then. You could never run, overpower the power train because  
14 then when you get D and H models you can over torque the power system because they  
15 finally gave you more horsepower than they gave you capacity in your power train. It  
16 was a welcome relief to people, get enough horsepower to get out where you wanted to  
17 go.

18 SM: I'm sure it was a hazard at times, bouncing the aircraft along the ground,  
19 trying to get off.

20 JP: Yeah, but it was one of those. It was just a technique thing you got used to  
21 and finally you had to live with it. You always couldn't set yourself up to make sure you  
22 had enough for a couple of bounces to get off the ground before you go, especially fully  
23 loaded with troops. H model pretty much did away with that. We always had plenty of  
24 power if you didn't over torque the damn thing. There was always enough power to get  
25 out and get off the ground, even in bad situations. They did stick us in some touchy ones.  
26 I had a particular night extraction in Dak To. We were in triple canopy jungle. It was  
27 probably a hundred feet to hover down, straight down in the hole of trees they'd cut out  
28 with some banglor torpedoes to pull these guys out of. That was a very hairy night  
29 operation. I had a new, brand new captain in-country with me and he was just pitiful. It  
30 was a very scary night. He was scared to death. We went in there about four times that

1 night to pull people out, but nobody on the whole thing got in any problems or anything,  
2 but it was quite interesting.

3 SM: Now was this—what size unit was this that was in there?

4 JP: I don't know. We did about four rounds apiece pulling them out of there and  
5 I don't how many ships involved, six, seven.

6 SM: Quite a unit.

7 JP: Several, several people we hauled out of there that night up on some ridge in  
8 the real deep jungle.

9 SM: Were they—how did they get up there? Were they inserted earlier?

10 JP: Somebody had inserted them somewhere earlier and then they had to blow  
11 this LZ out. We'd come in. We'd start a final to—a couple miles out. By the time the  
12 next ship came out, by the time he reached the top of the trees he'd hit his rotating beacon  
13 and that would give you a place to shoot for and you couldn't even see the hole in the  
14 trees until he was away and you got down there with a—then you could see the hole in  
15 the trees. You'd have to hover down into it and shut all the lights off and get to the  
16 ground, get a load on with all these stumps and trees and stuff sticking up and then hover  
17 straight up and hit your light for the next guy to come in and then cycle out of there. We  
18 did that a number of times anyway, two or three times definitely. That was an interesting  
19 night. It wasn't very far back to Dak To, but it was hot and hairy.

20 SM: You didn't get shot at then?

21 JP: No, not that I know of. I mean, nobody got hit or hurt or anything. I mean, it  
22 was—I guess they were coming down on these guys pretty hard on the ground because  
23 there'd been a lot of activity up on this hill range, mountain range coming down on these  
24 guys. But that's the one particular mission. We had a lot of hot missions, but I mean one  
25 blended into another. I can't—some of these guys go day to day. God I can't—from day  
26 to day. I have flashes of particular ones, but I can't remember day to day stuff.

27 SM: Well, at what point in your tour did you get H model Hueys? Was it before  
28 or after Dak To?

29 JP: Probably fall of '67, sometime, the fall. So maybe around the Dak To time.

30 SM: That's during the Dak To period.

1           JP: Probably. I'd been there some months, I think. I'm going to say it's in that  
2 end of summer to winter time in that period, probably started getting a few in at a time.

3           SM: Okay. Well, when you were operating in the Bong Son, when we talked  
4 earlier you said that the rules of engagement for your unit were not, did not feel onerous,  
5 or seem onerous to you. How were they in Bong Son? What kind of restrictions were  
6 there at all, if at all on your operation?

7           JP: Well, I think in the, right in the Bong Son village area and some of the other  
8 vills that were, no fire zones. Bong Son was pretty heavily populated and I think that  
9 was, Ho Chi Minh had some relationship to Bong Son. I don't know if that was where he  
10 was born or something like that. I know there was some relationship, but pretty good  
11 sized population there. They just didn't want us shooting up the city. There were some  
12 restricted zones like that, but pretty much when you get beyond that—I mean, they were  
13 gridded in on a map I'm sure, but after that it was pretty much free fire. A few times they  
14 came down they closed the whole area and then they started up again, but I mean those  
15 were very temporary on again, off again things. Again like I said the intensity wasn't that  
16 heavy anyway. Any time we were doing combat assaults your usually arty prep and  
17 you're free to fire on that kind of stuff. That was not a question and other than that you  
18 were just doing ash and trash around the countryside. You're always able to protect  
19 yourself if you took fire, but I guess the need, didn't sense the need to have to be able to  
20 shoot up the countryside just as a matter of course. I don't think there was a—I don't  
21 know what the sensitivity was and what level it was that created the rules of engagement,  
22 pretty obvious things like Bong Son and a large population but the other stuff was not  
23 transmitted. It was just don't shoot here, do shoot here, why not at the time, but it  
24 wasn't—like I said it didn't feel onerous. We didn't feel like we were endangered by it.  
25 I mean, everybody grouched about this and that, but I don't think it was a problem to speak  
26 of.

27           SM: You don't think it hindered your operations or capability to—

28           JP: No, I don't think it did.

29           SM: Successfully complete your mission?

30           JP: No, I don't think so. I think that was another thing I don't think is—you  
31 always get communicated what, but not a lot of why. The policy behind and the

1 reasoning is never communicated. Today you can do that because you can add the  
2 communication in with the—you can't shoot here because and here's why we want to be  
3 sensitive to it which would have been a lot more valuable as far as I could see, but they  
4 didn't communicate that kind of thing. They didn't communicate the reasoning for the  
5 policy is, just don't shoot here. Not that you could have discussed it anyway I don't  
6 think, but at least you would have had some understanding of why and of what for, but  
7 that wasn't there. I mean, some of the things were obvious. You don't want to shoot up  
8 Bong Son because it was a city, but in some other areas that some cultural or religious or  
9 other iconic reasoning would have been wise to know, but we didn't have a good  
10 understanding of religion and culture to connect those things anyway. So it probably  
11 wouldn't have done any good if we'd been told that. But I think those things would have  
12 been valuable, to have more cultural understanding and what the sensitivities were. I  
13 think we could have done that better, I don't think that the military or the Army at the  
14 time had as much faith in its people to have understanding and didn't communicate to the  
15 bottom as well as it could. So maybe that was a—it probably was a detriment from  
16 accomplishing the mission in a much better way that could have been—we could have  
17 performed much better if we'd known that, but at the time it didn't seem onerous because  
18 we were just, do Mission XYZ and didn't think to that depth. But I'm sure we could  
19 have performed better if we had been given the opportunity and the wherewithal to do  
20 that.

21 SM: Well, when you would get prepared to go out on a mission what kind of  
22 briefings did you get? What was the intelligence you would typically receive? How  
23 accurate was it?

