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**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with John McNown, Jr.  
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.  
September 16; December 17, 18, 2003; January 28, 30, 2004  
Transcribed by Shannon Geach**

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

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm conducting an oral history  
2 interview with Mr. John McNown, Jr. Today is September 16, 2003 and it's  
3 approximately 8:44 AM Central Standard Time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas in the Special  
4 Collections Library Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr.  
5 McNown, you are in Overland Park, Kansas?

6 John McNown: Actually I'm in Mission, Kansas. I work in Mission, Kansas.

7 RV: Okay, very good. Let's start with a biographical sketch of yourself, sir.  
8 Could you tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

9 JM: Yes, I was born on or I guess on Kessler Field, Mississippi. My father was  
10 in the Army Air Corps at the time. He was a career officer. Actually he bounced back  
11 and forth. He was riffed a couple times. He started off as a private. I think he joined the  
12 Army in 1940, went to OCS in '42 and I was born March 1, 1944. So I grew up on  
13 military posts, on Air Force Bases. My father, most of his career was a provost marshal.  
14 He was an Air Police Officer. We spent time in Germany and Japan and Hawaii and a lot  
15 of time in Texas. There's a lot of Air Force bases in Texas.

16 RV: Yes, sir.

17 JM: I thought I was a Texan for along time. They used to brainwash you pretty  
18 well when you were in school back there.

19 RV: Yes, sir.

20 JM: I think I went to twelve schools in thirteen years if you count kindergarten.

21 RV: Wow.

1 JM: Started off kindergarten in Germany. My dad was stationed in Marburg,  
2 Germany. Kind of an interesting situation there. He was the only Air Force officer in a  
3 supply post. He was a first lieutenant. We were living in this huge house because the Air  
4 Force at the time had just become its own branch of the armed forces. They were  
5 insisting that their senior officers got the same quarters as the Army senior officer on the  
6 post. He was a general. So the entire Air Force detachment actually lived in this house  
7 with my dad instead of in the barracks. So we had kind of an interesting group setting  
8 house while we were in Germany. Then various posts around the world. We were in  
9 Japan in 1953 when I was in fourth grade. That was pretty interesting because we used to  
10 have air raid drills and we used to have to go out and get into foxholes in the school  
11 yards, because at the time they were still worried that the Chinese might decide to come  
12 into the war bigger and bomb Japan. So I had kind of an interesting childhood as far as  
13 moving around and doing a lot of those things.

14 RV: How long were you in Japan?

15 JM: Just a year. We were there for a year. Actually lived off post for about the  
16 first three or four months. They didn't have enough quarters there so we lived out sort of  
17 on the economy, in a small village called Kogane. All my playmates and things were  
18 Japanese. I didn't speak any Japanese but a lot of the kids around my age around there.  
19 That was actually a very nice experience for me. It was a good thing. They were playing  
20 baseball even back then, so we had something in common. Got to be friends with a lot of  
21 young Japanese people. Of course I didn't keep in touch with them. When you're in  
22 fourth grade when you come home, you don't worry about pen pals and things. So we  
23 spent [time in Hawaii], and I actually graduated from Waipahu High School in Waipahu,  
24 Hawaii. Only went there three months so I've never been invited to a reunion. But I  
25 don't think they know I actually went to school there. So it was sort of interesting  
26 moving around like that.

27 RV: So you bounced around quite a bit. How do you think that's affected you?  
28 Was it a positive experience overall do you think?

29 JM: Actually I think it was. I mean I think it gives you a fairly cosmopolitan  
30 outlook on how things are and how things work. Air Force bases especially are like small  
31 communities because they're usually much smaller than an Army post. So I think you get

1 sort of that small town close knit feeling there. I always thought, because we moved so  
2 much I guess, it was sort of an adventure. There was some place new to go, some place  
3 new to see. I made friends fairly easily I think at that time. So it was always a good  
4 experience for us. We always lived on post because my dad's occupation. Therefore you  
5 didn't have some of the problems that I know my sisters had a little later on after I had  
6 graduated from high school. They moved to a couple places and actually lived out in the  
7 civilian economy. Of course you weren't accepted as readily out there because people  
8 lived there their entire lives whereas on the Air Force bases people were moving all the  
9 time. You just sort of made new friends as they appeared.

10 RV: I imagine that the ability for you to make those new friends has helped you  
11 through out your career and your life after that, after you graduated and got out, I would  
12 imagine. I've heard this from a number of people who've moved around military bases,  
13 that if they were able to adapt like that, to those changing situations that transferred into  
14 their adult life as well.

15 JM: I think it's been good in my professional life. I think I'm a little more  
16 introverted and I'm not sure why that is in my private life. So I'm not a real network  
17 kind of person when I'm outside the house, I mean outside work. So from that standpoint  
18 it's been a little different. But it's been fine at work, because I can sort of integrate in  
19 fairly rapidly into a setting.

20 RV: Tell me about your schooling. How were you as a student?

21 JM: I was a good student. A's and B's all through high school and sort of an  
22 indifferent student by the time I go to college. I'm not quite sure why that was. Really  
23 enjoyed school. I was blessed with having some very good teachers, I think, when I was  
24 in Texas, especially fifth, sixth grade and my junior and senior year in high school. I  
25 think teachers make a lot of difference. They can say what they want about school  
26 systems and I think the thing that makes a person learn or have the desire to learn is  
27 whether they get a good teacher or not. So I just feel like I received actually an excellent  
28 education at a time when the Texas school systems weren't reputed to be very good.  
29 That carried on with me. All through life I've always had a fairly easy time in school.  
30 Unfortunately I didn't have the self-discipline maybe in college on some things. I got

1 through, but I had the desire, I wanted to be an Army officer. That's what I wanted to do,  
2 so going to college was just a method to that end.

3 RV: How about sports? Were you athletic?

4 JM: I played a little football in junior high and then because we transferred every  
5 year they had a transfer rule in Texas and so I wasn't actually eligible. The only thing I  
6 was actually interested in was football and three out of my four years because I started  
7 practicing some place I wasn't actually eligible to play. Of course by the time I got to be  
8 a senior it was pretty much over. So, no. That's a long answer. I was reasonably  
9 athletic, but I didn't play.

10 RV: Your father was in the military obviously, we've talked about that. Any  
11 other relatives that were in the military?

12 JM: Yes, I have an uncle who was a career NCO in the Air Force. He actually  
13 lives in San Antonio now. He retired as the non-commissioned officer in charge of the  
14 radio crypto school for the Air Force. He's been in radios for years and actually a pretty  
15 brilliant man in his own right. He used to put the plane together they used to spy on over  
16 in Southeast Asia, actually configure them and talk to the vendors about what they were  
17 going to put inside the planes to do what. Just grew up with radios and was awfully good  
18 at it. Then I have my other uncle, on my mother's side was a career Air Force officer.  
19 He retired as a lieutenant colonel. Went in during World War II and then stayed in. Then  
20 my father's only brother actually built airplanes for McDonald Douglas in the forties all  
21 the way until he retired in 1979. So even though he was 4-F for the draft in World War  
22 II, had a heart murmur, he had something to do with the military his whole life.

23 RV: I can only imagine that with your father in the military and then these others  
24 that this was a huge influence on you joining the military.

25 JM: Yes, I mean that's what I knew and I liked it. I felt that was what I wanted  
26 to do. I knew I didn't want to be in the Air Force. In the Air Force it becomes pretty  
27 obvious that if you're not rated, as they say, you're not a pilot, that it sort of limits what  
28 you could do, at least at that time. So I decided that I really would rather be in the Army  
29 and always kind of wanted to be an infantry soldier. I have no idea why. I was a history  
30 major and I guess I read too much history. So part of the reason was I thought there

1 would be a better chance for promotion and advancement in the Army because my eyes  
2 were bad enough I wasn't going to be able to fly.

3 RV: How did your parents feel about you joining the military?

4 JM: They were very much in favor of it. They thought it was a good life and felt  
5 if that's what I wanted to do they were very much in favor of it. Didn't actually push me  
6 into that, though.

7 RV: Right. That was your decision.

8 JM: Right.

9 RV: What year did you graduate high school in Hawaii?

10 JM: 1962.

11 RV: What were your plans after that? Were you expected to go to college? Did  
12 you want to go to college?

13 JM: A little bit of both. I think my parents wanted me to go to college. I wanted  
14 to be, as I say, I wanted to be an officer in the military. So there was three ways to do  
15 that. OCS wasn't very big at the time. As a matter of fact, it was, I think, pretty small at  
16 times so there wasn't many people going into that. I applied did an application at West  
17 Point, was first alternate here in Missouri. Then after I thought about it, I decided I didn't  
18 want to go some place there wasn't girls. So I ended up, decided to go the college route  
19 through ROTC.

20 RV: Where did you go?

21 JM: I went a year to the University of Hawaii. So I ended up five years in school  
22 at a time when people were graduating in three because my first year was pretty much  
23 wasted, but I had a great time. I ended up going to Southwest Missouri State in  
24 Springfield. My parents were over in Hawaii and they wanted me to be somewhere close  
25 to family. I had grandparents in Bolivar, Missouri. We'd gone around and looked at  
26 some places. I wasn't as much interested in where I went to school as to what the  
27 outcome was going to be when I came out. They had a very good ROTC program  
28 actually.

29 RV: Ok, so you were there at Southwest Missouri State from '63 until—?

30 JM: '67. Graduated in '67.

1           RV: Tell me about your college years there. What are your memories, your main  
2 memories of that?

3           JM: Let me see. Actually I had a great experience in college. I loved the social  
4 experience. I loved a lot of the learning experience. I was a resident assistant in the  
5 dorm for three years. So that certainly helped matters as far as it paid for my room and  
6 board for the last three years I was in school. Between that and the summer, at that time,  
7 you could make tuition and books. ROTC gave me enough spending money to get by.  
8 Didn't have a car so you didn't have a lot of expenses that way. I was in the student  
9 senate, just did a lot of different things while I was in school. I had a lot of good friends  
10 that I still have from college. It was just a very positive experience. I just enjoyed the  
11 entire spectrum of college life. Sometimes I enjoyed going to class and sometimes I  
12 didn't.

13          RV: You indicated earlier that you were an average, a little bit better than  
14 average student.

15          JM: Yes, unfortunately I would get upset and not drop a class. I would quit  
16 going, but not drop it. That lowers your grade point considerably on occasion.

17          RV: Yes, sir.

18          JM: But did really well in ROTC, did really well in my major. I was a history  
19 major with a political science minor and probably have enough hours in English to get a  
20 minor in that if I would have applied for one, if I would have declared it. Had a  
21 wonderful time in the classes I enjoyed. In the classes I didn't enjoy I kind of skated  
22 through.

23          RV: Tell me about ROTC. What was that like?

24          JM: ROTC at Southwest Missouri State was actually a great experience. We had  
25 good instructors. At one time, SMS had graduated more general officers as a percentage  
26 than any school in the country.

27          RV: Wow.

28          JM: I'm not sure that they still have that distinction. But one time even higher  
29 than A&M and pretty close to West Point. They had a class in '63 I think of nineteen or  
30 twenty graduates and thirty percent of them became general officers. I guess maybe we  
31 had one really distinguished class and then there was the rest of us. But really good. As

1 a matter of fact I was very much influenced in my entire military career by a man named  
2 Major George Urish who had been a platoon leader in the Korean War and was just an  
3 excellent instructor. I suspect he'd been a really good leader as a platoon leader and  
4 company commander. He just had kind of an aura about him. He liked me and I liked  
5 him. I learned an awful lot from him that they don't teach in the books, which is an  
6 important thing after you get in combat. There's lot of things they teach you that really  
7 just don't work as well as they think they're going to. He taught me the best lesson I ever  
8 had from anyone as far as military training was. That was, whatever unit you command  
9 in the smallest unit you take any place with you. So if you're a squad leader, you take  
10 your whole squad, you never split it. If you're a platoon leader, you take your whole  
11 platoon. If you're a company commander you take your whole company whether it's one  
12 sniper or a whole battalion. It was a good lesson. It was something they don't teach in  
13 military training but something he learned in Korea.

14 RV: You took that with you during your military career?

15 JM: Yes.

16 RV: Did it serve you well in Vietnam?

17 JM: Yes it did. Or at least I feel it did.

18 RV: Tell me a little bit about the climate there at Southwest Missouri State in the  
19 1960s. A lot of stuff going on internationally and domestically. I'm really curious as to  
20 how much the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia was discussed in your history classes  
21 and political science classes.

22 JM: Actually because I graduated in '67 I think the war was still seen as a fairly  
23 positive thing at that time. Springfield, Missouri being a conservative community and  
24 sort of right in the center of the country, a lot of the activism hadn't gotten down there by  
25 the time I graduated. So there was some concern I think by the time I graduated, I think  
26 about my last semester about what was going on because the draft had certainly picked  
27 up some momentum by the first part of '67. But prior to that—and of course it was  
28 discussed a lot in the ROTC classes just because by '67 they were telling us everybody  
29 was going to Vietnam after they graduated.

30 RV: Right.

1 JM: So there was a lot of discussion about it there. But again it was sort of ‘this  
2 is what we do and this is the job and this is where you’re going to go. We’re going to  
3 train you the best we can.’

4 RV: How did you feel about it personally? Do you remember?

5 JM: Yes. Actually, you know, when you’re young and dumb I guess as far as  
6 that kind of thing goes, I was actually worried that they were going to get the war over  
7 before I got there. Because at that time there was certainly a lot of talk about well,  
8 ‘We’re winning and things are going very well.’ I thought, ‘Well this may be my only  
9 chance to go over and actually see combat.’ At the time I thought if you’re going to be a  
10 soldier you should go over and see combat. I thought, ‘There may or may not be over by  
11 the time I have chance to be there.’ So that was one thought. Of course you always  
12 worry about well, ‘Once I get there how am I really going to perform?’ So that was  
13 mainly my two main thoughts about it.