24 JP: We got an intelligence briefing. It was supposed to be XYZ here and there  
25 and we're going to go out and insert so many guys to see what's going on there, onion  
26 skin sheet. I mean, you didn't get a briefing book on anything, you get a single sheet like  
27 that with about as much hen scratch in as you get in a typed format. The intelligence is  
28 there are a few VC here and they're operating in this area and they're scarring the people  
29 in this vill and doing that. You're going to put an insertion, try to round them up or shake  
30 them out of the trees, but not a great deal more than that. It seemed reasonable. We

1 always seemed to, I don't know what percentage of the time you'd stir something up, not  
2 always but frequently.

3 SM: Did you find that the intelligence you received was accurate before your  
4 missions?

5 JP: That's what I mean. I don't know what you could say is accurate, at a  
6 snapshot in time it may have been accurate. I don't know how it was derived. I don't  
7 know if it was Special Forces or area recon or what the source documentation was. I  
8 don't know where it came from. So it could have been anything. It was all kinds of ways  
9 that did that, but it could have been scouts or the last insertion might have had something  
10 there. I guess I didn't understand the architecture of the flow of intelligence that was a  
11 precursor to a mission as well. We just did the mission and again I think that's another  
12 flow information stop, the various levels along the way. Even within the company at  
13 operations they may have had intelligence that would say to this, but probably it  
14 happened at battalion because they had to coordinate the blues and the aircraft resources.  
15 Probably the intelligence stopped there and then missions were filtered beyond that. If  
16 our operations had any intelligence we may have gotten a cursory overview. There's  
17 supposed to be somebody there. It wasn't a great deal of where the source came from or  
18 what it was or how good it was or anything like that. It didn't particularly make any  
19 difference to us anyway. You did a, kind of a *pro forma* you know artillery prep, gun  
20 ship escort and do an insertion kind of thing. That may have been also, like I said the  
21 level of intensity was down. I mean, it may have been a hot LZ, but small arms fire,  
22 there wasn't a lot of aircraft down or people ahead or anything like that, that I recall of  
23 any specific intensity. It got to be pretty much a default kind of operation and it was  
24 pretty easy work. But again I sense tactical stuff as opposed to strategic. So you were  
25 doing all these little busy missions that didn't seem to be a concerted effort to accomplish  
26 a larger picture. That's what I felt in the Bong Son area and was kind of—so everybody  
27 had the same attitude. It was kind of a drill. You'd be doing something, these search and  
28 destroy missions, but they didn't feel like they were part of a larger operation.

29 SM: Would they make, the blues that you inserted, were they making a lot of  
30 contact or were they reporting it, body counts?

1           JP: There was some, there was some contact. They had to do a body count, but I  
2 don't recall it being—there wasn't heavy contact every time you did something. I mean,  
3 there'd be a few here and there'd be bad one there and you'd pull them out and they'd say  
4 yeah, it was hot or they'd say no it was a walk in the park. We laid around in a rice  
5 paddy all day and didn't do anything, but some they did and some they didn't. I think the  
6 whole, for that X month period in Bong Son, it was a lower level of contact than any  
7 other time I was there. That was a, I don't know, that was a—I think the Ia Drang was  
8 part of that in '66. I think they backed the Cav off, looking at the operational missions.  
9 It seemed like after that high intensity stuff in the Ia Drang and a few other places they  
10 might have backed the Cav out for awhile and given them a breather. Maybe that was  
11 just it. I'm speculating now, but knowing that seemed to be a period of downscale effort.  
12 I don't know if it was intentional or what, but it was down. Of course the I Corps move  
13 was ramping back up again.

14           SM: When you were working in that part of the country, did you work with  
15 ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) as well or just American forces?

16           JP: Primarily American Cav forces. There was some ARVN. I think we had  
17 ARVN in Dak To, but I don't remember. We did a lot more ARVN stuff in I Corps I  
18 think. We did do ARVN stuff. I guess I can't say when the time was, I don't remember.  
19 We carried ARVN troops and we had some ARVN airplane support, but primarily Cav  
20 troops, the blues that we dealt with.

21           SM: Did you get shot down at all in the Bong Son area?

22           JP: No, but that first forced landing was the only thing.

23           SM: Well, the forced landing, yeah but that's—

24           JP: No, I never got shot down. No.

25           SM: Any serious or any kind of damage to the aircraft from small arms?

26           JP: We had small arms fire several times, bullet holes all around me in the floor  
27 and up to the roof, but I never had—had on hydraulic failure. That was in (inaudible),  
28 affecting the economy. You can still fly the airplane. I think that was it, hydraulic failure  
29 and other than that, nothing really.

30           SM: It's just a lot harder to fly.

1           JP: It's just real stiff. I mean, the control system is a lot of feedback. They're not  
2 leveraged. They're all push-pull tubes like a regular manual control system, but they're  
3 all hydraulically assisted. Because of the hydraulic assist they don't wring them so  
4 they're real easy without the hydraulic assist. You've got to force it and it's very stiff  
5 and there's a lot of feedback, but it's easily flyable. You can hover and land and do  
6 anything if you're strong enough. It's physical strength then, doing the collective and the  
7 foot pedals aren't difficult. It's just mostly the cyclic that's more difficult to operate. It's  
8 a practice thing that you fly, traffic patterns and landings and takeoffs and everything  
9 without hydraulics. So it's not an impossible thing to do, just much nicer. It's like  
10 shutting off your power steering in a car, the same thing. How difficult that is if the belt  
11 falls off or something, that's the difference. You want it fixed. You're not going to fly it  
12 everyday, but it's doable, easily doable. That was the only—we had a lot of small arms  
13 rounds and did get in quite a bit of flak. I don't remember if we ever got any actual  
14 aircraft damage out of flak. I remember flying through a lot of black smoke and that was  
15 like a diesel fuel fire, black. That's very ugly. You don't want to be in that stuff, but no,  
16 nothing on the small arms fire.

17           SM: Okay. We're at a good stopping point to take a quick break. I want to use  
18 the restroom. Do you need anything?

19           JP: I'm fine. Perfect.

20           SM: I'm going to—

21           SM: Were there any other specific aspects of the operations in the Bong Son  
22 Plain that you want to talk about, that you remember?

23           JP: You asked about resistance and I said pretty much indigenous, but I mean  
24 there had to be somebody with those rockets because they did hit the POL dump that  
25 time. So somebody, one of the, something twenty-two something like that rocket and  
26 those, some of that, but not much. Again, I think it was low-level stuff compared to what  
27 we saw in the future, nothing again remarkable that I could point to in the Bong Son area.

28           SM: What were your unit's losses like during that period for that area?

29           JP: Nothing that I remember, at least aviation units. Probably some blues lost,  
30 but there wasn't that physical close. Dak To was worse but I still, I think we had a

1 couple of guys, no total aircraft losses, anything like that until we got into the A Shau in  
2 '68. Yeah, nothing.

3 SM: Nothing in Bong Son at all?

4 JP: Nothing in Bong Son that I remember. I mean there may have been a small  
5 arms hit or something like that, but it wasn't, no massive aviation falters there. Some in  
6 Dak To, a few shot up, not in our particular unit though that I remember.

7 SM: Did you conduct many impromptu either Medevac or search and rescue  
8 missions in the Bong Son area?

9 JP: Yeah. Any time you're doing ash and trash, a log missions, it's always  
10 available for you know if somebody's XYZ or you know near a location then you're  
11 always monitoring frequencies. I mean, you drop food to pick somebody up and yeah,  
12 we did that kind of stuff fairly frequently I'd say. Depending on if you were there and a  
13 Medevac wasn't, it wasn't and they needed something immediate you'd do it. I  
14 remember delivering several to a hospital in Qui Nhon and other places depending on  
15 where I got sent. We did impromptu kind of stuff too. It was reasonable flexibility in  
16 that sense, seemed to be fairly good awareness of what was going on in different places at  
17 least in the air because of fairly common frequencies. I mean you'd use a tactical, a  
18 regular FM (frequency modulation) frequencies for unit to unit operations and then you  
19 know VHF (very high frequency) for wider area aviation communications, but the  
20 tactical stuff is all on FM radios and brick twenty-five on the ground kind of thing. The  
21 awareness was pretty good and help wasn't too far away in those situations. We did a lot  
22 of impromptu stuff.

23 SM: What was the supply system like for those first few months that you were in-  
24 country, any shortages, any want for anything? You pretty much got everything you  
25 need?

26 JP: Never noticed anything, no. Once you became accustomed to the level of  
27 creature comforts over there. I mean, you had everything you were going to get and it  
28 wasn't, it wasn't bad.

29 SM: But the essentials, food, as far as your equipment, your maintenance, all the  
30 things that were important.



1 JP: Food, ammo, water those kind of things, they were all there. I think aircraft  
2 could have been updated sooner and that was a lag in you know probably manufacturing  
3 more than anything else, but that was all.

4 SM: What was your daily routine like, while you were operating in Bong Son?

5 JP: Missions were—you'd get woke up in the morning if you had one. Typically,  
6 sometimes you'd be able to get brief a little earlier, night before or something. If things  
7 were fairly routine you'd be doing XY or Z, but a lot of times you'd wake up in the  
8 morning and they'd hand you an onion skin. You would find this or that person, change  
9 fairly frequently.

10 SM: Now were you an aircraft commander at that point or were you—?

11 JP: I think I made AC (aircraft commander) in Bong Son, but I don't remember  
12 how many months it was into the time. It wasn't too long I don't think. I don't remember  
13 it. It was just one of those milestone moments, but as far as timing I don't know when it  
14 was. I'm pretty sure I didn't—I was AC down there, but I couldn't tell you time and  
15 anything else. I ended up being the company standardization guy for the last five months  
16 I guess, IP. It was before we left Bong Son I'm pretty sure I made AC, just switched  
17 seats and doing the same thing.

18 SM: Well, okay. So you'd wake up. You'd get an onion skin if you had a  
19 mission, go get your briefing.

20 JP: A lot of times there wasn't much of a briefing if it was an ash and trash thing.  
21 It was what bird you got, time it was to go and you went and did it. It wasn't a—

22 SM: Grid coordinates, locations.

23 JP: Yeah, those kind of things, locations, time. You always had an SOI (specific  
24 operating instruction) with all the frequencies of the units. So that was fairly well up to  
25 date. I'm trying to think if there was any specific process. I don't think so. It was you  
26 crank twenty minutes before you had to be there and go get your stuff and make sure  
27 you're full of fuel. There's a thing, it was not much of a process unless it was doing CAs  
28 (combat assault) or something like that, a little more briefing then when you're in a flight  
29 of six, but not a great deal.

30 SM: A combat assault.

1           JP: Yeah, right. A little more in depth understanding of what was going on, but  
2 as far as the regular ash and trash type you were the baker's delivery boy. The CA's a  
3 little bit more planning. This guy Walburn, he was a captain I flew with when I first  
4 started flying some lead flights. He was okay. He'd been an instrument instructor and  
5 was kind of a gruff guy. I seemed to get along with him all right, but he never developed  
6 much warmth or personality, but we flew well together and accomplished well and  
7 executed well, but Ken Hamburg who's going to be here I thought was a little more  
8 fastidious. He always had a map with a Mylar overlay and all degrees penciled in. It was  
9 just a little more professionally done that we'd work it out ahead of time. He was a little  
10 more fastidious in that way. I appreciated that even in the other one. We always got it  
11 done and I think timing worked out here, but it was a little more off the cuff with the  
12 other guy whereas Ken put a little more thought into, we'd be here and come around the  
13 timing would be just right for the smoking on us. He'd do that and I'd fly and we were  
14 happy as hell, worked out well a lot. We did it a lot. It's easier when things are a little  
15 bit better laid out.

16           SM: Organized.

17           JP: Yeah. We'd lay that out together. We'd talk about where we got to be and  
18 what we were going to do and then he'd lay it all out with a grease pencil and then mark  
19 your times to where we want to be. He'd say, "We're a little early. We need to swing it  
20 out or bring it in tighter," and you know those kind of things. That made it more  
21 interesting really than just going out and jockey assing around, but that was kind of fun,  
22 good guy to fly with.

23           SM: Now did you find that kind of attention to detail and planning of your  
24 operations, did that help with the execution? Did it make it a better mission or—?

25           JP: It made it a better mission from the sense that there was continuity from the  
26 planning phase all the way to the final execution. As far as accomplishing the insertion,  
27 we were always on time the other way, get in before the smoke got there. It worked, but  
28 it just didn't have the congruity of it totally. Like I said I'm a systems guy. I think that  
29 way, it works. I can also freelance it and we did it and we accomplished it very well the  
30 other way, but it just seemed like a better mission when it was thought out and planned.  
31 Then you didn't have to improvise at all. It was all—if you know you're early or late you

1 can go wide or tighten it up to where you to got to come in on a curve. That works,  
2 works real well. So who knows?

3 SM: Very interesting. Well, when you left Bong Son and moved on to Dak To,  
4 that was your next series of operations?

5 JP: Well, that was kind of an out thing. We were still at Bong Son and we went  
6 out to Dak To for a period of time and then came back. I don't even remember if we  
7 stayed up there. I think we flew in and out of there a lot and didn't actually night over or  
8 anything. We may have stayed right there on the runway a lot of times, but I don't  
9 remember us actually transporting tents and equipment. We may have, but I don't  
10 remember that. I just remember there was a lot of high intensity for it. It was only a  
11 period of days or weeks. It wasn't a long period of time, but it was pretty hot stuff going  
12 on for some period of time. It was a pretty rainy time. I remember there was a lot of  
13 deep—(Editor's note: Interviewee speaks to third party, but it's not relevant to interview)  
14 It was a lot of two feet deep mud and I remember those deuce and a halves up to the  
15 fenders plowing through stuff up there, a lot of rain or misery.

16 SM: Well, yeah. You were flying in part of the rainy season, in June, July,  
17 August?

18 JP: I don't know when the rainy season was.

19 SM: Was weather bad when you were flying in Bong Son?

20 JP: In Dak To it was bad. I remember that. It was pretty muddy there. It was  
21 very muddy there. In Bong Son it may have been, but it doesn't, that doesn't come up. I  
22 remember a lot of dust and dirt there, but not mud. I'm trying to recall stuff in Dak To,  
23 just ain't ringing a bell.