14 RV: Did you have an idea of why the United States was in Vietnam at the time?

15 JM: I actually believe that. In retrospect I think it may have been true, that we  
16 were over there to stop Communism from expanding. I think that as you get older and  
17 you put things in perspective, I suspect it was just all part of the Truman Doctrine if you  
18 want to call it that. It was probably, maybe the right thing to do. It seemed the right  
19 thing to do at the time. We were over there protecting the people. The only thing that  
20 seemed a little strange about it was the South Vietnamese government certainly wasn’t  
21 even in probably ’65 or ’66. They were having all this turmoil, coups about every other  
22 month it seemed like for a while. It didn’t seem like there was much stability there. But  
23 I actually did buy into the fact that the Domino Theory might be correct.

24 RV: Did you get the other feeling that other people around you, especially in  
25 ROTC, felt the same way?

26 JM: Pretty much. Of course we had people at the campus, but they weren’t very  
27 vocal there at the time, that felt the opposite. They just couldn’t figure out. I had a good  
28 friend Cliff, at the time and I’m blanking on his last name right now. He was going to  
29 stay in school for as long as he could because he didn’t want to go over there. We were  
30 good friends. He just felt that there wasn’t anything over there for him. He didn’t want

1 anything to do with that. He felt that we didn't know what we were doing and we should  
2 stay out.

3 RV: How did you adapt to the military kind of training and lifestyle in the ROTC  
4 and then as we get into your basic training how did you adapt to all that? You'd grown  
5 up around it.

6 JM: Pretty well. One of the things I learned as I went through life and it was  
7 coming out then; I don't particularly take orders well. That's probably one reason I'm  
8 still not in the Service. Depending if somebody gives me a good reason to do something  
9 and it seems to make sense in the context that you're doing it and the right thing to do, I  
10 would follow that kind of a person just about any place. If somebody just told me I  
11 should be doing this because they told me to do it then I have a tendency to pretty much  
12 ignore that. I first came across that a little bit in ROTC. We had a lieutenant colonel  
13 there who was as, I remember he was a transportation officer. He pretty much thought  
14 that he was a lieutenant colonel and that was an important thing to be and that we should  
15 just do something while we were in ROTC because he told us to do that. I later found out  
16 from the sergeant major there that the reason I didn't make distinguished military  
17 graduate was because this particular person put a letter in my file and I didn't realize it,  
18 saying that I was not good military material because I had questioned orders. So maybe  
19 he had some insight that I didn't realize at the time.

20 RV: Looking back do you know why you were like that?

21 JM: Yes, maybe. My dad, as I said he'd been a squadron commander and a  
22 provost marshal his whole life and so you pretty much had to toe the line because part of  
23 what he taught me was I wasn't allowed to get into trouble as I was a teenager because it  
24 reflected on him and his job. Certainly I have a lot of love and respect for my father and  
25 I did that. So I didn't have much rebelliousness in me or it wasn't allowed much when I  
26 was growing up in my youth. So I think by the time I got into college I had the ability to  
27 exercise whether I wanted to do something or not, which wasn't really allowed at home.  
28 I think I just decide on my own. If I decided that makes sense to me, I'll do it or if it  
29 doesn't I'm not going to do it. So I think that's pretty much where that comes from.

30 RV: So when you graduated in 1967 you were off to Ft. Benning, is that correct?

31 JM: Right.

1           RV: Did you have the summer there off before you had to report?

2           JM: I reported probably about the 25<sup>th</sup> of July. I'm not sure. It was toward the  
3 end of July. So we graduated I think around the 16<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> of May so I had a couple  
4 months off before I went down. I had a great time during the summer before I went  
5 down. Worked a little bit, and partied a lot, then went off to Ft. Benning.

6           RV: Tell me about Ft. Benning, what was it like? This was your combat platoon  
7 leaders course.

8           JM: Right. Let me see, Ft. Benning, it was just a huge going concern by then.  
9 The OCS classes they were graduating one a week or something. It was a huge number  
10 of OCS people going through school down there. The Airborne school in the summer  
11 was just full of people, you know, running around. That was the first year they made the  
12 West Pointers go to Infantry Officer Basic or as they called it at the time, Combat Platoon  
13 Leaders Course. So we had all the West Point graduating class was down there that were  
14 going infantry. They just had a class starting it seemed like one or two a week coming  
15 out of ROTC. It seemed to me like there were nine classes or something going through at  
16 the same time we were. We were the second class for what they called '68. So they must  
17 have started the first of July. It looked like they were starting about two a month. You'd  
18 have two hundred people about in a class. We were living in basically what were BOQs.  
19 They weren't exactly like a barracks, which had two guys to a room. We had an  
20 administrative company commander, administrative platoon leaders and some people. It  
21 was about a nine-week course at the time. It was all strictly focused on being a platoon  
22 leader. Not much on administration or anything else that you needed later in life.

23           RV: What was your typical day like there?

24           JM: You get up about 4:30 or so in the morning. We'd come out, have  
25 formation. We'd have breakfast, do some PT, run around, and then we would have either  
26 field training or class training down at Infantry Hall. That ran pretty much six days a  
27 week. We would be off Sunday most of the time. We ran through a couple of Sundays  
28 as I remember. We trained on Labor Day so we didn't get the holiday off. They were  
29 pushing people through just about as fast as they could possibly push them. The thing I  
30 remember about Ft. Benning is just the excellence of the instructors there, Just incredibly  
31 good instructors in almost every class. Of course they were all specially picked and they

1 were allowed to spend six months preparing their class. A lot of things, a lot of teachers  
2 liked to be able to do. They might only teach one class during the week. Of course they  
3 taught it over and over again. There was pretty much an unlimited expense account for  
4 what they needed to do to make the class interesting, exciting and memorable so people  
5 would take it with them. I remember we had a guy that had them build a concrete ramp  
6 right into infantry hall at one of the stages so they could run a tank up right into the  
7 classroom. They'd have the curtains shut. He said, 'Gentlemen, I present armor in the  
8 attack.' All of a sudden this tank just roars from outside and into the classroom. They'd  
9 spent, I guess, lots of money reinforcing the stage so it would hold a tank.

10 RV: That certainly would make an impression.

11 JM: It did. No question about it. There was just class after class that was just  
12 incredibly well taught and the visuals, I guess they had a whole battalion just making  
13 mock-ups and things for people. So like on an M-60 machine gun they'd have a mock up  
14 that was probably eight feet long that you could go up to. It was made out of wood that  
15 had all the parts carved and working. A lot of expense. I know they told us a lot of the  
16 colleges were sending their education departments down to look to see what was going  
17 on. Our particular administrative platoon leader who had been a LRP platoon leader with  
18 the 173<sup>rd</sup> airborne I think, and then was the first lieutenant to make captain. He had been  
19 chosen to teach a class. One of the things he was doing while he was working on his  
20 lesson plans (coughs), excuse me. Then he would be the administrative platoon leader  
21 for one of the ROTC classes. He was telling us that he had six months to prepare this and  
22 then three months I guess. It started off and he would go in and make a pitch to a  
23 committee. They'd critique it. They'd come back a month later, present the class again.  
24 Then after six months he would actually start teaching the class. He would teach it for  
25 six months. Then he would start transitioning out. So it pretty much seemed like a year  
26 tour of duty, or maybe it was eighteen months. He may have taught it for a year. Then  
27 they would rotate them out into someplace else.

28 RV: Did you split your time between the classroom and out in the field training?

29 JM: Yes, some days we would be mostly down at infantry hall, which was just a  
30 huge place. I don't know how many classrooms it had. We would spend a lot of the time  
31 in there. Some days you'd go out and you'd do some field training where you didn't

1 actually go out and get real muddy or anything. You'd be out doing rifle firing or  
2 something in the afternoon and have class in the daytime. Then sometimes you'd go out  
3 to the field and be out for three or four days at a time when you had some exercises. One  
4 of the interesting things that happened to us John Wayne was there filming the *Green*  
5 *Berets* while we were going through class. I suppose one of the memorable things that  
6 was sort of funny was we were supposed to get helicopter training. That was a big deal.  
7 They were going to teach us so we could read the maps from a helicopter. We were  
8 standing out in this huge field in our little U shapes waiting for the helicopters to come in.  
9 We heard all these trucks staring up off on the woods. The trucks pulled into our little U  
10 shapes. On the side it said 'helicopters.' So that was our helicopter training. He [John  
11 Wayne] had all the helicopters making the movie. So I was never on a helicopter until I  
12 got to Vietnam. So that was pretty exciting for me the first time I got a helicopter trip.  
13 I'd been looking forward to it for a year.

14 RV: Your instructors, were they Vietnam veterans?

15 JM: A lot of them were. I would say over fifty percent of them were. They'd  
16 come back and they were usually what they used to call five percenters. They were the  
17 people at the top of their class, but they were also people that they thought would be good  
18 and had a little bit of flare for teaching. Some of them, I remember one of them to this  
19 day, the fellow that taught us on Labor Day, his name was Captain Marbert. He had such  
20 a great pitch that I even remember his name thirty years later. It was the company in the  
21 attack. He was out. They called him 'Garbage Mouth' Marbert and they claimed his  
22 pitch was so dirty they wouldn't let him give it in Infantry Hall because they were afraid  
23 a Congressman or somebody would come in. He had a giant playmate [Playboy's  
24 centerfold] that had been blown up. I don't know. It was probably ten feet long and  
25 three feet long, a centerfold and had it intersected with gridlines and things. Kept talking  
26 about various objectives and stuff. It was just a really wonderful pitch for a group of  
27 young men because it kept your attention during the whole thing. We were way out in  
28 the field someplace, out in the middle of nowhere and it was basically a classroom  
29 setting. He claimed they wouldn't let him do it in Infantry Hall. But they liked it so  
30 much they let him go ahead.

31 RV: What was your weapons training like?

1 JM: We trained in just about everything that you would use in a rifle platoon.  
2 We received training with M-60s, .50 caliber machine guns, .81 millimeter mortars. We  
3 actually fired them and learned to sight them. At the time, all of our rifle training was  
4 with M-14 because they didn't have enough M-16s to use in training. They were just  
5 making the transition I think in Vietnam about '66. I'm not exactly sure when that took  
6 place. But they didn't have enough M-16s. We had those...we were still trained with  
7 rifle-propelled grenades, which I never saw again. The M-79 grenade launcher hadn't  
8 been out too long. We received training in that and of course with hand grenades, how to  
9 call in air strikes, call in artillery, anything that might be useful in the field.

10 RV: How were you as a leader? You mentioned in college you were very  
11 involved in a lot of extracurricular, including the Student Senate. You go into Benning  
12 and you're going to be a platoon leader in Vietnam. How did you see yourself as a  
13 leader?

14 JM: I thought I was pretty good and I think that [opinion] was pretty much  
15 shared. The fellow I was telling you that was our administrative platoon leader was a  
16 very sharp man. I wish to this day I remembered his name. We had an administrative  
17 company commander who was terrible. He was kind of a Martinette. I'm sure he wasn't  
18 tall enough to have met the requirements to get into the Service. We were told later on  
19 that he'd been relieved of command and they put him in there because they didn't know  
20 what to do with him at the time. He was just a terrible person just because he harassed  
21 people like in formation and stuff for no good reason. This administrative platoon leader  
22 brought me and three or four other fellows in and told us that he thought we were the  
23 people that had some potential in his platoon. He wanted us to know that we needed to  
24 watch this guy. Whatever he did, make sure we never did anything like that. That would  
25 be the best example of negative leadership we ever saw.

26 RV: Wow.

27 JM: He [the Admin Platoon Leader] had the DFC. His father had been a general  
28 and his grandfather had been a general. He was a West Pointer. He picked up the DFC  
29 as a LRP platoon leader in early '67 or late '66. I actually ended up I think number three  
30 out of two hundred in leadership in that particular class and number one in tactics. At

1 ROTC summer camp I'd come out number one out of twenty-five hundred on the  
2 academic part of it, which mostly had to do with tactics.

3 RV: Wow. That's very impressive.

4 JM: Well, like I said that's what I wanted to do and I really enjoyed the thinking  
5 part of combat.

6 RV: Yes, sir. What would you say was the most challenging thing about your  
7 training at Benning?

8 JM: Probably the physical part of it. Even though in ROTC summer camp and  
9 stuff we'd done a lot of physical training and all, I don't know if I'd ever been anyplace  
10 where the humidity was as bad as it was at Benning in the summer. Of course we were  
11 running from one place to another. They'd run us down to Infantry Hall and then we'd  
12 stand out in the sun for forty-five minutes because we would get there early. We had a  
13 student company commander who actually made things a little bit bearable because he  
14 actually outranked our administrative company commander. He had a Ph.D. in cultural  
15 anthropology, a man named Stein. He'd been over in Ethiopia and they called him back.  
16 They finally told him he'd been avoiding his commitment long enough. He was actually  
17 a captain. He used to give us some really funny [talks]. He'd sit there after we'd run  
18 some place and then have to wait an hour before we could go into class he would sit there  
19 and explain to us why this was necessary. The administrative company commander  
20 would just go nuts because he wouldn't actually understand half of what this man was  
21 saying. We had kind of an unusual class in that at the time they were making all the  
22 military intelligence officers go through infantry school so they would understand what it  
23 was, why they needed to get certain kind of intelligence and what kind of intelligence  
24 would be good. About seventy percent to eighty percent of this particular class were  
25 actually military intelligence officers. They didn't have to pass, they just had to attend.  
26 So their attitude was a little different in this class than some of the others ones just  
27 because sometimes they would decide they were fed up with something and they weren't  
28 going to go out and roar when somebody told them to roar for instance. It was kind of a  
29 different experience maybe than some other people had for that reason.

30 RV: Before we leave Ft. Benning how applicable was all of your training there to  
31 what you actually experience in country in Vietnam?

1 JM: I think it gave you a good solid basis to work out from. The 'school  
2 solution' never works because the situation never is exactly the same. But certainly they  
3 gave you a lot of after action reports to work with. You spent a lot of time on things that  
4 had actually happened in Vietnam and why a particular action may have turned out the  
5 way it had and what might have been done differently. So a lot of that was, I think, very  
6 applicable to what we were doing. Certainly I think I would have to say the majority of  
7 the training was really well done and it really was trying to prepare you the best that they  
8 could for going into the situation over there. I think that of course that's just the way the  
9 military does things. They spend a lot of time trying to get you psyched up so-to-speak  
10 so you didn't like the Viet Cong. We ran around singing those songs to the tune of  
11 'Poison Ivy' about Charlie Cong and things. Pretty much you recognized that for what it  
12 was and took that with a grain of salt. They were very big into being gung-ho. You get  
13 over there and you get the job done. Just psychologically trying to get you sort of like a  
14 football team, to go over there and have a winning attitude.