24 SM: But you don't—the weather.

25 JP: Weather, rain and mud, but I don't remember. We flew a lot of low stuff  
26 underneath the scud and clouds. It was kind of hilly up there. I can't remember. We  
27 were talking about Decca earlier today. Ken and I flew several missions on that Decca.

28 SM: Would you explain what that it?

29 JP: Decca is an electronic, I think they were land based radio chains. I'm not  
30 absolutely sure. LORAN (long range navigation) is satellite base. Decca may have been  
31 an early satellite base, but I'm not sure. I think they were land based chains of

1 triangulated radio signals for a 3D navigation system called Decca. I don't know what  
2 the acronym is, but it was a scrolling, moving map on silver operated rollers. It wasn't  
3 electronic. It was all analog servos that scrolled a map up and down so you could  
4 imagine how far out of whack that kind of thing could get, one or two needles that you  
5 had to calibrate. Of course calibrating anything—it's like trying to calibrate two toilet  
6 paper rolls. You can imagine the slippage in paper. Even though it was on a tractor feed,  
7 it's like a tractor feed printer. But at times we'd fly at—of course we'd fly it in the  
8 daylight in good weather and it was always right on the button. Then you fly up a valley  
9 where it says you can get through it X thousand feet and all of a sudden you come to a  
10 dead end and the damn thing didn't work. You'd fly into a mountain, have to turn  
11 around. So it wasn't something you wanted to get in the clouds with and trust, but we did  
12 try it. We pushed it a lot but it was—it just wasn't any damn good basically. It was a  
13 precursor. At the same time the Navy is flying the DME (distance measuring equipment)  
14 and TACAN (tactical air navigation), and excellent electronics. We got that Decca crap.

15 SM: Decca system.

16 JP: Yeah. It was just—I don't know. I guess they didn't feel the Army was up to  
17 snuff to get the good electronics. The greatest percentage of the time you didn't need it,  
18 it was all VFR (visual flight rules) stuff. When we did we had, we got into the clouds we  
19 had ADF (automatic direction finder) and TCA (tactical control assistant) stuff we could  
20 work with so it wasn't bad, but it wasn't—it was supposed to be a tactical instrument  
21 system so you could free fly like you can with GPS (global positioning system). It would  
22 give you wherever you were capability, but it just didn't work out. GPS would be the  
23 fine thing to fly with today compared to that.

24 SM: Do you know what letters they used for the acronym?

25 JP: Decca. No, I don't remember. That's—

26 SM: You don't remember even the letters?

27 JP: Oh, it was D-E-C-C-A, but I don't know what they stand for. I remember it  
28 was, there were several chains overlaid on the whole globe. You'd operate with two or  
29 three of these chains of data coming from somewhere, but the data was probably good. I  
30 think the execution of the actual electronics and the analog display system was the worst  
31 part. I just don't think they were ready for prime time yet.

1 SM: Well, when you were flying who would run that, the Decca system?

2 JP: It was an automatic thing. It was a—you tuned the radio chains in and it was  
3 on a console on the dash.

4 SM: Oh, it was right there in the cockpit with you.

5 JP: It was on dash of the thing. They had the two scrolls were—you put the  
6 paper scrolls in and on a tractor feed and set the needle at your initiation point. You set  
7 up your Decca chains similar to a GPS LORAN. So you knew your start position. Then  
8 once you start the paper map rolled up and down and eventually we'd wind off into  
9 nowhere. If you lost a signal, it wouldn't self correct. You'd have to initialize again to  
10 where you were and this kind of thing.

11 SM: Now was this an attempt to get you guys a map of the earth, to keep you  
12 lower so you wouldn't have a—?

13 JP: Oh, oh yeah. That's what I meant by tactical. I mean it was a tactical  
14 navigation system, whereas typical aviation nav systems are point to point, like VOR  
15 (VHF omni-directional radio-range) is a point to point, you fly an airway. Whereas GPS  
16 you can free fly you know point to point of your choosing as opposed to VOR 1 to VOR  
17 2 like, from Schenectady to Kennedy, there's an airway. But in GPS you can fly  
18 Schenectady to this, that and the other and free fly. That was an attempt with Decca to do  
19 a free fly thing so you could use it in a tactical situation where all of a sudden you're in  
20 the shit and you don't know where you are and you've got situational awareness enough  
21 to get you out of it or where you wanted to be. The thought was good. GPS is, I'm sure  
22 in today's, you know the Black Hawks and the Apaches, it's all together and it's all  
23 integrated with the flight systems. Of course that wasn't. That was another thing. It  
24 wasn't integrated with the flight system. All you had was a display. I mean, you had to  
25 use—you were still flying the airplane and had to fly to—that needle was there saying  
26 where you were and you had to fly from that to wherever you wanted to go. So the pilot  
27 was the automatic pilot. There was no coupling to the flight systems at all. It was all,  
28 you know, you read it and then you did the flying like all of the other stuff was. We had  
29 no coupled flight systems at all, no automatic pilot or anything like that. The pilot did all  
30 the interpretation. Even if you did the interpretation from bad information it didn't do  
31 you a hell of a lot of good, but the idea was good. That was—I did enjoy trying to work

1 the bugs out of it because I knew if we did have this, the capability would be incredible,  
2 but it was one of those things. It just wasn't ready for prime time.

3 SM: But when you did fly with the Decca system on board, would you typically  
4 fly at a lower altitude then you would otherwise?

5 JP: No. No, I didn't.

6 SM: You still flew at the same altitudes that you, as far as your mission altitude  
7 didn't change?

8 JP: The altitude thing was as much being a cowboy as it is anything, but I think  
9 that the mission, the exposure was one thing. The hotter it was, the lower you flew just  
10 because you weren't exposed I mean. If it was, no problem, fifteen hundred, couple  
11 thousand feet, you cruise along fat, dumb and happy. It was nice. You don't have to  
12 work too hard and you're outside of the dead man's curve, the envelope of insecurity.  
13 Beyond certain altitude unless there's a lot of open space you just you can't—the physics  
14 of controlling the aircraft if you have engine failure isn't there. You're going to crash,  
15 that kind of thing. So you're working those two things against each other all the time,  
16 staying out of the dead man's curve and staying out of the shooting man's curve. So  
17 those are the two things you balanced against each other and, but low-level flying is just  
18 too much fun to ignore too. It's you know a hundred miles an hour through the tree tops  
19 or up rivers. Everything is just, it's a hell of a lot of fun.

20 SM: But you're—I mean you're decreasing your vulnerability because your  
21 speed over the ground in relation to—

22 JP: Right. I mean, your exposure to a guy with a small arm, I mean he is only,  
23 his field of fire is very small and at a hundred miles an hours it's real quick. So there's  
24 not much opportunity and that's as good a reason as any. After awhile you begin to  
25 develop—like I said I had one hydraulic failure and I don't remember a great deal of  
26 equipment. Turbines are very reliable power plants. You begin to develop a faith and a  
27 sense in the equipment that even though you're flying in the dead man's curve and they  
28 say you can never get it down, a lot of people have put them down and auto rotated from  
29 one hundred feet you know and used—

30 SM: Really?

31 JP: Oh, yeah. It's not an impossibility. It's just not a—

1 SM: You've got to be really, a split second reaction.

2 JP: Well, reaction timing and reaction timing, it becomes innate. The minute  
3 anything happens you roll and throttle and dropping the collective so you can maintain  
4 the inertia in your rotor system that you can use when you get close to the ground. You  
5 get close to the ground real fast, but I mean you're flaring. Whenever you flare you're  
6 putting more energy into the rotor system so you had more energy to work with when you  
7 get wherever you're going to go. Of course in the trees no matter what you do you're not  
8 going to do much, but open area rice paddies and going like hell up through that or you  
9 know low jungle growth, its not as bad. But in the trees too they're even greater  
10 protection because their field of fire is narrow because of the high jungle. So at two  
11 thousand feet they still don't have a great deal of field fire for you. Flying high there  
12 isn't bad. But it was just too damn much fun flying low level. It makes it interesting.  
13 It's another thing, just adds another dimension whereas you're just cruising along at two  
14 thousand feet all day, grab some food and come back at two thousand feet. There's no,  
15 no excitement in the area, make your own excitement.

16 SM: But you weren't told not to do that?

17 JP: It wasn't—it was probably frowned upon, but most people did it whenever  
18 they damn well felt it was—they could raise hell. I'm sure somebody always had  
19 something to say. Well, you won't hold level here, you won't do this, you won't do that.  
20 Somebody was always doing something stupid, knocking some gooks off the top of a bus  
21 or you know idiotic stuff like that. That happens. But you know it's—there was those  
22 kind of things happened too.

23 SM: Knocking people off of a bus?

24 JP: Yeah, I know. Yeah, well.

25 SM: With your skids.

26 JP: Exactly, or coming close enough for them to jump off, but that's—those  
27 things I guess. There's always some dimension of that somewhere. Or you know people  
28 on a rice paddy just buzzing them close, tight that happens. I don't think it was any  
29 physical contact. I mean, you still don't want to hit anybody going a hundred miles an  
30 hour, no matter what you hit. You're not going to do that, but I mean it was just aberrant

1 teenage behavior. Those kind of things would get a lick now and then from somebody,  
2 but that wasn't common. The low level flying wasn't common a lot of times.

3 SM: Well, go ahead and describe what happened at Dak To and what took you  
4 guys there.

5 JP: From what I understand there was some kind of an NVA incursion. It was  
6 quite close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail which came down through, I don't know, was it  
7 Laos or Cambodia that's right west of Dak To. They got in some pretty hot stuff there  
8 for some extended period of time and had to beef up the resources. That's what brought  
9 us over there. We worked with three or four other units there too. I don't know if it was  
10 170 something, aviation brigade or two or three different units that we hadn't done  
11 before. There were a lot more ground troops. We had some armor and some other things  
12 that I'd never, we'd never operated with before. Of course it was pretty helpless in that  
13 two feet of mud. So that was another reason they depended on armor and mech stuff and  
14 that didn't work out because it was all mudded down. So I think they had to switch to the  
15 air mobile thing to try and counteract the weather conditions. Of course that didn't help  
16 because low clouds and sky we're limited too a lot of times. I just remember kind of  
17 hairy for a few weeks there and things settled down. They chased them to the point that  
18 we'd insert guys and there'd be no more contact that kind of vaporized into Laos and  
19 Cambodia again, didn't maintain contact. But it was hot for awhile. I think the  
20 dependence on mechanized Cav got them in a bit of a snit because of the tracks and stuff  
21 wouldn't go in the mud, or at least wouldn't go where and when they wanted them to.  
22 That was difficulty. So that's the extent of it. Again the missions were hotter LZs and  
23 first encounter remember with anti-aircraft fire. Other than that it was a raise in the level  
24 of actual what was thought was combat. I don't know if it was our initiation or not or the  
25 NVAs blundering over the border or just that we were doing some kind of, or whatever  
26 units that were, were doing some kind of a search and destroy and blundered into it or  
27 not, but I think it was a blundering thing as opposed to an intentional act of engaging the  
28 NVA at that point in time, but it was pretty wild and crazy for days to weeks. I don't  
29 remember the timeline of that engagement, how long it was or how short it was. I just  
30 remember them raising the activity and being up there. Then we went back a few times  
31 after that doing more typical missions. We helped them do some insertions, but it was



1 basically the NVA regiment or corps or whatever it was that vaporized them. It was just  
2 typical missions then, a little bit of small arms and nothing, no major engagement, you  
3 know battle, battles. Firefights but you know not battles.

4 SM: Did you guys take heavier fire in the air while you were working at Dak To?

5 JP: Yeah, heavier fire. That's why I said anti-aircraft fire.

6 SM: Anti-aircraft fire, 37 or?

7 JP: Probably, probably was. We got a couple of them. There's a twin gizmo of  
8 some kind, I think it was a 37, but I'm not absolutely sure. There was a—Dak To airfield  
9 ran seems like east and west. It was a heavy mountainous area just to the south of it I  
10 think I'd say. It ran east west. I'm thinking about west, west and east, but to the south  
11 and that's where most of our contact was, south. Far west beyond the airfield was where  
12 we had most of the activity and that was difficult operating. In Bong Son we operated  
13 mostly in plains area and we always had a field or a rice paddy or something in certain  
14 extract where as the, up at Dak To it was all mountainous stuff, hillside insertions and a  
15 lot of stuff blown down LZs with tree limbs and logs and stuff that poor guys had to  
16 climb out of into, because you could never touch down a lot of times just hovering in a  
17 mess of blown up trees. That was more difficult—not I mean, to hover, but the poor guys  
18 had to get out in it was a little more difficult. The extractions were a little more difficult,  
19 waiting for them to climb up over the edge, or trying to get down where you could touch  
20 one toe down or on the skids if they can get a board you know or climb up over the skids.  
21 It took more time to load and extract whereas you go into a nice field and they're all  
22 ready. I mean, you touch the ground and they're out and you're gone in a heartbeat  
23 whereas those you're sitting a little more exposed for quite a bit longer period of time and  
24 you got jungle all around that's a little more—whereas in a field or something you may  
25 have a bush row, but there's not as much place for bad guys to hide as there in the deep  
26 trees. Still I don't remember getting a lot of ground fire there, more aerial, not as much  
27 ground fire.

28 SM: Now when you were flying, not just necessarily there in Bong Son or Dak  
29 To, just in general in Vietnam, did you ever fly near or over the border or on missions  
30 where you were told all right, you're going to be over the border, you can't really land,  
31 but you can go and do whatever you've got to do to get the mission done?

1           JP: We didn't, you know Lerps (LRRP, long-range reconnaissance patrols)  
2     insertions and anything on the border.