15 RV: Did that work?

16 JM: With some people. I think to me, that wasn't what the job was about. The  
17 job was about to go over there and get the objective accomplished and lose as few people  
18 as possible and none if you could. As a matter of fact I used to think it was possible if  
19 you did it all right that you wouldn't lose anybody. But that doesn't work very well.

20 RV: Yes, sir. So tell me when you finished Benning, is this in the fall of '67?

21 JM: Right. It would have been at the end of September.

22 RV: Where did you go from there?

23 JM: I went from there to Ft. Carson, Colorado to the 5<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Infantry  
24 Division.

25 RV: What did you do at Ft. Carson?

26 JM: I was the battalion communications officer for the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry.  
27 That was sort of interesting how I got that job because that's not what I wanted to do of  
28 course. I reported in and Carson was just full of Vietnam returnees, a lot of second  
29 lieutenants. I mean there was just second lieutenants every place. They had assistant  
30 platoon leaders in almost every rifle platoon. So I reported in and had Colonel William  
31 Legro, who was actually became a little—I guess he had his moment of fame, one of the

1 best leaders, most decent people I ever met in the book, *No Decent Interval* about the  
2 CIA pull out in Vietnam at the end of the war.

3 RV: Yes, sir.

4 JM: He was the head of MAC-V intelligence who probably ruined his career by  
5 telling them they were going to be overrun. The CIA disagreed with that. He got all of  
6 his people out evidently. Of course a lot of the intelligence agencies didn't. But Colonel  
7 Legro, at the time was a lieutenant colonel. He called me in, saw that I was an ROTC  
8 officer and most of the officers in the battalion were in the OCS. He said, 'John you can  
9 be an assistant platoon leader out there and run that platoon every other week and do  
10 something or,' he said, 'you can take over the battalion communications platoon and  
11 report pretty much to me.' He said, 'Leadership is leadership.' He said, 'Whether you're  
12 leading a rifle platoon or a communications platoon,' he said, 'the principles are the same  
13 and getting the men to know how to do the job is what's important. That's what you'll  
14 learn here.' He said, 'I think you can learn a lot more about that in this position because  
15 it'll be your own platoon and you can't go into a rifle platoon.' So I did that for nine  
16 months or so that I was there. He was absolutely right. I mean it was great experience  
17 for me. I got to learn to work with my sergeants, learn to work about things I would have  
18 never had an idea about. A lot about paperwork also. I had a great platoon sergeant who  
19 pretty much wanted to spend most of his time at the NCO club. He was on the board  
20 there, but he knew how things worked and how to get things done. He taught me an  
21 awful lot about how the Army really works as opposed to how it was supposed to work.

22 RV: Can you give me some examples?

23 JM: For instance we had a lot of excess equipment because it was really difficult  
24 to get things through supply channels. Of course if you're going to have an inspection  
25 that's huge no-no to have equipment that wasn't on the books, parts for instance. You  
26 were allowed to have—at the time we had some radios that still had tubes in them. You  
27 were allowed to have two of these tubes. They'd go out all the time and it might take you  
28 a month to get new ones. When you got down to one you were supposed to order and  
29 keep your inventory up to a certain level. Well, what would happen, you'd have one go  
30 out and the next one would be no good. Suddenly you wouldn't have any and your radios  
31 wouldn't work. So what he'd do is he would have all these parts and things squirreled

1 away and when the rumors came down that we were going to get an inspection he always  
2 got three or four hours notice on things. He would have one of his buddies from another  
3 battalion bring a truck over, load all this stuff into it and just go out and have it kind of  
4 run around the reservation until the inspection was over and then we'd bring all the stuff  
5 back in. We were never down. We had one of those old World War II generators that  
6 they used on the radios that you see in the movies that have the three cornered stool. The  
7 guy sits on it and cranks this little generator by hand. It had handles on each side. I was  
8 going to get rid of that because that was of absolutely no use. We didn't have anything  
9 that it would run. He said, 'Oh no, lieutenant, you can't get rid of that.' I said, 'Why?'  
10 He said, 'Just trust me.' So we go out to the field and we have one of the big M115 or  
11 M114...it was one of those command tracks. He throws this thing in there when we go  
12 out to the field. So the first night at bivouac we're out bivouacked by this little trout  
13 stream. He goes out and gets some of the communications wire, strips it back, ties rocks  
14 around it throws it out into the little stream, hooks it up to this little hand generator and  
15 cranks up a few trout for us that night (laughter). So he was always working some angle,  
16 a good, good fellow. Taught me a lot about how things worked and actually got me a  
17 citation when we were up. We went to the Martin Luther King riots in April of '68 in  
18 Chicago. They sent us up there. So one of the things he thought we were going to need  
19 was a loudspeaker system. The Army didn't have any portable loudspeaker systems. He  
20 knew how to hook up some kind of an inverter vibrator, I'm pretty sure it was called. It  
21 actually turned the DC current coming off the battery in to AC that you could actually run  
22 a little PA system off of. We'd taken one of our weapons carriers and hooked these loud  
23 speakers up and actually had a loudspeaker system that worked. And of all the federal  
24 troops in Chicago we're the only one that had one of those. Somebody took notice and  
25 the brigade commander got a nice write up from the three-star general out of Ft. Hood  
26 who was in charge of the federal troops about that. So then I got a nice write up.  
27 Sergeant Duckworth was the one and he'd known how to do that from the Korean War or  
28 some place. But evidentially a lot of that knowledge had been lost some place because  
29 there wasn't anything in any of the books about how you could make a loud speaker with  
30 this system.

31 RV: What was Chicago like during those riots?

1 JM: Actually that was one of the funnier experiences in my military career I  
2 guess you could say. My particular battalion was called the IRE, the Immediate  
3 Readiness Element for the division. The riots had been going on for the better part of a  
4 week. We were restricted to post. I actually lived off post. I had an apartment with  
5 another fellow. About, I don't know, the third or fourth day we would pack up all the  
6 trucks, put all the people in them, issue the weapons, put the ammunition in the truck,  
7 issue the signal operating instructions for the radio, the crypt, code stuff. We would drive  
8 off to Peterson Field there at the outskirts of Colorado Springs. We'd come up over this  
9 little hill and we'd get down there and we'd turn around and we'd go back. We'd done  
10 that, I guess, about four different times, just to see how much time it would take us to  
11 make sure we had everything packed. After about five days, you know I needed to get  
12 back to my apartment because I was running out of clean clothes. I'd gone back there to  
13 get some clean clothes and they called us up. So I got back out to the post and had all my  
14 underwear in a dryer someplace back at the apartment complex. They had us load up and  
15 then we said, 'Here we go again.' So I told one of the people in the apartment complex,  
16 'Would you get my stuff out of there and I'll pick it up later?' So we go out over the  
17 little hill coming into Peterson Field. There was about twenty-one C-141s lined up with  
18 their back doors down. So we just drove on to the planes and off we went to Chicago. I  
19 was on the plane with Colonel Legro. We were actually the first federal troops to land in  
20 Chicago. We landed; it seemed to me like it was about ten o'clock at night. It was fairly  
21 late because they couldn't find a flight crew at Peterson. They'd all gone into Ent Air  
22 Force Base to get some chow. They were gone. We'd sat out there—I guess we'd set out  
23 there for about two hours. I understand after we loaded up and actually took off it took  
24 them quite a while to get the rest of the people loaded and out. It actually started  
25 snowing. All these guys are out there and it's snowing on them. Of course they didn't  
26 have any tarps up on the trucks. Everything had to be stripped down so it could go on the  
27 airplane. So we get to Chicago and it was actually drizzling. The colonel had to go  
28 downtown to talk with the FBI and some other people about what we were supposed to  
29 do and report into the general who was already there. He turns around to me, and he  
30 says, 'John all these people are going to be coming in.' He said, 'We have to make sure  
31 everything looks good because we're going to have television crews out here in the

1 morning I understand.’ So all these planes are landing and it’s about one or two in the  
2 morning. Most of them as I said were Vietnam returnees, and I’m a second lieutenant  
3 and I’m the only officer on the ground at the time. I’m telling them we need to take a  
4 string and make sure all the tents are lined up perfectly because we were camping out on  
5 the drainage area, the flat part. We were on the runway there at the Great Lakes Naval  
6 Air Station. I took a lot of abuse that night. I remember that. It was just a huge amount  
7 of abuse because it’s raining and it was reasonably chilly. But we got everything done.  
8 Then finally the captains and some people showed up to help out with the thing so I got  
9 out of that duty after about an hour or so when we finally got some other officers in there.  
10 Then we stayed camped out there, for gosh, I don’t know how long, three or four days  
11 maybe, just sat out there because they didn’t want to bring federal troops into the riot area  
12 if they didn’t have to. I think they were a little worried because we had such a high  
13 percentage of Vietnam returnees. If they took any fire then what you teach people in the  
14 Army doesn’t necessarily work out in a riot condition because suppression fire is not a  
15 nice thing, you know, in a populated area. So finally though there was an intelligence  
16 that the black militants were going to show up in Grant Park and then storm the National  
17 Guard Armory, which was downtown inside the loop. They wanted us to go downtown.  
18 So Colonel Legro had me go out. We set up kind of intermediate radio tower so we  
19 could talk to the Great Lakes Naval Air Station there. Then we went downtown and  
20 convoyed down there in trucks and buses and different things. We actually had a couple  
21 of M111 I think they’re called. Anyway it was the command and control armored  
22 personnel carriers. They looked like little sports cars. They have a .50 caliber machine  
23 gun on them. They only hold three people, very low and they’re very fast. They had a  
24 gasoline, I think it was a 280, whatever, the 283, the old Chevrolet engine in them with a  
25 couple of four barrels. They would actually move out pretty good. So we actually  
26 brought a couple of those with us, then we had some gun jeeps and some things. So we  
27 get on the highway and he [Col Legro] had told—we had a captain who was the  
28 executive [battalion] officer that had come back in from the National Guard. Watched  
29 the war on TV and wanted to get into it. His name was either Captain Swift or Captain  
30 Quick. We used to call him ‘Tom Swift’ because the guy was just a little strange because  
31 he just couldn’t wait to get over in combat. Just all gung-ho from watching television.

1 Colonel Legro had told him not to break camp because he didn't think we were going to  
2 be down there [in Chicago] very long and that the areas under the tents were dry. He  
3 didn't want the men to have to come back in and be on wet ground because we'd had this  
4 drizzle off and on. So Colonel Legro leaves, this guy has us break camp. We get down  
5 there and we lined up there in Grant Park. I guess it's Grant Park. It's down inside the  
6 loop in Chicago. We were up sort of toward the Prudential Building up toward the north  
7 end of it. We were along the big sidewalk facing all the buildings. We were their  
8 company on line, platoon on line, the whole brigade of infantry. We had a policeman  
9 assigned to each one of the units from Chicago because they hadn't declared Military  
10 Law. If we had to make arrests we needed a civilian officer with us. Of course they were  
11 all pieces of work. They were all going around trying to you know, scarf up on c-rations  
12 or anything else they could. None of these guys could figure out what they were talking  
13 about. Then when they found out how much police officers made everybody said, 'Well  
14 what are we doing here? Why can't you guys do your job?' Spec- 4, I think, was making  
15 about two hundred and twenty dollars a month and the policeman I think they were  
16 telling us they made seventeen thousand a year plus whatever the graft they could get.  
17 They were pretty honest about how they just took money from people because they  
18 couldn't really afford to live on what a policeman made. So they weren't getting a whole  
19 lot of sympathy from the soldiers. So we'd actually issued out the ammunition and done  
20 the whole business and nobody shows up. Most of the people that showed up at this rally  
21 were either FBI agents or newspaper reporters. So we stood around there for three or  
22 four hours and ended up playing some softball in the park. Finally the vehicles showed  
23 up and we went back out [to Great Lakes Naval Air Platoon] and we got out there and the  
24 tents were all down. The colonel relieved the captain on the spot and told him to find an  
25 airplane and get out of there, he didn't want to see him anymore. So I don't know what  
26 happened to him. He was just incensed that somebody would mistreat the men. Not that  
27 he told him not to do it, and he'd done it. That wasn't the point. But it had rained in the  
28 meantime, the ground was wet and the men were going to be sleeping on the ground.  
29 There had been no point in doing that. So finally I think we were there about seven days.  
30 Finally the Air National Guard showed up to take us back. We'd had all these C-141s to  
31 bring us all out there at one time. We went back kind of a planeload at a time in all

1 kinds of various aircraft. I mean there were just a lot of prop-driven things and just a  
2 whole different scene going back. Took a couple days I think to get everybody out of  
3 there. There was a rumor we were going to go into Kansas City because they were still  
4 having trouble in Kansas City. We were actually airborne on our way to Kansas City  
5 when they decided that it was under control and we didn't have to land there and got to  
6 go back to Ft. Carson. We had one other kind of funny thing that affected my platoon.  
7 We were in charge of the generator for the camp. We had a five-kilowatt generator on a  
8 trailer that ran all the lights and things in the bigger tents and had strung wire. One night  
9 it was pretty nice so we went over to the Navy and borrowed a film projector from them  
10 and we were going to have a movie. It was one of the Fu Manchu movies with  
11 Christopher Lee. I remember to his day because everybody was kind of excited. They  
12 were a little racy at the time. The guys were pretty excited about that. The exciter light  
13 [on the projector] wasn't working right so there wasn't any sound. Everybody kept  
14 complaining and one of the PFCs in the communications platoon went over and saw that  
15 the voltage was only like 115 or something, instead of 120. He decided that's what the  
16 problem was and this guy was somebody we never allowed to do anything much, you  
17 know cleaning equipment and things. He turned the generator up to get it up to 120. I  
18 was in the tent talking to the colonel about what we were going to have to do the next  
19 day. All the light bulbs exploded (laughs). I went running out to see what was going on  
20 and when I got to the generator it was at 280 coming down. I looked over and the film  
21 was on fire, and the projector and the whole thing was burning up. So we put the film  
22 back in a can and put the projector back in its case. We turned it in just as the plane was  
23 leaving. So we didn't have to pay the Navy for their projector.