3           SM: You didn't do any LRRPs or anything. You did LRRP insertions on the  
4     border?

5           JP: Oh, yeah we did LRRP insertions over the border. We did mercenaries with  
6     Montagnards and Chinese Nungs they called them. Sometimes they'd even black out the  
7     back, or they'd put a curtain behind our seats and put the guys in the back and we didn't  
8     know what the hell we were dropping off in there.

9           SM: Really? Very interesting.

10          JP: Drop off some kind of characters and they'd back up with a Jeep and put  
11     them in. You go drop in this and then get out when you're gone. You can pick them up  
12     some other time. We did several of those but yeah, some of them were cross border.  
13     There was some kind of, Shh, you can't say this and all that stuff, but you know it  
14     wasn't—it was pretty much common knowledge. Who the hell are you going to talk to?  
15     No one's going to know, but we did that.

16          SM: Well, when you would do the cross-border missions, were they Laos,  
17     Cambodia or both, or North Vietnam? Did you ever do anything in North Vietnam?

18          JP: We were up into the DMZ (demilitarized zone) a couple of times for  
19     something, towards North Vietnam. I think probably that most of those were up in I  
20     Corps. We may have done some in II Corps too, but I don't remember that. I don't  
21     remember which corps. I know we were in Laos and Cambodia both at different times.

22          SM: You would land, let them off?

23          JP: Oh, yeah, can't push them out. We didn't do any parachute stuff or anything  
24     like that. So yeah we'd insert them in some LZ they picked and then they do some—  
25     there was intelligence stuff mostly. I'm sure that was CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)  
26     coordinated a lot of times. We'd have white helicopters show up. Some guys would get  
27     off, we'd take them out somewhere else. Air America interacted with them to some  
28     degree on the white helicopters. But it was all kept to some need to know basis of what  
29     was going on. LRRPs typically wasn't any problem. It was when we get into the flying  
30     some of those mercenaries that they put a curtain behind the seats for. Why? Who

1 knows? What difference does that make? I mean, you want to lift the curtain, you lift the  
2 curtain, but it was kind of interesting.

3 SM: That is.

4 JP: I don't remember why or what. I think that was mostly the mercenaries that  
5 were put in there for some reason.

6 SM: Would you get special briefings for those types of missions?

7 JP: Yeah. You'd get a briefing where you were going to go and drop them off.  
8 A lot of times they were night insertions to do that, at some coordinates.

9 SM: Were you ever asked to sign security agreements for those?

10 JP: Not that I remember, not that I remember. I think they did take our  
11 personally identifying information off though some times. I don't know if it was rank  
12 and dog tags without the names or not, but there was something that went on and off in  
13 certain ones, not all of them but some.

14 SM: How about on your aircraft?

15 JP: No, nothing changed there. They were always marked.

16 SM: They were always marked.

17 JP: Always marked. Yeah that was (mumbles). I don't remember anything else.  
18 Well, they did maybe three or four of those. I had a friend that did several others. There  
19 was one time we did, it seemed like quite a bit and then it passed and didn't do any more  
20 or we did very little.

21 SM: Now, these missions, these were in A Shau or—?

22 JP: No, they were west of that, Cambodia and Laos.

23 SM: No. I mean, where were you based when you were doing it?

24 JP: Oh, where were we based? I'm trying to think, Evans maybe. It was in I  
25 Corps somewhere. We had two or three different, Hammond and Evans and something  
26 else and I don't remember all those places well either, but I think that was primarily the  
27 areas we did those in. That's when again I think we became more of a strategic operating  
28 entity in I Corps. Then we had other places. Those were obviously intelligence missions  
29 and prepping for probably the A Shau, assault on the A Shau. Of course during the Tet  
30 thing you reacted to that kind of stuff. So I'm sure that's what that was. Again like I said

1 we weren't in on policy origination of the missions, but it's pretty obvious in hindsight  
2 that that was intelligence prep for those kind of things.

3 SM: Well, why don't you go ahead and describe—well, is there anything else  
4 about Dak To that you want to talk about, that you remember?

5 JP: Nope. Mud and bad weather and hot area, but nothing beyond that, that first  
6 exposure to anti-aircraft, more mountain slides.

7 SM: But again no aircraft losses?

8 JP: Huh?

9 SM: No aircraft losses in the unit?

10 JP: Maybe, maybe, I just don't remember any that time. I only remember—we  
11 had a lot of—like I had a hydraulic failure and Walt got shot down for fuel line and those  
12 kind of things that, the new fuel line, new hydraulic this and you're back up and running  
13 again, not losses. I think we only had a couple losses and those were in the A Shau that  
14 Brannau and Aness and Harrington got killed in. They were pretty severe when they hit  
15 the ground. They crashed pretty bad so those were total loss aircraft and that's what I'm  
16 saying. There may have been in Dak To, we may have lost one for some period of time,  
17 a control tube or this or that, but not losses.

18 SM: No, yeah. When I say losses I mean in the way, in the sense that you're—?

19 JP: That's what I'm thinking to.

20 SM: You're interpreting, no total losses aircraft losses to your knowledge.

21 JP: No total losses that I know of. No, other companies or other, you know  
22 maybe second platoon had one, but I don't recall in my immediate circle of influence  
23 there was any aircraft losses out there. I'm sure there were. In the whole operation there  
24 was some pretty heavy crap, but not from my immediate circle.

25 SM: Your company.

26 JP: Not company that I remember.

27 SM: Okay. Now where were you for Tet of '68 because when you were working  
28 at Dak To that was near the end of '67, going into '68?

29 JP: I'm thinking it's in—I think we moved north in maybe, I'm trying to say  
30 November. I'm not absolutely sure. It was cold up there. I know that it was in the 40s.

31 SM: This is when you went to Camp Evans?

1 JP: Evans or what was the other one? There was another one up there. We were  
2 in two different places and I can't remember the names. Evans was one anyway. Then  
3 we moved from somewhere else.

4 SM: You were operating in.

5 JP: We divided the unit too when we went up there. There were a couple of other  
6 places so we weren't all together as the whole battalion had been pretty much together.  
7 Bravo Company had been totally together, but I think even the company had been split, a  
8 few birds here and some other place. God, I'd have to go back and look at operational  
9 missions and remember that, but I sensed there was some splitting off and a reduction in  
10 total force, worked together still, but in different areas for different reasons. I don't  
11 remember what that was, what the division was, if it was a battalion separation or  
12 company or what it was, but there was some rearrangement of the forces that weren't as  
13 tight together as they were in II Corps. But I believe, we were at Evans I think. I  
14 remember the name fairly well and going in out of the POL area there. Again typical  
15 missions until Tet. I went R & R (rest and recuperation) just before and when I came  
16 back Tet was that day or the next day or something like that when I got back from  
17 Australia. It all just turned to crap from then on. I don't know how long Tet lasted.  
18 Maybe you can refresh me, but I extracted a lot of Marines out of the Citadel and Hue.  
19 That was a pretty hot area. We moved a lot of people around a lot of different places  
20 until they finally got that taken back again. We operated there. I guess that was in  
21 January.

22 SM: Yeah. It kicked off the very end of January and continued through most of  
23 February and March.

24 JP: January and February, yep. That was most of the activity in the city there and  
25 just around the perimeter of it, in and out of that, all around that area.

26 SM: Before we get too much deeper into Tet, you mentioned your R & R. So we  
27 keep it chronological and talk about that real quick. What was that like going to  
28 Australia? Two week or was it a week long or two week R & R or?

29 JP: I don't know. Make it ten days, something like that. It was real nice. It was  
30 culturally different. They treated women like dirt so anybody that treated them nice was  
31 incredible. That was a—I guess there was quite a different ratio of women to men in

1 Australia compared to what we were used to. Most of the Australian guys were, there  
2 was kind of a macho attitude and since—

3 SM: That is there were a lot more women than men in Australia.

4 JP: Well, more women than men and I think there's a—I don't know if it's a  
5 European attitude, I noticed it a lot. I was in Ireland last year and I noticed that there's a  
6 little more macho male dominant society there in England than I notice here. We're not  
7 quite that way. In Australia that served us well because we were a little more polite and  
8 nice. It was a lot of fun, went to Bonsai beach and had a lot of fun. First night in this bar  
9 room, Ron Gutwein and I met this guy from Orange was the name of the community. He  
10 flew us out to his sheep station in his twin airplane and we stayed there for a couple days  
11 just because he wanted to bring a couple of Americans home with him and treat us well.  
12 He did and that was very nice. Then he flew us back to Sydney and we spent the rest of  
13 the ten days you know raising hell, going to the beach and having a good time, very nice,  
14 very nice. It went by all too fast I guess. Ten days didn't last long. Then it was back  
15 right in the middle of Tet. November to January was probably most times setting up and  
16 getting organized and figuring out the lay of the land there as they dispersed it and  
17 ground operations getting all the LZs and firebases known. We were whatever pole  
18 pushed stuff to. We're a lot closer. We went into Da Nang several times, spent several  
19 nights at the Air Force BOQs (bachelor officers' quarters) there and met some people. It  
20 was a little more civilized than we'd been in Bong Son and An Khe in a tent situation,  
21 instead of hillbillies of the war. It did me a little more gentrified being able to get into Da  
22 Nang, in an air base with real airplanes and fuel trucks, instead of running out of rubber  
23 blivets all the time and that stuff. That was that first couple of months, organization and  
24 typical missions. We flew a lot. I think I got about—I don't know I got about eleven  
25 hundred hours that year so we did a lot of flying, a lot of flying.

26 SM: That is a lot of flying. You mentioned log missions earlier?

27 JP: Logistics.

28 SM: Okay, yeah, just providing?

29 JP: Food, water, ammo. I mean, these guys on the ground got to be supported.

30 SM: Same as ash and trash.

31 JP: Three meals a day, yeah ash and trash. That's logistics, log mission.

1 SM: I would imagine you probably got a lot of your time from those, or no?

2 JP: I don't know. I don't know what the mix was, probably seventy/thirty,  
3 eighty/twenty probably logistics stuff and general missions compared to CAs. Although  
4 we logged it different, as log time or CA, we logged it different, but I never did figure out  
5 what the ratio was. I mean, they were all the same.

6 SM: As far as your total flying hours.

7 JP: Total flying hours, it—

8 SM: It doesn't matter what your mission is.

9 JP: It doesn't matter. You can get shot carrying food as well as you can CA. I  
10 guess the only thing that would be different from the CA is you were actively trying to  
11 stir up trouble in some area where there was some kind of known activity, but the other  
12 was just a matter of timing. It wasn't much different. We did a lot of that in the first two  
13 months. Then I guess we were proactively getting organized there whereas after you get  
14 to Tet and the A Shau it was more a reactive thing. Tet was very reactive. Nobody was  
15 expecting and you didn't, bing, bang, bing, bang. You're always doing some mission  
16 on—everything's an emergency all the time, which was a lot more tense and probably a  
17 time where you felt that combat was more relevant. When I said outside your headset  
18 and outside of the rotor blades you hear a little pop-popping, it's not there. It came in a  
19 little closer as the intensity grew and a lot more people get hit and this and that went on.  
20 That came in a little bit, but still it wasn't—it was no overwhelming fear or no, I don't  
21 want to do this, I don't want to do that or I can't do this mission and that one. Still, you  
22 just did it, but you had more sense of what was happening in those times. But still not  
23 objectionable, I mean fun and had a more sense of accomplishment because you're  
24 actually pulling people out of hot spots and bad places. That was good stuff.

25 SM: Now during Tet while you were flying I guess around Hue. Did you fly, did  
26 you ever fly near Khe Sanh or into Khe Sanh, support missions?

27 JP: Oh, yeah. We did a lot of Khe Sanh, actual operations, what the Cav and the  
28 101<sup>st</sup> together was what broke that siege of Khe Sanh eventually. That was an organized  
29 mission, but that was post-Tet I think to some degree. It probably was some continuity  
30 there, but getting Hue and the Citadel back and that kind of stuff was primary importance  
31 for that month or two. That's where I got a Bronze Star and a Vietnamese Cross of

1 Gallantry and two or three other things and the stuff at Hue, for what I don't specifically  
2 remember, but I knew we flew a lot of missions. I flew into a soccer field in the Citadel  
3 and out of there, not several times, but I don't remember what I got the awards for, but  
4 there was a lot of stuff given during the time. It was pretty tense activity. I can just put  
5 the two together because I don't remember mission specific stuff, but I do remember  
6 flying into a city and it was hot and that kind of thing which we had done very little of  
7 before. We never, always in the open countryside. I mean, even at Dak To was an  
8 airfield and not relevant to a population city. Bong Son was the closest we were, but Hue  
9 was quite a city. They just knocked the shit out of that with all of the artillery fire trying  
10 to take it back from the NVA. But then we did fly a lot of—I remember pre, before the  
11 fairly sizable sets of combat assaults we did all around Khe Sanh to start breaking that  
12 down, I think we started some kind of a cordon type maneuver, where we inserted people  
13 and then pushed up closer to the NVA where we could see from here the little zig zag  
14 trenches were up close to the wire all around. (Editor's note: Interviewee speaks to third  
15 party, but it's not relevant to interview)

16 SM: Do you want to take a break? Go ahead, I'm sorry.

17 JP: Yeah, we started some kind of a cordon maneuver around Khe Sanh it seems.  
18 We put people all around and then kind of squeezed it up from the air. That was a, I  
19 would say, a pretty good siege there on that airfield. There were burned out C-130s on  
20 the ground and interesting air field. You never saw anybody above ground. Everybody  
21 was underground, the Marines there. The airfield was basically leveled as far as  
22 incoming artillery so they were all living underground. It was just a runway and a bunch  
23 of flat spots around it with sandbag humps, but we went in and out of there several times.  
24 Did you see the poster they had out there of Rocky. I think I was.