24 RV: Sir, why don't we take a break?

25 JM: Sure.

26 RV: Okay, sir, let's continue. We're going to 1968 here. We've been talking  
27 about Chicago and all that. In June '68 you're leaving Ft. Carson, is that correct?

28 JM: That's right. If I may, there's a couple more things that I think are sort of  
29 interesting. You learn different things about how organizations work and where your  
30 place is in them and stuff from your experiences.

31 RV: Yes, sir.

1           JM: Ft. Carson was sort of unique in that we had all of these officers with not too  
2 much experience and all these enlisted men that had three months to six months to go [on  
3 their enlistment]. So it was from a discipline standpoint and learning how to deal with  
4 people. I think it was a really good experience for young officers in that you still had a  
5 mission to accomplish and training to do. Then the attitude was not real good among  
6 some of the troops because they just wanted to go home. They'd done their bit and they  
7 were wanting to get out. Two other things I think might be worth noting. We had a  
8 maneuver, a division size maneuver in either late December or January of 1967, '68.  
9 Anyway it was mid-winter and we went to the field. The whole division went to the  
10 field. We'd been out about twenty-four hours and we were up in the foothills of the  
11 Rockies there and it started to snow and it continued to snow. We continued to play war  
12 out there. You know we had one brigade against the other. It continued to snow and it  
13 kept getting colder, the temperatures kept dropping and continued to snow. After about  
14 three days the snow was pretty deep. We're talking over two foot and it's still snowing.  
15 Just blizzard conditions up there in the foothills. Two things happened. I learned to  
16 drink coffee on that particular [maneuver]. I didn't drink coffee before and I was so cold.  
17 Having grown up in Texas I wasn't used to real cold weather and I was just miserable.  
18 The only thing there that was warm was peppermint Schnapps, which my platoon  
19 sergeant carried and some of the other guys because you couldn't smell the liquor on  
20 your breath.

21           RV: Yes, sir.

22           JM: That would warm your stomach up. Then the other thing was coffee. So I  
23 went to the field not drinking coffee and I came out addicted to it, which I am to this day.

24           RV: You must have had a lot to drink then. A lot of coffee.

25           JM: Oh, I drank a lot of coffee. It was unbelievably cold and you would be out  
26 walking around in the snow. So after about three or four days of snow they called and  
27 it's still snowing. They called the maneuver off and told us to go back to our cantonment  
28 areas and put the VF poles up. We're out there with all these tracks and tanks and stuff,  
29 being a mechanized division. You couldn't see the road. You couldn't see any  
30 landmarks. It was just pretty much miserable, blowing and snowing and blowing. So we

1 had to put people in front of the vehicles with poles to walk them back to the post. It took  
2 us thirty-six hours or so of just continuous movement to finally get back to the post.

3 RV: Wow.

4 JM: And vehicles that broke down were pretty much left in place because there  
5 wasn't anything to do with them. You couldn't see to mark them because you couldn't  
6 see any landmarks to mark a map where you were. They got drifted over with snow and  
7 some of them weren't found until like March.

8 RV: Wow.

9 JM: They couldn't fire artillery down range in some of the areas because they didn't  
10 know if there were vehicles out there that were left. Anyway I was told that was the case  
11 by some artillery people. The commanding general at that time—and we also had three  
12 hundred cases of suspected frostbite from being out in the snow so much. It was just an  
13 absolute miserable time. The commanding general of the time got promoted, got his third  
14 star and went to Vietnam as a corps commander. That gave me the impression that  
15 people higher up didn't always know what was going on at other levels. It just seemed  
16 like a complete fiasco to the people who were out there actually in the maneuver. The  
17 last thing about Ft. Carson, the day I left the 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade from Kansas came in.  
18 They'd sent the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade of the 5<sup>th</sup> Mech to Vietnam and they called up the Kansas  
19 National Guard, this one brigade of infantry to fill in the slot for the reserve. As far as I  
20 know they were the only infantry, major infantry unit called up during the Vietnam War.  
21 Of course living in Kansas I know a lot of people who were in that particular brigade.  
22 They brought them over there [Fort Carson] and then sent them all to Vietnam as  
23 individual replacements. They'd been promised they weren't going to Vietnam. They  
24 were just going to stay in the States as part of the strategic reserve. Then the Army sent  
25 them all to Vietnam, the entire brigade eventually, as individual replacements. It just  
26 kind of reminds me of what goes on right now in Iraq. My cousin's son is over there and  
27 he just got extended. Actually his tour in the National Guard is up in September and they  
28 extended him in place until February.

29 RV: Wow. That's tough.

30 JM: Yes, it is tough. These people [the 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade], they finally  
31 brought them all home early. The congressman from Kansas finally found out what was

1 going on and got a bill together and made the Army all bring them home because the  
2 promise had been they wouldn't be sent over there. But they lost quite a few people. I  
3 think they're the only National Guard outfit with a Vietnam streamer. They finally gave  
4 them a streamer because everybody got sent. So Ft. Carson like I say, it was a good  
5 training ground for me just because I was lucky enough to have just an incredibly smart,  
6 good man for a battalion commander who taught me a lot about how things ought to work  
7 and then I saw some things, probably not how they should work.

8 RV: Right. How did you leave Ft. Carson?

9 JM: Individual orders. I left I think it was the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May I left. For some  
10 reason that date sticks in my mind. I arrived in October and it was spitting snow and I  
11 left on the 23rd of May and it was spitting snow. I remember that. I had orders to go to  
12 Jungle Warfare School in Panama. Since I was a military dependent I knew how the  
13 system worked. So I told them I was going to drive to Charleston, South Carolina where  
14 the plane left from and then drive back to San Francisco to go to Vietnam. I was leaving  
15 out of Travis Air Force Base there, in Oakland actually. That way I got, I don't know, it  
16 was like thirty days of travel time. For every three hundred miles you went...it was like  
17 fifteen days. For every three hundred miles you got one day of travel time. Of course I  
18 immediately drove home in one day to St. Louis where my parents were living. I had a  
19 really good time for about two weeks. Then I went to Panama for jungle training. Then  
20 came back and between my leave and my travel time I think I got about forty-eight days  
21 off in between.

22 RV: Wow.

23 JM: My roommate at Ft. Carson couldn't believe that. So he went down and had  
24 his orders changed to go to the same Jungle School that I was going to because he had  
25 been told to go later than I was, just before he went to Vietnam, which was what they did  
26 with a lot of people. I had this kind of break in there. So ended up with forty-eight days  
27 off before he had to go over, too. He was pretty pleased.

28 RV: So you received your orders for Vietnam while at Ft. Carson?

29 JM: Yes. Then went to mid-June of '68, went to Panama for the Jungle Warfare  
30 School.

1           RV: How did you feel when you received your orders? Were you expecting  
2 these?

3           JM: We were expecting them at some point. I didn't know where. Most people,  
4 they were leaving...most lieutenants, they were leaving the States for a year. They were  
5 trying to give you a year experience in garrison in some place before they sent you over.  
6 In being in the infantry you pretty much knew that you were going to be going over. I  
7 wasn't as excited about going. I don't know if excited is the word. As I said when I went  
8 into Ft. Benning I was worried the war was going to be over. Of course by the middle of  
9 '68 the whole picture had changed after Tet.

10          RV: Were you aware of what had happened with Tet and what was going on?

11          JM: Of course. I mean that was just [common knowledge]. What had also  
12 happened and I'd met a lot of [men], especially senior NCOs that had come back from  
13 Vietnam. Some of these fellows had been in Korea and some of them, even World War  
14 II. We still had some World War II vets left in the Army then. Their impression had  
15 started changing mine about what we were doing over there and whether we should have  
16 been over there because most of them, a lot of them felt that the war was not being  
17 conducted properly and that it was just a complete snafu, as they said. So by that time, I  
18 was starting to get a little different opinion about what was happening on the ground in  
19 Vietnam. Then Tet of '68 happened. By that time it looked like we didn't have a clue  
20 what was going on. After a fashion it—certainly from the television reports, we were  
21 completely surprised by the size of the offensive. Even though I think militarily we  
22 recovered it was certainly a failure in intelligence for sure. So by then, and of course, it  
23 looked like it had gotten a lot more serious. So I had a lot more trepidation about going  
24 then I had I think prior to that point.

25          RV: How did your family feel about that?

26          JM: Well, being a military family they were worried. They were very worried  
27 about me going over there, especially being in the infantry. But they kept a good, stiff  
28 upper lip and told me to do my job and do what I'd been trained and I'd be okay and  
29 come home. Which is about...what else are you going to do? They'd spent their whole  
30 life [in the military] and the reason they call it 'the Service,' I think it is almost like

1 calling to some people. I think they were very proud that I was an officer and that I was  
2 wanting to serve my country. They were very supportive in that.

3 RV: Tell me about going down to Panama. What was that like?

4 JM: Panama, there's no other word for it, Panama sucks. We had people down  
5 there. We went down and they flew down there, landed at night and crossed the isthmus  
6 in a bus. I was confused the entire time I was down there. I hadn't done my homework  
7 properly and didn't realize the canal actually runs kind of north and south instead of east  
8 and west. I didn't know that the airbase that we landed on was actually on the Pacific  
9 side and we crossed at night to the Atlantic side. So the jungle training was always  
10 actually on the Atlantic or the Caribbean side of the isthmus. The whole time I was there  
11 I thought we were on the Pacific side.

12 RV: Really?

13 JM: We'd come from the east coast, flown from the east coast [of the US], landed  
14 and crossed [the isthmus]. And we were out in the jungle so you couldn't see much so I  
15 thought the whole time we were there [we were on the Pacific side]. The maps only  
16 covered like twenty kilometers or something so you couldn't really tell anything from the  
17 maps most of the time as far as where your position was in the big picture of Panama. So  
18 the whole time I was there, which was, I think, at that time they were only running the  
19 school for two weeks. It was really more of an acclimatization, familiarization with the  
20 jungle kind of thing, I mean really kind of super training because you were there, always  
21 out with small groups of people. So it was more like patrol training than a company or  
22 platoon kind of maneuver. It was right at the beginning of the rainy season. You know I  
23 had never been in the jungle. The jungle there compared to the jungle in Vietnam, I  
24 think, was much worse, at least in the area that I was in in Vietnam. The jungle in  
25 Panama was absolutely just dense, nasty. It seemed like every tree had thorns. The ants  
26 would leave their ant trails and attack you. Insects, an incredible number of insects in  
27 Panama compared to Vietnam where we were.

28 RV: Can you describe the training in general? What they were teaching you and  
29 preparing you for?

30 JM: Basically they were teaching us, I think, just how to be miserable in the  
31 jungle and they did a good job of that. So it was like learning to handle the terrain, to

1 handle the kind of weather and to run patrols. I mean we ran a lot of patrols, did just a lot  
2 of basic kind of river crossing kind of things, little five-man groups of deals. We'd run  
3 patrols and they'd give us BB guns and little facemasks. They would have aggressor  
4 troops out there and they'd shoot you in your facemask. You never would see them. I  
5 mean it was really kind of an eye opener from that standpoint that somebody could hit  
6 you with a BB and you wouldn't even realize they were there. And they were really good  
7 with them. I think they had some Special Forces people out there acting as aggressors.  
8 And it seems like they always hit you either in the chest or the facemask so it didn't give  
9 you a good feeling about things. Taught us a little bit about booby traps, taught a lot  
10 about survival. You had a lot of what you can eat and what you can't eat in the jungle  
11 kind of training, which I hoped I was never going to get to use and thank God never had  
12 to. Then just reading maps and a lot of map reading and trying to get from point A to  
13 point B, which is really difficult if you don't have anything to make resections on.  
14 Learning terrain navigation. And then the last part of the training was escape and evasion  
15 course where they would put you on in five man groups, take everything away from you  
16 and say, 'Okay, you've got to get to the coast,' which was, I don't know, six or seven  
17 kilometers away. I'm not sure how far it was. You had one map and you were supposed  
18 to stick together and there was partisan points that you were supposed to go into and get  
19 food and more information about enemy patrols. They had aggressor patrols out there.  
20 They'd done the same thing at Benning. We had escape and evasion classes at Ft.  
21 Carson, too. But in Panama they pretty much let the terrain take care of the difficult part  
22 of it. If you got caught in Panama...usually in the other courses they'd put you in some  
23 kind of prison camp scenario. In Panama they just made you start over, which was  
24 punishment enough. We actually had people in the class that had been to Vietnam that  
25 quit part way through it.

26 RV: Really?

27 JM: Just because the terrain. It was just nasty there. I think they decided they'd  
28 had enough of that. So we had a couple officers who were going through it that had  
29 actually quit part way through the course. We had several people hurt down there. It was  
30 just nasty terrain.

31 RV: How did you do personally?

1           JM: It was fine. I think that I got my Jungle Expert Badge and got out. I wish  
2 I'd been in better shape. I'd already been on leave for thirty days before I went down  
3 there. So the first few days was pretty miserable because I hadn't done any exercise or  
4 anything while I was away so it took me a little while to get acclimatized to that. Having  
5 been raised in Texas the heat didn't bother me as much as some other people did. The  
6 humidity was terrible, but you know, I mean, I was conditioning. We saw animals, we  
7 saw jaguars and sloths. There was a lot of interesting things to see down there. But it  
8 was just generally learn to sleep in a hammock. I pretty much didn't like it. One  
9 day...and I didn't think in some ways it was realistic. Basically it was like I said, they  
10 were just pretty much acclimatizing and teaching you to read a map in the jungle. I went  
11 down there thinking it was going to be more like Vietnam training. It turned out I was  
12 little disappointed in the level of the training I guess and what it was doing. I thought  
13 there'd be more.

14           RV: How much was applicable to Vietnam?

15           JM: Certainly the map reading part was and after that, not much. We went  
16 downtown one day to Colón on a Sunday and I spent about three hours down there and  
17 got out. Panama is just a scary place I think. The National Guard there just beat people  
18 on the streets just for fun. They actually beat up one of the guys that stayed down there  
19 too long from our unit. He was in pretty bad shape. He ended up in the hospital. I don't  
20 know what happened. He claimed he just looked at them wrong. One of the interesting  
21 things about it [the Jungle School] we had some British troops with us. There was a  
22 lieutenant, or a 'left tenant,' I guess, as they call them, and four or five members of the  
23 Green Howards, which is one of the British Army regiments. They were stationed in  
24 British Honduras, which at that time was getting ready to go onto its own, go into the  
25 Commonwealth as a free nation. This fellow had actually been through the British Jungle  
26 Warfare School in Malaysia, which is like six months long and a different kind of thing  
27 and had been a platoon leader for a while with the Gurkas in New Guinea when they  
28 were having some trouble with the Indonesians. He was just an interesting fellow to be  
29 around because getting around in the jungle really wasn't a problem for him. He'd spent  
30 a lot of time in the jungle and he had a compass. We had these lymphatic compasses the  
31 Army issues you where you can sight through the little wire and get your bearings. He

1 had a compass that was more like a Boy Scout compass. It was more like a plastic plate  
2 with a compass stuck on top and an arrow. We'd be out navigating and he'd always  
3 come out within about ten meters of where we were supposed to end up. We were lucky  
4 to be within two or three hundred meters. He was extremely, extremely good and very  
5 helpful in teaching us things that they didn't teach us there. I was lucky to be on the  
6 same team that he was on. We had a couple of Air Force Academy cadets and they were  
7 wondering what they were doing down there after about three or four days. The escape  
8 and evasion thing at the end was probably the most memorable because they stick you  
9 out and they tell you not to move at night. Of course they've taken away your hammocks  
10 and there's all these insects and scorpions and things in the ground so all you had was  
11 canteens. So we decided after we went to the first 'partisan point' they called it, where  
12 you could pick up some c-rations and then check in. Part of the reason they wanted you  
13 to do that was to know where you were, and so you could check in. But they were also  
14 patrolling those pretty heavy with the aggressor forces. So you had to be very careful.  
15 So we went to the first one and we decided after looking at the map that if we really  
16 pushed hard we could make it all the way to the coast in one day instead of spending the  
17 night out in the jungle but we'd have to skip the other two partisan points. In our group  
18 there was another captain in the Armor [branch] who had been in the National Guard and  
19 had come back in, and two other infantry lieutenants and myself, and an Air Force  
20 Academy Cadet. So this captain was saying we couldn't do that, we had these rules, that  
21 we couldn't do that. So we sort of took a vote [skip the partisan sites]. He voted against  
22 it and the three infantry lieutenants voted for it. And the Air Force Academy guy didn't  
23 know what to do, so he abstained. We decided we were going to push for the coast. The  
24 captain told us that we couldn't do that. He was giving us a direct order and of course  
25 under those kinds of scenarios, there's really nobody in charge exactly. I mean he should  
26 have been in charge, but we decided he wasn't an infantry officer so we weren't going to  
27 pay any attention to him. So we pushed through the coast that night, made it to the coast  
28 about ten o'clock. We weren't supposed to move after dark and it turned out I think over  
29 half the class did that. We kept running into people. Once it got dark they pulled the  
30 aggressor troops out. So we were able to actually get down close to the river and just  
31 push all the way into the coast and get back and sleep in a bed that night.

1           RV: So you all did well?

2           JM: Yes, and it turned out that checking into the partisan points and stuff, none of  
3 that counted. The only thing that counted was whether you made it to the coast. Again,  
4 there's good lesson there. When you're in some kind of a critical situation the ends are  
5 what matters, you know, the goal and not exactly whether you follow every rule to get  
6 there. So anyway...but Panama it was a hugely interesting experience and I have never  
7 wanted to go back there. I just did not care for the place. The poverty was incredible  
8 there. I think I spent a tour in Vietnam in mostly in rural areas, all in rural areas in Korea  
9 just down from the DMZ and of course it was a lot of rural areas in there, farmers. Never  
10 seen the kind of poverty that you see in Panama. It was just absolutely the dregs of  
11 human condition there. I just felt really bad for people down there.

12          RV: So did you leave? You went back to the States and you had a little time off.

13          JM: Went back to the States and I had another couple weeks before I had to  
14 report into Travis.

15          RV: Tell me about your departure to Travis. Were you on civilian air?

16          JM: Yes and I can't remember. I think it was a World Airways jet, reported into  
17 Travis. I think I was supposed to leave at eleven at night, got there around eight. It turns  
18 out I'd been left off the manifest. Actually, there was me and a number of people that I  
19 had been in Combat Platoon Leaders Course and in Panama and Ft. Benning with. We  
20 were all scheduled to be on the same plane. So that was kind of a neat thing. We were  
21 all going to get together and fly over. It turned out I'd been left off the manifest. So I  
22 ended up having to fly space-available to Vietnam. I had to wait around but they got me  
23 on one at about three in the morning and flew to Japan.

24          RV: What was that flight over like? What was your mood?

25          JM: It was a pretty miserable flight actually. You had a lot of people that had too  
26 much to drink on there and so you had a lot of sick people. You had people that were just  
27 really moody and worried. You couldn't sleep. It was a stretch eight so they had just as  
28 many people as they could stuffed in there. I just don't sleep well on airplanes and never  
29 have and still don't. They brought a book and I was reading a book and talking to people  
30 around me and it was pretty much subdued. There wasn't a whole lot of talk. Certainly  
31 wasn't many people very jovial. The flight crew was incredibly nice though. They

1 really, as a matter of fact the flight crews, both trips going and coming, you couldn't say  
2 enough about how decent the people on those flight crews were in those civilian airlines.  
3 It was a terribly long flight. I mean you flew into Japan, which I don't know, it seemed  
4 to me like that was about ten hours or nine. It was a long flight. They refueled there in  
5 Japan and they let you off the airplane into one little area in the airport. But they actually  
6 made us sit on the airplane for a long time. It then turned out they were having some  
7 trouble getting fuel or something so they finally let us off for a while. There was some  
8 major, I have no idea who he was, that told me I needed to get a haircut. I remember that.  
9 I was on the plane and he saw me out in the lobby and told me there was a barbershop  
10 there and told me I needed to get a haircut. I pretty much ignored that. So I figured I'd  
11 never see him again. But they had a lot of MPs in there to make sure people weren't  
12 going to try to make a break for it or something.

13 RV: Right.

14 JM: Then we got back on the plane and flew from there to Tan Son Nhut. Again  
15 the closer you got, there wasn't much to see. A lot of it was night. I remember flying  
16 over the Philippines. That was about the only thing. You probably saw some lights and  
17 things down there. So everybody went to the windows and then they finally announced  
18 we were off the coast of Vietnam. People all of a sudden...the excitement picked up.  
19 There was a lot more talk and people looking out the windows and you were finally there.  
20 Just everybody was starting to wonder where they were going and what they were going  
21 to do. So then we flew along the coast until we got to Tan Son Nhut. They announced  
22 they had just had a rocket attack and we were to debark as quickly as they could land the  
23 plane. My first impression it was, I don't know what time it was. It was probably mid-  
24 morning sometime when we got there and this was late July. I don't remember exactly  
25 the day I got there. I'm thinking it was like the 28<sup>th</sup> or the 29<sup>th</sup>. It was real late July. As  
26 a matter of fact, I think I made first lieutenant like three or four days before we hit  
27 Vietnam. But I didn't get my orders changed and my pay for about another five months.  
28 They couldn't get it straightened out. I remember when I got to the door it was just like a  
29 blast furnace. I mean I just don't ever remember walking into something and just feeling  
30 the heat. It was like it was coming off the tarmac there. Of course everybody was  
31 running out and heading across the tarmac toward where they were having people get into

1 because they'd had this rocket attack. Then there was all these guys standing out there  
2 ready to get on the same plane. They were all sort of jeering and yelling at people. It  
3 was kind of good-hearted after a fashion, saying, 'You'll be sorry.' Stuff like that. They  
4 were all heading out. You never saw a group of happier people. I knew just how they  
5 felt a year later.

6 RV: So they were actually kind of taunting in a good way?

7 JM: Yes, not being nasty at all. So we get there, and they unload the plane and  
8 my duffle bag isn't there. So all I have is the clothes on my back. I don't even have a  
9 shaving kit because it was in my duffle bag. So I got a set of khakis and evidently they'd  
10 put my duffle bag on the other plane. There's this mound of duffle bags there. I asked  
11 somebody, 'What's that?' He said, 'That's all the ones that come in unclaimed.' I mean  
12 this thing must have been two stories high and one hundred feet across at the base. It was  
13 huge. I'm thinking, 'Oh this is a bad deal.' So they put us on the bus. I remember there  
14 was screen wire on the windows and we go from there over to Bien Hoa to the repot  
15 depot. We report in and some sergeant read us Westmoreland's letter of welcome. That  
16 was kind of attention. We were all setting in like little desks and around. We filled out a  
17 bunch of paperwork and they took it. They put me in a temporary BOQ. It was just a  
18 barracks. It was just a temporary BOQ. Everybody's in bunk beds, typical barracks.  
19 Said we were waiting for orders. They showed us where the orders would be posted.  
20 Everyday they would come out there and they'd have a whole big list of people's names  
21 and what unit you were going to. Like it would say, '101<sup>st</sup>' and it would give the names  
22 of the people being assigned to that unit, the officers under that. My duffle bag doesn't  
23 come in. I didn't have any money and so I'm borrowing shaving cream and stuff from  
24 people. I'm thinking, 'I'm going to have to go get a new uniform pretty soon because  
25 I'm not smelling very good here.' I think I'd been there three days and finally in the  
26 afternoon of the third day my name appears on the list. You go out there two or three  
27 times. You go out there two or three times a day and you check. Here I am and I'm the  
28 only one [on the list] that says, 'Americal 23<sup>rd</sup> Division.' My name's the only name  
29 there. All these other guys are going to other units. I'd never heard of the Americal  
30 Division. So I go back to this little temporary officer's club they had. Went back in there  
31 and so I'm asking around. There was this guy who was waiting to leave. He looked up

1 at me and he said, 'You poor mother fucker, you're going to I Corps.' That's the only  
2 thing anybody ever said. I thought I knew where I Corps was and I never heard of the  
3 Americal Division. So I went out the next day. They put me in a jeep because I was the  
4 only one going and took me back out to Tan Son Nhut. There was a C-130 out right by  
5 this big pile of duffle bags again. I still don't have my stuff. I go out and I start looking  
6 around it [the duffle bag pile], because there was a little time. So I said, 'Can I look  
7 around?' They said, 'yes.' The second one I looked at was mine. It was down at the  
8 bottom.

9 RV: Wow.

10 JM: I mean it was just incredible luck. So I'm feeling pretty good and I walk on  
11 to this C-130. There's me and a whole bunch of ARVN officers and NCOs and their  
12 wives and their kids and their goats (laughter). We all get on this C-130 and fly up to  
13 Chu Lai. So that was an interesting trip. You know I'm on here I don't know how long it  
14 took us. But I'm on here with all these goats. I was thinking it was kind of bizarre.

15 RV: Right. Were you able to talk with any of the ARVN troops?

16 JM: A couple of the officers spoke a little bit of English. Mostly I talked to the  
17 loadmaster and stuff. I was a little paranoid I suspect. I didn't know what to expect from  
18 who or what. I was just wanting to go over. By this time I think I was getting pretty  
19 nervous about what was going to happen. It hadn't started off real good by having no  
20 clothes or anything. I'm the only one going up there, so I don't have anybody else I  
21 know to talk to. I get up to Chu Lai and they sent me to the Americal Division Combat  
22 Course they had. It lasted about a week after you first got in country. That was down on  
23 the beach. They had all these tent kits and the officers were up in one area and the  
24 enlisted men, down in the other. You know up on the dunes, up behind the beach. We'd  
25 have training, kind of a regular training day. It was just miserably hot. This would have  
26 been around the first of August, as a matter of fact it was the first of August. I don't  
27 know what the temperature was getting to down on the beach but I'm sure it was up near  
28 a hundred. That's in the dry season over there. So it's just very hot but the ocean was  
29 pretty. They had a little club up there. We'd go up there every night and drink.

30 RV: Who would you go with?

1 JM: The other guys in the tents, people I met. There was actually a couple of  
2 guys by the time I got there, there were some fellows that I'd been in Combat Platoon  
3 Leaders Course with that were there at the same time. They'd been on that plane I was  
4 supposed to be on originally. It turned out it had engine trouble and landed in Hawaii.  
5 They'd spent two days in Hawaii, down on the beach in Hawaii while they were fixing  
6 the plane. All that time counted toward being in Vietnam.

7 RV: Wow.

8 JM: I was a little upset that I hadn't made the flight [that stopped in Hawaii]. I  
9 had to go space available. So we got there [the officer's club] and we'd go down and  
10 they'd have movies in there. I think one night they had some Korean show girls that  
11 were in there. So they'd have little things there at night. Then in the daytime we'd go  
12 through booby trap trails and they'd teach us how to spot booby traps. Of course they  
13 had little like firecracker kind of things hooked up. You'd trip the wire and then they'd  
14 tell you how you missed it and what it was doing. Some of them were just pretty clever  
15 and that made you worry. You had weapons familiarization again. That's the first time I  
16 got to fire an M-16 was there. One day we went up and they wanted to know if you  
17 wanted to throw a hand grenade. It was sort of 'your choice' kind of a deal. Most of the  
18 fellows in the infantry didn't want to throw one because we'd done it already and of  
19 course we'd all been warned about hand grenades are not your friend, kind of thing. But  
20 a couple of the division clerks had never thrown one and they wanted to throw one. So  
21 this one fellow went into the pit with a sergeant, threw the grenade and it had a short fuse  
22 on it. It blew up about fifteen feet out of his hand. That was the first guy I saw hurt over  
23 there. He and the sergeant were both hurt pretty badly and they medevaced them.