25 SM: Yeah, with the Budweiser. Is that right?

26 JP: I think we were with him when we dropped that off one day and we had that  
27 and ran out and dropped it off at the command bunker and took off again, kind of a silly  
28 effort, but it was kind of a neat thing. Khe Sanh was an incredible airfield. You went off  
29 the end of the runway and there was, I don't know a thousand foot drop to a valley  
30 bottom with a big waterfall down to a river down below. Every time we went up there  
31 we'd low level up this road. It was gorgeous, I mean it was absolutely incredible



1 scenery. It was some of the most beautiful I've even seen. Then you pull straight up and  
2 pop onto the end of this runway right at the end of it. It was quite a place, quite a place.  
3 We had one guy that was flying a POW (prisoner of war) back down that river and he  
4 crawled out the side and landed in the river. They went back around, picked him up and  
5 he was still alive. He inched himself over the side and went out. Somebody, Fillmore I  
6 think or somebody wrote a story about it. I don't remember who it was or who they were  
7 with or what happened.

8 SM: How high were they when he got out?

9 JP: I don't know, probably low leveling down the river, several hundred feet  
10 probably, but he climbed out. He bashed up in the river, but they picked him up and he  
11 was alive. That's quite a story.

12 SM: That is. Well, it's just remarkable that he was able to do it and survive, but  
13 even more remarkable that he was re-caught.

14 JP: Oh, Jesus of all things, of all things, yeah. But went in there a lot of times. I  
15 think the worst of that was—it didn't seem too much to break the deal, but after the fact  
16 we had to do some of these recovery missions. The whole area was littered with a lot of  
17 bodies and we had to go scoop that stuff up. That was some pretty nasty, sitting outside  
18 for days and smelling crap. That was just graphically nasty.

19 SM: Yeah, very difficult.

20 JP: I think NVA and American both. It was a pretty severe battle. I think that  
21 was the most exposure we had to the real consequences. Shot in the leg is bloody and  
22 nasty, but its not grotesque, blackened corpse kind of stuff. That was, that was bad. But  
23 again, it wasn't you. The relevance, it gets closer, but it's still, ten feet tall and bullet  
24 proof still gives you some protection. I don't know what it is. It's a genetic deal, but that  
25 was about the Tet, Khe Sanh, A Shau connection. I'm not quite putting together in time,  
26 the A Shau may have been in the middle and Khe Sanh later, but I think Khe Sanh  
27 followed Tet, following our go into the A Shau which was probably a result of Tet and  
28 how did they get all this stuff so close to us without us knowing, I think that was the  
29 reason for that. But the weather was never good there. The operation was not good  
30 because you couldn't re-supply in there because of weather. We did it right on the fringe  
31 of when bad weather was coming. I think the planning, even though it was probably a

1 necessary mission, the planning and timing were probably not great because you got into  
2 bad weather before you could fully accomplish although we did, we did whack a lot of  
3 stuff up in hospitals. There was a Russian helicopter there and a lot of equipment, but  
4 probably didn't have the time to fully exploit all the, or wreck all the assets that were  
5 there because of weather considerations and the ability of re-supply and maintain those  
6 guys' supply line because we didn't have truck supply. It was all aircraft delivered and  
7 even though you could get, finally get 130s into the bottom it still wasn't a good  
8 situation, the weather. That was a pretty hot situation, going in there. Everybody refers  
9 to the nineteenth and twentieth, which I don't remember dates, but I know the first couple  
10 of days were bad and we lost you know one ship total loss on the first day and another  
11 one. I don't remember which one it was, but evidently from the stories I hear this Steve  
12 Brannau was killed, but his copilot wasn't. But I was on the wing of one of those guys  
13 and it must be Harrington that I had a full load of grunts. When they went down, one  
14 they ordered not to go down with them, but I mean what the hell can you do if you're  
15 right there. So we did go right down with them. When I finally got down there where I'd  
16 saw they'd gone in, they'd smacked into the hillside and skids were spread and rotor  
17 blades were down. It looked like everybody aboard—you know I couldn't touch a skid  
18 down because I was just on one skid and I was flying on the left seat, looking across  
19 because the only place I could land was looking across into the aircraft down like that.  
20 Everybody was dead. I had a full load of grunts. I guess we could have put them out, but  
21 I mean everybody reported that the whole place, there was nobody alive so why risk six  
22 more guys to stick them out there to protect a bunch of dead guys. I think we were  
23 assaulting south into the valley. The weather was really bad. We're flying right in the  
24 bottom of the crap, all the way along, in and out of clouds. That, we were right in the  
25 clouds when we got down there. So the only thing we could do is, we pulled out of there,  
26 we just pulled pitch and climbed out at about ten thousand over the mountains. I actually  
27 took the grunts back and took them back to Evans because we were low on fuel. There  
28 was all kinds of pressures on them. We'd been getting all kinds of fire going down that  
29 valley for the head of the thing trying to stay underneath the crap which put you right  
30 down in small arms fire range. That was a hairy day. Then the next day was even worse.  
31 I think we assaulted north and that's when it was—the ceiling was much higher, but

1 that's when the anti-aircraft fire was—all they had was zero on the bottom of the ceiling  
2 and between there and the ground just fill it with crap and they were getting all kinds of  
3 stuff. They got some 130s and Chinooks. I mean, stuff was dropping everywhere. That  
4 was kind of between the shit and sweat there was no place to go except back into the  
5 clouds and out of there once you got your insertion done. I don't know how many times  
6 we went in there that day, but that was I think one of the biggest combat assaults that had  
7 ever been done. It was a combined 101<sup>st</sup> Cav mission and there was a—it was a huge  
8 flight of birds, I mean hundreds of aircraft I think is in there—were lined up. We had to  
9 actually go down and find sets of fields big enough away from Evans that would hold all  
10 the birds to put the mission together and take off flight at a time and so much spacing and  
11 all that. It was quite an operation, pretty complex to put a lot of swinging blade airplanes  
12 in the air together like that, especially with bad weather. It was an interesting few days.  
13 After that it was more typical missions. I don't remember how much more assaulting we  
14 did. I'm sure we did more, but those two were particularly bad. Once we got some  
15 artillery in there and calmed down the ack ack and a few things like that it was more  
16 reasonable. I mean, it wasn't certain suicide to go in the damn thing like it had been for a  
17 lot of—I don't know how many airplanes they lost in that first two days, but it was much  
18 more than the allowable norm for sure. It was not a good day, good day as in the weather  
19 didn't cooperate and bad to go I guess.

20 SM: This weekend is the anniversary of that?

21 JP: Yeah. That's what somebody told me is that tomorrow is the day, official day  
22 of Brannau's getting nailed and the next day the others. I didn't realize that but—

23 SM: Yeah, okay. Well, we're almost out of record time here. We've got a few  
24 seconds so I'm just going to throw an ending on this and we can pick it up on another  
25 that.

26 JP: Sure. That's fine.

27 SM: Thank you very much, sir.

28 JP: You're quite welcome.

29 SM: This will end our interview for the day.

30 JP: Good.