24 RV: Wow.

25 JM: So then we went back to the beach. The only other thing other than the  
26 booby trap trail. Of course they made us go into the gas chamber like they always do.  
27 They have these sadistic guys in there that make you take your mask off and ask you  
28 questions you know. We went through that whole thing. It was really hot in there [the  
29 gas tent], when you're sweating that CS gas is just bad. It just really starts making your  
30 skin burn. So that was probably the worst gas chamber experience I ever had. The guy  
31 in there just kept asking questions after questions, especially if he found out you were an

1 officer. He would just keep you in there for a long time with your mask off. So anyway  
2 we did that, booby trap trail and then we had a lecture on the Geneva Convention. They  
3 got everybody up in some grand stands. Some guy from the JAG that was a captain from  
4 the JAG office came out and gave us a lecture on the Geneva Convention. It was my first  
5 indication that things probably weren't as they should be over there. They were having a  
6 little racial problem along the beach. You had to be careful at night because there were  
7 bands of black or white troops kind of roaming the beach looking for people.

8 RV: Really?

9 JM: Yes. So they had some racial trouble there in Chu Lai, which was just a  
10 huge, huge base. I don't know how big that place was. You had Air Force and all kinds  
11 of people on there. But this JAG officer came out and told a story and I think it was  
12 about an outfit in the 198<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade that had captured some nurses. It was  
13 pretty sordid. It turned out they ended up murdering one of these nurses. This was the  
14 story anyway. The other one they'd sent back to the rear and she turned them all in for  
15 murder. There was gang rape and several really bad things here. They'd been out in the  
16 jungle. Of course they court marshaled all kinds of people and sent them to jail and stuff.  
17 But the moral of this story was that, 'You can't trust your buddies not to turn you in.'  
18 That was to me the first indication that something's just not quite right here. To me, that  
19 wasn't what the moral of the story should have been. That stuck with me I guess my  
20 whole life. Obviously here I am thirty-three years later. I remember this guy standing up  
21 there and I'm thinking, 'What is this all about?' Then I got my orders to go down to the  
22 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. After my week there they put me on a C-123 to fly down to Duc  
23 Pho. It was full of mail. I remember that it was all full of mail palettes. You just had all  
24 kinds of palates hooked in there. As we came in there, they just had a small mortar  
25 attack. The guy came in at an angle. I couldn't believe it. A C-123 will land practically  
26 on a dime. They're made for short landings. I thought we were crashing, we were  
27 coming in so steep. They actually then went off onto the taxiway and started kicking the  
28 mail palates out the back without stopping to let them pick up. They just had us sort of  
29 jump out and then they flew back out on the runway and took off again. So I mean they  
30 slowed up to probably two or three miles an hour. We threw our stuff out and jumped  
31 out. I got there and of course I didn't know where I was going. There were all these

1 trucks to pick up the enlisted men because they all had orders to some unit. I was just  
2 assigned 11<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade. So I went in [to the terminal building] and finally  
3 got somebody to call the S-1 and they sent a jeep over and picked me up after about an  
4 hour. I get over there and there was a major that was the S-1 officer for the brigade. He  
5 gets me a Coke and says, 'Okay, do you want to spend your first six months in the field  
6 or in the rear?' He said, 'We've got positions open both places.' I said, 'I'd just as soon  
7 get it over with.' He said, 'Are you sure?' I said, 'Yes.' So he said, 'Okay.' So I sat  
8 there for about an hour or so and he comes back and he has set orders and assigns me to  
9 the 1/20. Alpha Company 1/20 Infantry. A jeep comes and picks me up and I'd been  
10 told at Chu Lai from the time I felt Chu Lai it would probably be another week to a week  
11 and a half before I actually got assigned in the field. It takes them forever to get that  
12 done right. So this jeep picks me up and we go over to the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 20<sup>th</sup>. The guy [at 1<sup>st</sup>  
13 of the 20<sup>th</sup>] types up some papers, hands me over to the Alpha Company guy. They take  
14 my duffle bag and start pulling. The first sergeant starts pulling stuff out of it, hands me  
15 a rucksack. I start to put stuff in there and he'd say, 'You don't need that.' He'd put it  
16 back in the duffle bag. Pretty much threw the stuff in, took me over to the armory, got  
17 me a weapon, a .45. They took me up to the ammo supply point, got me seven magazines  
18 and couple of hand grenades. Marched me back down to the helipad. Said, 'Wait here.  
19 There's going to be a helicopter coming to go to LZ Thunder.' He said, 'You need to be  
20 on it,' and left me there.

21 RV: How were you feeling by this point?

22 JM: By this point I was just totally confused. I was really getting apprehensive  
23 because things were moving much faster than I thought they were going to move. I really  
24 came in there thinking, 'Okay, I'll be here a couple of days. I'll get familiar and learn  
25 some stuff.' I didn't learn anything. Didn't know anybody's name, didn't know  
26 anything. They're just throwing this stuff in there [the rucksacks] and moving me out.  
27 They sent a sandwich down because I hadn't even had a chance to eat. So he sent  
28 somebody down with a sandwich. So I'm sitting out there eating and a helicopter shows  
29 up. They throw a whole bunch of stuff on it. I get on it and get out. That was my first  
30 helicopter ride. So I'm talking to these guys in the helicopter. We got out there [to LZ  
31 Thunder] just about dark. I remember how pretty it was because the sun was going down

1 behind the mountains. Up at Duc Pho the coastal plains probably, maybe ten kilometers  
2 wide. It's not very wide. The mountain actually south of there, actually come down and  
3 touch the ocean. Then they kind of sweep out as you go up more toward Quang Ngai  
4 City and Chu Lai. So you've got the ocean on one side in the helicopter and the  
5 mountains and the sun going down on the other side. It was just a beautiful country. To  
6 this day I don't know if I've ever seen prettier places in some places than Vietnam. Just  
7 lush and green and the rice paddies were all well kept and all level. Then there would be  
8 these big hills sitting in the middle of them. We kept firebases on them. So on one of  
9 these big hills was LZ Thunder. They landed me on the helicopter pad and by that time it  
10 was dark. All these guys were pulling stuff off. Finally I'm just standing there.  
11 Somebody says, 'What are you here for?' I said, 'I'm supposed to go up to Alpha  
12 Company 1/20.' He said, 'I'll call somebody.' This jeep comes bouncing down the hill  
13 with its lights on. I get on it and we bounce up the hill to a bunker. I walk in. They said,  
14 'Go into that bunker. There will be somebody that can help you.' So I go in there and  
15 walk in and here's a bunch of guys sitting around. One of them has got no shirt on, a  
16 little bitty, looks almost like a Vietnamese guy, dark skinned guy and he turned out to be  
17 my platoon sergeant. He said, 'Who are you?' I said, 'I'm Lieutenant McNown, the new  
18 lieutenant here.' He said, 'Yes, we heard you were coming.' He hands my rucksack to  
19 somebody and tells them to take it down to the bunker and the guy says, 'I just got off  
20 bunker duty. Get somebody else to take it.' Sergeant Wright picked up an entrenching  
21 tool and hit the guy upside the shoulder as hard as he could and knocked him over. He  
22 picked him up and said, 'When I tell you to do something, you do it.' The guy picks it up  
23 and leaves and he said, 'Come on, they're having a meeting down there, down at the  
24 command bunker.' So I go down there and they were just breaking up because they were  
25 moving off the hill. This was about probably about nine o'clock at night and they were  
26 moving off the hill at three the next morning, you know, talking about the operation,  
27 getting the operation all set up. I walked in there just as the meeting was breaking up and  
28 I met the other platoon leaders. The company commander was either on R&R, he wasn't  
29 there. One of the other platoon leaders, Ray Enners, was acting as company commander  
30 for the time being. He was brand new. He'd only been there about a month maybe. The  
31 other platoon leader walked up to me and started talking. I'd been in Infantry Officers

1 Combat Platoon Leaders Course with him. We'd been in the same company. He  
2 remembered who I was. We'd been in different platoons and it was kind of funny  
3 because he was stuttering and smoking and I didn't remember him doing either thing. I  
4 asked him, 'Have you been here a long time?' He said, 'No.' I said, 'Have you seen a  
5 bunch of action?' He said, 'No I haven't been off the hill yet.' I was thinking, 'Oh my  
6 gosh, it must be terrible.' It turned out I think he'd had a little stutter. So I don't know  
7 how he'd gotten into the Infantry to begin with. Anyway, he hadn't smoked. He'd  
8 started smoking after he got there. So introduced me to the other guys in the room there.  
9 We went over and tried to get some sleep and at three o'clock we walked off the hill.

10 RV: How receptive was everybody to you, the new guy?

11 JM: The other officers were very nice of course. They wouldn't actually assign a  
12 platoon to me even though Brad [Burgraff] was the first platoon leader and Ray [Enners]  
13 was the third platoon leader because the company commander wasn't there. They  
14 wouldn't actually tell me that I was going to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon leader because the  
15 weapons platoon didn't have a platoon leader at the time either. Of course they didn't  
16 want to, you know. Sergeant Wright figured I was going to be his platoon leader. He  
17 was pretty good, nice but just waiting to see what was going on. Then the next  
18 morning—so I'm just walking. I'm just out for the walk. I'm not really in charge of  
19 anything, but we're leaving the hill so I'm going with them. They told me—and then we  
20 had Doug Faulk who'd been in country at that time. He'd come over with the brigade but  
21 he was still a second lieutenant. He graduated from OCS and he was the XO. He'd been  
22 the third platoon leader up until the month before. Then they'd moved him and made  
23 him Executive Officer. He was real, really good. It was kind of funny. Everybody else  
24 was a First Lieutenant and he was a Second Lieutenant and he'd been there the longest.  
25 He'd come out of OCS and I think gone to Vietnam six weeks after OCS, after he  
26 graduated from OCS. So we just marched. We walked off the hill and then I had no idea  
27 what we were doing. It was dark and I just got in line. I wasn't in line with the right  
28 platoon because everybody was just marching past you. I was asking questions and  
29 nobody was saying nothing. They were just leaving. So I finally decided I better get in  
30 line or I'm going to be in trouble. We marched down the hill through this village. Here's  
31 the long answer to your question I guess. I fell off a rice paddy as we're moving out

1 across a rice paddy. I'm flopping around there and I've got this big pack on and I wasn't  
2 used to wearing stuff. I'm having a hard time. Every time I go to get up, the paddy  
3 dike's wet and my boots are wet and I keep falling back in. Everybody just keeps  
4 walking past me, right? I finally hear out of the darkness somebody said, 'Who the hell  
5 is that making all the noise?' One of the other guys said, 'It's that fucking new lieutenant  
6 I guess.' (laughs) They're just walking on. Finally somebody at the end of the line  
7 helped me out. So then I'm all the way to the end. I mean that was pretty much when  
8 you're new and nobody knew you. So then I ended up being with the platoon and we  
9 were on a blocking force and stopping people. Two of the other companies were pushing  
10 into it. We were working with some PRUs, I don't know. You've probably heard about  
11 the PRUs.

12 RV: Yes.

13 JM: So we had some National Police and some PRUs with us and they were  
14 interrogating these people. So we were picking them up and sending them up to this  
15 collection point. Then they were kind of talking to them and sending some of them on  
16 and then tying some of them up, tying their hands behind their back and having them  
17 squat over off to the side. Where I was originally I couldn't see that. But I got called up  
18 to the CP after they finished interrogating all of these people. We were just sending  
19 people up that way. So they called me up there and they're just beating the hell out of  
20 these people. I just, really, the technique was just really interesting. I asked, 'What are  
21 we letting them do that for?' He said, 'No that's their operation. We're not allowed to  
22 interfere with that.' They had this E-7 MP that was the advisor and he's up there with us.  
23 They're just beating these people with sticks that are probably as big around as your  
24 thumb and yelling at them. There would be two or three people [PRUs] running around  
25 and one of them walking around and one of them they've got squatting and beating them.  
26 They finally end up with one kid they thought was a draft dodger. They took him off and  
27 he was all beaten up. The fellow that said he was a sniper in the Viet Cong, he was  
28 supposed to go and show us his hole. Then they had a woman that said she was squad  
29 leader of a Viet Cong squad. They'd actually called her up with a telephone. I don't  
30 know if she ever, I don't know. Anyways, they'd taken a field phone, which is a DC,  
31 current and actually it puts out a lot of voltage or wattage. They'd actually had some

1 wires with alligator clips on them and fastened them to the woman and then cranked the  
2 phone up to interrogate her.

3 RV: Where were they fastened to?

4 JM: They were fastened to her genitals or to her breasts. So finally she breaks  
5 down and says okay she'll take us to where they're going. So Enners and the two  
6 platoons [1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>]...he sends the second platoon, which was the platoon I wasn't really  
7 assigned to but was with. Doug Faulk who had the most experience, he said he'd go with  
8 them [2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon]. Brad Burgraff, the other two platoon leaders, took the rest of the  
9 company to 'Remain Over Night,' a night defensive position and sent us with the  
10 National Police to see if there was anything to this story. We marched around and later  
11 on the sniper shows them this hole and there's no weapon. One of the PRUs just shot  
12 him.

13 RV: Wow. Right there in front of you?

14 JM: Well, I didn't see it. I heard the shot. I'm all nervous and nobody else is  
15 moving around. I was further back in the line. Nobody else starts doing anything  
16 because it was one shot and it was a .45 and they all recognized the noise. All I realized  
17 was there had been a shot. Of course I'm all excited. They said, 'Don't worry about it.'  
18 We get up there and here's this guy laying here. I asked Doug Faulk I said, 'What  
19 happened?' He said, 'Well they got mad and shot him.' He's arguing with this E-7. The  
20 E-7 is telling him not to worry about it, it's none of our business. So we go up and then  
21 surround this little village. It was a hamlet, maybe five or six huts. They start searching  
22 the hamlets. Eventually they give up. They can't find anything so they start phoning this  
23 woman up again with the TA-312. She tells them where to look. They move this  
24 woodpile and there's a trap door under it. The sergeant pulls up the trap door and a  
25 grenade comes flying out. I'm sitting back there and I've just got my mouth open. The  
26 PRUs and the National police drop back about two rice paddies and punt it. They just  
27 start opening up on full automatic. We're between them and the VC. It turned out there  
28 was five VC in these tunnels down there. They're popping up and shooting. So we get  
29 into this little firefight that last probably thirty minutes once we got the PRUs to quit  
30 firing.

31 RV: Were you actually firing yourself?

1           JM: Actually no. I didn't fire that first time because I wasn't in charge of  
2 anybody. I was just watching the trail, helping somebody watch the trail. Doug Faulk  
3 was in charge of things, but I could see everything going on from where I was. I could  
4 see the whole thing. I was taking fire. We were down under. They [the VC] had an M-  
5 14 E2, which was the old automatic version of the M-14. They had an M-16 and an AK-  
6 47 we captured. They were all armed anyway. So it took about thirty minutes and they  
7 [the platoon] finally got them cleaned out. We had one fellow that took a little piece of  
8 shrapnel, probably from an M-79 and got dusted off. Then the actual PRU interrogator,  
9 who was a young guy, and who was the one that was doing the really major part of the  
10 physical torture and interrogation on these people, [the suspects] took a little piece of  
11 shrapnel in his jaw and every time he'd see his blood he'd pass out. It was kind of ironic,  
12 I thought. So they dusted him off. Then we set up there for the night because it was  
13 already getting dark.

14           RV: This was your first full day or second full day?

15           JM: Yes, this was my first day. Yes, we walked off the hill at three-thirty in the  
16 morning. I saw it at the end and I felt like I'd been on the six o'clock news. Everything  
17 you'd ever heard about I'd seen, these South Vietnamese torturing people, then this  
18 execution, then we'd been in this firefight. I thought, 'Well, this is just bizarre.' I don't  
19 know what I expected. I don't know if I expected. But I hadn't expected the first two  
20 things for sure.

21           RV: Yes, sir. Why don't we go ahead and take a break for today?

22           JM: Sure.

**Interview with John McNown**  
**Session 2 of 5**  
**December 17, 2003**

1           Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone, I'm continuing my oral history  
2 interview with Mr. John McNown, Jr. Today is December 17, 2003. I am again in  
3 Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room on the campus of  
4 Texas Tech University. Mr. McNown is in Mission, Kansas. Sir, why don't we pick up  
5 where we left off? You had basically completed your first full day in Vietnam. Why  
6 don't we continue the narrative from there?

7           John McNown: I was thinking about that. As a matter of fact I was reviewing a  
8 few notes that I had taken while I was there this morning just to be sure I had some things  
9 right. I guess one of the things, I guess, that would be worth talking about was that you  
10 didn't realize, having grown up watching movies and things, just how miserable being an  
11 infantry soldier is. I think maybe in the latest Gulf War they were showing more things  
12 about that because the reporters were actually out in the field with the troops again. But  
13 when I got to Vietnam I was a little overweight. I partied for about thirty days before I  
14 got there. Quang Ngai Province in August, it probably runs between ninety-five and one  
15 hundred degrees in the daytime. It doesn't drop much below that at night. The  
16 mosquitoes are bad and the heat's bad. You're nervous and one of the things that I  
17 remember was you didn't get much sleep when you first got there. Between the  
18 mosquitoes, we had lots of indoctrination about what we were supposed to do to protect  
19 ourselves from Malaria and mosquitoes, using mosquito nets and insect repellent and  
20 things. They didn't issue you any of that stuff. To get out to the field, pretty much you  
21 have a poncho and a poncho liner. No mosquito netting, no little insecticide stuff to blow  
22 around after you set your mosquito net up. The mosquitoes were just terrible. I  
23 remember at night just trying to find some way to keep the buzzing in your ears from  
24 annoying you so much that you could get some sleep. We were carrying somewhere  
25 between sixty and eighty pounds a man. I talked to people in some units and they would  
26 bring in a helicopter every night with their equipment and things on it. They went around  
27 pretty light in the daytime. Every thing that we had we had to carry on our backs, all  
28 your extra ammunition, your water. I think we were probably carrying about two gallons  
29 of water a man because most of the stuff you couldn't drink. We would carry anywhere,

1 I don't know, I think by the time I got out, most of the people that had been there for a  
2 while were already doing this. They were carrying four-hundred and fifty rounds of M-  
3 16 ammunition and one hundred rounds of machine gun ammunition and either a LAW  
4 or a mortar shell and a claymore, maybe four or five fragmentation grenades. So by the  
5 time you got all done, most of your weight was either in ammunition or food. We'd carry  
6 four or five day's worth of food. It was all c-rations at the time. They hadn't come out  
7 with what they called the Long Rang Patrol rations, the MREs I think is what they call  
8 them now. Everything was canned so it was pretty heavy. That's what I remember. I  
9 remember sitting down and then having somebody help me up off the ground because I  
10 couldn't figure out how to get up with that load on my back. That's a little embarrassing  
11 when you're twenty-three years old and you're in pretty decent shape and you can't get  
12 up. It just takes you a while to learn to maneuver with that much weight on your back.

13 RV: Can you tell me what your uniform was comprised of, what you personally,  
14 individually carried?

15 JM: When I first got there I carried the seven magazines. I guess we'll start at  
16 the bottom. I had a pair of jungle boots and socks. They'd issued jungle fatigues.  
17 Everybody had jungle fatigues and the webbing with the pistol belt. You had this kind of  
18 yolk thing that went over your shoulders and you could hang things off of it. I carried  
19 two two-quart canteens and two one-quart canteens then I got some more later on. Water  
20 was something you really needed, especially in the summer. I started off with two  
21 fragmentation grenades and ended up carrying five. Started off with the seven magazines  
22 and ended up carrying twenty-five plus another hundred and eighty rounds. Usually, at  
23 first, I carried one extra set of clothes. I got rid of those because they'd come out with  
24 resupply every week or so, depending when they could get to us. So it was just weight  
25 that you didn't need. I would carry an extra pair of socks and try to keep them dry in a  
26 little plastic bag. I carried some writing material, smoke grenades, a knife, a bayonet, M-  
27 16 rifle. They issued me a .45. I gave that to an M-79 guy because they didn't give  
28 them .45s and they only had one shot. Most of them were worried about the fact that they  
29 didn't have personal protection. I didn't like carrying a pistol because, at the time, it  
30 made you stand out from the other people. Some writing material, a map, a codebook  
31 because I was a platoon leader and I had my dog tags someplace I guess. You were

1 supposed to lace them into your boots. I think I taped mine up. I kept them around my  
2 neck. I never liked looking at my dog tags when I was walking. It just seemed like a bad  
3 omen. I got to the point after I'd been there for a week or two that I was really concerned  
4 about everything being exactly where it should be. I would want things in my pockets. I  
5 had a little eight-bamboo piece from a ma jan that was a key chain I carried my mom had  
6 given me, a Ho Chi Minh penny that I'd picked up and some other things. I'd want  
7 everything in the same pocket. I'd be walking along and all of a sudden I'd realize that  
8 something wasn't in the right place, I would stop and move it so that things were exactly  
9 where they should be.

10 RV: Why did you do that?

11 JM: You know what? I guess it gave you sort of a sense of security or that you  
12 were in control of something. I'm not exactly sure. It was almost like a superstition. If  
13 things were in the right place that there was something more secure feeling about that.  
14 You would know where everything was. I think quite a few guys were like that. You'd  
15 do certain things everyday after a while. It takes a little while to get to that point I think.  
16 It didn't take too long. I think within a week or two you got to where you wanted  
17 something that you thought you were in control of. I think that was pretty much the case  
18 for everybody. Everybody wore a helmet. At the time you didn't see any bush hats in  
19 the field, at least in our unit. Entrenching tool, entrenching tools were very important  
20 thing. Then we would carry, as I say, either a Light Anti Tank Weapon or an  
21 .81millimeter mortar round if the mortar people were out with us because they couldn't,  
22 of course, carry all their stuff. And a hundred rounds of machine gun ammunition.  
23 Every man in the platoon carried a hundred because I think the machine gun crews  
24 carried about nine hundred to a thousand rounds. Then everybody carried extra  
25 ammunition for the machine guns because that was really important for us.

26 RV: Tell me about your weapons. You mentioned that you carried a sidearm, but  
27 then gave it away. But you had the M-16. Can you discuss that weapon and any of the  
28 other things that you had? Which ones did you prefer? Which ones did you not want to  
29 have?

30 JM: Well, the M-16, I never fired an M-16 until I got to Vietnam because at the  
31 time, we were all still training with M-14s in the United States. So the first time I ever

1 fired one was when I got to Chu Lai for training. Then they handed me a weapon out of  
2 the armory my first day. As I mentioned earlier I think I spent about four hours in the  
3 rear area where they were just handing me stuff and sticking it in this rucksack and  
4 sending me out. I never actually got to fire the weapon until I was actually in combat. I  
5 had no idea where the rounds were going. I'd never been able to put a zero on it.  
6 Sergeant Wright, my platoon sergeant, had been on machine gun committees at various  
7 post, had been a machine gunner in the Korean War. He used to make us load, when we  
8 had time, every fifth round, tracers so at night the M-16s would look a lot like the M-60  
9 machine guns when they were firing. The other thing in the daytime, if you didn't know  
10 where your bullets were going, about every fifth one you had an idea of whether you  
11 were high or low. So it wasn't the worst idea in the world. So we spent a lot of time,  
12 when we had time loading our magazines and setting that up so that at night if we got hit  
13 it would protect the machine guns. So it's [the machine guns] about thirty or forty  
14 percent of your firepower and a lot. It's just really important to use your guns right.  
15 Then the M-16, I liked it. I only had it malfunction on me one time. Of course we had  
16 the A-1s. We had the second version. By '68 they had the newer ones out where they  
17 put the chrome in the chamber and around the bolts so they didn't stick as badly as they  
18 had in '66 and '67. As long as you kept them clean, it was fine weapon. The thing that I  
19 liked about it, the ammunition was light. You carried a lot of ammunition whereas with  
20 the M-14 or one of the earlier weapons you could probably only carry half as much.  
21 Then the fragmentation grenade, the first ones we had were the M-26 A-1s, I think. They  
22 were shaped pretty much like the old pineapple grenades you saw in the World War II  
23 movies, only they were smooth. They fit in your hand pretty well and you could kind of  
24 put a spiral on them like a football and throw them pretty well. Then some genius in the  
25 Pentagon or someplace decided that all Americans played baseball and they needed to be  
26 shaped like a baseball so they came out with the M-33, which was round. We didn't like  
27 those nearly as much. We would trade them. They were smaller and a little bit lighter  
28 and we would trade them to the South Vietnamese for the M-26s because when  
29 something is that heavy it's a lot easier to throw with your whole hand than to try to grip  
30 it like a baseball. So we liked the fragmentation grenades when you were in close  
31 combat, were a good thing. The M-60 machine gun was a fine weapon, again, if you kept

1 it clean. It was combat, pretty dirty environment. But they were just hardly ever  
2 malfunctioning, just an extremely good weapon. The M-79 grenade launcher, which was  
3 the other thing we had at the platoon level. Nobody liked carrying it. The ammunition  
4 was heavy. It was a one shot deal and it was really sort of almost like a support weapon.  
5 Because it was heavy and it had one shot and the ammunition was heavy, they just didn't  
6 like carrying it. So the new people usually got assigned to carry the M-79. Very few  
7 people wanted to carry it after they carried it for a little while.

8           RV: How long would those guys usually carry it before they realized this is not  
9 so good?

10           JM: I think they figured it out immediately when some old guy would say,  
11 'Okay, you're the new grenadier,' and take their 16 when they showed up. It didn't take  
12 too long to figure out that people before you didn't like it. Then we had some people  
13 that...occasionally you did have somebody that did like it. They'd run around with a  
14 shotgun round for initial stuff. It was a good weapon for what it was designed to do, it  
15 just wasn't very practical. Of course now they have the 'over and under' thing I guess  
16 where the person actually has a 16 and an M-79 that's sort of all in one piece so they do  
17 have some personal protection. But that was a weapon that whenever we got really short  
18 of people we wouldn't have any M-79s in the field. We usually didn't have as many as  
19 the TO and E called for. It called for two in each squad and we usually had one. We  
20 would try to fire them as a group if we could, if we were in an area where we could kind  
21 of put them together and use them sort of almost like mini-artillery. We did the same  
22 thing with the LAWs. We carried a lot of LAWs and because a lot of time the NVA  
23 would wait until they were close enough to kiss you before they'd open up. You couldn't  
24 get artillery or air strikes in. We'd use those almost like artillery. We also carried a 90-  
25 millimeter recoilless rifle in the company. So each platoon was assigned one, but we  
26 only carried one in the company. That's again the ammunition. I think it weighed about  
27 eleven and a half pounds for a round, but they had a fleshette round with them. Mostly  
28 we carried two or three high explosive rounds. We'd carry a few fleshettes and carry one  
29 gun, one of the recoilless rifles in the company. They came in pretty handy occasionally  
30 when things got real tough because they'd clear out a lot of brush and a lot of people if  
31 they got online. So it was a nice weapon. I know a lot of the outfits didn't carry one.

1 Captain Adams, our first company, commander insisted we carry one. I think later on  
2 they quit carrying it. The whole time I was in the field we had it with us.

3 RV: What was your favorite weapon?

4 JM: Far and away the M-60 machine gun. I mean I didn't fire it that much, but  
5 when it came to worrying about things, whether you had good people on the guns, the M-  
6 60 was your fire power. That was the thing that gave you the edge if things got bad. So  
7 you put good people on them, you made sure that you had backup gunners. Just really  
8 when an M-60 was in the hands of somebody that knew what they were doing it's just an  
9 awesome piece of equipment.

10 RV: Do you think that was the most feared weapon that you all had out in the  
11 field from the standpoint of the NVA and the VC?

12 JM: No question about that. They tried to take the machine gunners out. They  
13 were smart enough to know to do that. Of course we did the same thing. A machine gun  
14 in the hands of somebody that knows what they're doing is a pretty terrible thing really.

15 RV: What constituted a good machine gunner in your eyes?

16 JM: Most of the time we put guys on them that were pretty good sized. It  
17 weighed twenty-three pounds and it would climb on you. A lot of times we didn't use the  
18 tripods. You were using it almost like an automatic, heavy automatic rifle. So you had to  
19 have somebody that could hold the gun down while it was being fired. You had to have  
20 somebody who was really steady, that didn't lose their head and was willing. They had  
21 to be a responsible person. We never had somebody on the machine gun that wasn't just  
22 as steady as a rock. That was real. They actually had two other people on the gun team  
23 with them. You had an ammo bearer and an assistant gunner so they really had some  
24 responsibility there over that group. Then they had responsibility that when something  
25 started happening they had to know how to react and then they had to be willing to just  
26 take the heat. It was really important that the gunner remain steady and act responsibly,  
27 no matter what happened keep firing.

28 RV: What weapon did you all fear the most that the enemy had?

29 JM: Probably the one that you thought the most about was the AK-47s. They had  
30 more of them and no question the AK-47 was a really good weapon. In the hands of  
31 somebody that knew what they were doing again it was really good. If we'd start running

1 into .50 caliber machine gun, .51s actually is what they were using. Those things were  
2 scary just because the round was so big. It would just start cutting down trees and things.  
3 So we probably—if when you talk about what we feared the most, it was probably the .51  
4 caliber machine guns.

5 RV: Did it have a distinctive noise that you all knew?

6 JM: Yes, it fired slow and it was very loud. Probably fired at a rate about four  
7 hundred and fifty rounds a minute, which isn't that slow, but it's still pretty slow, four  
8 hundred, so you could hear the distinctive rounds coming out of it and it sounded pretty  
9 low, but it was pretty fast. Then the RPGs were bad also. That was the thing that they  
10 used very effectively. They used it like we did LAWs. They used it almost like small  
11 artillery. You just get whole barrages of RPGs coming in on you.

12 RV: Was there a weapon that you did not have that you wished you did have with  
13 you?

14 JM: For a while we had .60-millimeter mortars. That wasn't part of our table of  
15 organization. We had .81 millimeter, which was a large heavy weapon with large heavy  
16 rounds. It was really developed for Europe. It wasn't very practical in the jungle in the  
17 rice paddies. We got some .60-millimeter mortars. We traded them from the Vietnamese  
18 and the Army took them away from us after they found out we had them after a while,  
19 because it wasn't part of the table of organization. But we really liked those because you  
20 could carry rounds that probably weighed half as much as an .81 round and the tube  
21 probably weighed a third. It was really a nice weapon. You could fire them off your  
22 knee. There was lots of things. I don't think anybody did that [fired the mortar off their  
23 knee]. It hurt I heard. A couple of them tried it. But anyway it was a nice weapon to  
24 have in the field, but as I said we only had one for a little while and then they took them.

25 RV: Were you all able to get resupplied adequately in the field and of course  
26 back to camp when you went there?

27 JM: When you were at a firebase—we didn't get back to camp much while I was  
28 in the field. I only spent a little over three and a half months in the field. I was very  
29 lucky. I spent most of my tour at brigade headquarters later on. But we were in firebases  
30 during that time [in the field]. We never got back to the brigade or the division base  
31 camp. I understand that some of the guys were out there nine months before they got

1 back. We didn't have a stand down for almost nine months one time. I think they just  
2 forgot that we were out there sometimes. And resupply was, I would say sporadic. They  
3 used to tell us that we were going to get a hot meal once a day. Sometimes we'd go three  
4 of four days and get one, and then sometimes we'd go two or three weeks without one so  
5 it just depended on the situation. There were times when we were out in the mountains  
6 when the weather got bad that we didn't get resupplied adequately at all. We ran out of  
7 food for two days, completely out one time.

8 RV: What did you do?

9 JM: We just finally got on top of a mountain, cleared an LZ and waited for the  
10 weather to clear. Some guys had some peanut butter and things were auctioning it off.  
11 They were looking for lizards to see if they were good to eat and things. So we literally  
12 had been out of food for two days before we got a resupply.

13 RV: How did you handle that as one of the leaders?

14 JM: At that time I was actually company commander. We just were all in it  
15 together. I wasn't eating, they weren't eating. We just sat there waiting for resupply.  
16 They knew it was raining, it was soaked in. There wasn't anything to do but what we  
17 were doing. The weather would clear pretty soon. They kept telling us it was going to  
18 clear. It finally did. Then we had sort of a disaster. We had sort of a new fellow. Like I  
19 said we were out in the jungle, pretty thick jungle. So we had a fairly small hole that we  
20 had cut in the trees for them to hover over and drop the resupply into. This helicopter  
21 driver just was new and he wouldn't hover. He had been told that you weren't supposed  
22 to hover. You could slow down. They were coming by kicking these c-rations out from  
23 about a hundred and fifty feet and two hundred feet up. They were just like missiles  
24 coming down. We actually had to dust a man off with a broken back that had been hit by  
25 a c-ration case. So it was just a whole little period right there was kind of a mess. We  
26 got in trouble, we actually shot at him because he came back to make a second pass  
27 (laughter). We scared him off by shooting an M-60 at him. Of course he reported us.  
28 We had one man hit, an arm broken, one man hit and his back broken because the c-  
29 rations. Excuse me a second.

30 RV: Go ahead.

1           JM: It was real sporadic. They'd bring us ice cream of course and it would all be  
2 melted by the time it got out to us and things like that. But it was nice to get something.  
3 You could pour it into canteen cups and it was still kind of cool and it would be good.  
4 The weather, when I first got there it was August and it was dry season. I know it would  
5 get up to 110 or 112 range. They claimed it was hotter than that sometimes but I don't  
6 know if it really was. Then at night it would cool off into the nineties, low nineties.  
7 Then we were out in the mountains in November. I think that was during the monsoon so  
8 you were wet. I think the temperatures would be in the upper fifties, lower sixties. You  
9 just felt like you were freezing. We'd set up our ponchos sometimes after we dug in and  
10 take C-4 and roll it in little balls and try to heat the inside [one of our shelters], light it  
11 with a match and sometimes go through a pound of two of C-4. I found out later on that  
12 it cost like two hundred dollars a pound so our heating bill was pretty expensive. But  
13 really the fellow that spent all their time up in the Central Highlands, I thought during the  
14 monsoon that must have been pretty miserable weather up there because we were up  
15 there in November and it just rained all the time. Trying to climb mountains in the mud  
16 is just not much fun.

17           RV: John, how would you rate the morale of them men when you first arrived  
18 and how that evolved over the time you were there?

19           JM: I got there as I say in late July of '68. The morale, and the only thing I can  
20 address is the morale in our particular unit because that's really about the only people I  
21 saw. But let me go back before that. At Ft. Carson, Colorado, which is where I was  
22 stationed before I went over, I was friends with some senior NCOs that had actually been  
23 in the Korean War and were professional soldiers. Some of them were already  
24 disillusioned. This would have been early '68. With just the way that things were going  
25 and the fact that having been over there they thought that people [Vietnamese] really  
26 didn't want us there they just thought the whole thing was a mess. So I went over there  
27 thinking that it wasn't quite like they told us. When I got there morale in the company  
28 was good. We had a good company commander. I think morale in any unit had to do  
29 with the leadership, good squad leaders and just generally good infrastructure within the  
30 company. So the morale was pretty good. That went on I think the whole time pretty  
31 much I was in the field. But by late November the morale wasn't quite as good as it had

1 been because they'd stopped the bombing at that point in North Vietnam. If I remember  
2 they stopped it early November of '68. At that point we knew that we were trying to  
3 negotiate our way out. Anybody was in range. People were worrying about, 'How long  
4 is the war going to last? What's the deal here? We're over here getting shot at and  
5 losing people. It's obvious that were going to pull out of it at some point.'

6 RV: How did you all know that in the field? Were you able to obtain information  
7 through word of mouth?

8 JM: Well the *Stars and Stripes* would have the facts. We'd get newspapers out  
9 there occasionally, the *Stars and Stripes*. They'd say as part of the negotiation things and  
10 stop the bombing in North Vietnam. The other thing that happened some time right after  
11 that, the amount of activity in our area of operation started picking up. We were getting  
12 more NVA coming in where there'd been fewer earlier. We'd actually pretty much I  
13 think taken care of [the NVA] by September. We'd pretty much blunted the post-Tet  
14 Offensive that they had coming through there in September. We had a pretty good-sized  
15 action out around Ha Thanh Special Forces Camp in our area, big action and pretty much  
16 decimated the NVA regiments that were out there. Then activity just really dropped off.  
17 I mean you could just see that they were running deep into the mountains every time you  
18 ran into some of them. They didn't want to stand and fight. They would just fire a few  
19 rounds and take off. You just couldn't find anybody. Then by later on by early February  
20 they were just all over the place again. So that [the bombing halt] was pretty obvious to  
21 people. The bombing, the halted bombing in North Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh  
22 Trail there for a while was not working to our benefit. You would hear things, people  
23 would come in, new people from the States would be telling you things that were going  
24 on. You could get radio stuff and people would get letters and rumors. There were  
25 always rumors going around. We heard Captain Robb over in Bravo Company had a  
26 baby and it turned out it was Captain Robb that was married to one of the Johnson  
27 [President Johnson] girls. But we were all calling him up and congratulating people on  
28 the radio. He wanted to know what was going on. We said, 'We heard you had a baby.'  
29 He wasn't even married, so that was...

30 RV: Did you know Captain Robb?

1 JM: Captain Robb in B Company. I didn't know Captain Robb that was married  
2 to Lyndon Johnson's [daughter]. No, this was a different Captain Robb. He was in  
3 Bravo 1/20. I think Captain Robb was a Marine. I think he was a Marine.

4 RV: Yes, he was. Chuck Robb was. Exactly right.

5 JM: No, I didn't know him.

6 RV: John, when you first arrived, tell me the sense of what you knew and  
7 understood or thought about United States in Southeast Asia, what the purpose was and  
8 why you were there and what the overall mission was.

9 JM: Actually I really did think the mission was that the Communists were trying  
10 to take over the country and that our mission was part of the great strategy of  
11 containment. It seemed a little—it was pretty grey because of all the things you'd seen  
12 on television. Ever since the Diem overthrow it was obvious that it wasn't as clear-cut as  
13 the mission they gave us. We were there to establish the hold on democracy and to hold  
14 back the Communists. I mean that was pretty much what they told us. The time I  
15 actually got there, I think I thought my deal was to be the best platoon leader that I can  
16 and get as many people home as I could. I think that's how most of the people and I  
17 think that's probably the thought of most infantry people even in World War II. I think  
18 maybe they had more of a mission [the WWII soldiers]. But once you get into the field,  
19 it gets a lot more personal. As a matter of fact there's almost no—I'd say the sense of a  
20 bigger purpose is just gone. It's just you and the people around you doing what you're  
21 told to do so you can get it over with and go home. I think that's the sense. In good units  
22 I think it's the same sense as it is in bad units. It really isn't about the big picture. It's  
23 about how you treat each other and how well led you are. It's kind of amazing that we  
24 can get people to do it. Sometimes you just think. I don't know if it's amazing now as it  
25 was during the Civil War. I just have no clue how they got those guys to do that. It's an  
26 amazing thing of what people will do because they bond with the people next to them.

27 RV: John, what was the typical day like for you when you first arrived and were  
28 out in the field?

29 JM: When I first arrived it was just pain. I was hot. I was tired, I wasn't in good  
30 shape because as I say I had actually had forty-five days off. I'd spent a little over two  
31 weeks in Panama at jungle school. So I got fifteen days travel time because I knew how

1 to work the system. So I had fifteen days off before I went to jungle school. I went to  
2 jungle school, it took about two and a half weeks I think by the time you got down there,  
3 went through the school and got out. Then I had thirty days off before I went to Vietnam.  
4 So I had partied pretty good. I had probably put on about twenty pounds I think. I had  
5 been eating good, drinking a lot of beer. I got over there and when you're first over there  
6 you don't do anything. You do some training, they take you to classes and teach you  
7 about the Geneva Convention and make sure you're familiar with the arms, take you  
8 through some booby trap trails where they simulate booby traps, so you have an idea of  
9 what they look like, what to look for. They get you acclimatized. Then they send you  
10 out in the field, and it was just—I never carried a pack that weighed that much. Don't  
11 know if I've ever been in a place where you couldn't get a drink of water at some point if  
12 you ran out. So you just knew. You don't know what's going to happen. I think the  
13 sense of the unknown, I don't think it's as much when you're twenty-three or twenty  
14 years old about worrying about getting killed. You just aren't familiar with your  
15 environment and what's going to happen so you've got this sense of having to be on the  
16 alert all the time. That's pretty draining. Getting to know the people, getting to be a new  
17 person, it's hard to get accepted in a unit that's been out there for a while when you're  
18 coming in as an individual replacement. Probably a little easier as a lieutenant because  
19 they have to be nice to you. Some people were accepted pretty readily and some weren't.  
20 So you had that whole business about being new and trying to break into a tight group.  
21 Then just as I said the environment was just real tough. It was hot, there was bugs.  
22 There were people shooting at you. Everybody was unfamiliar. It was just an alien  
23 environment. You'd just never seen anything like that in the United States with the rice  
24 paddies and the mud huts and the people chewing beetle nut. I mean we were in a rural  
25 area there. I guess Quang Ngai City was sort of a city but we never got up there. We  
26 could see it from the distance occasionally. So it was pretty much small villages and  
27 farming villages. Then you get in the mountains and there was nothing. There was just  
28 trails and NVA and occasional montagnard village down some place.

29           RV: What would make one person more readily accepted by the men or less  
30 accepted by the men?

1 JM: I think—gee, after all this time it's kind of hard to remember that. I know  
2 some people came in and they might be from an area that some of the other guys were  
3 from and that helped. We had quite a few people from Michigan. If we get another  
4 person from Michigan into the platoon that seemed to help. If they've been to the same  
5 AIT, you know where they had some thing in common and could talk to some people  
6 about it, if they were a little bit on the macho side it helped more than if you were a little  
7 bit more on the scholarly side, and then if you were just willing to do your part and not  
8 bitch and carry on you got accepted more readily. Then when something happened, if the  
9 person reacted well, that had a lot to do. If they didn't react well it took a long time for  
10 people if they didn't react well in their first action.

11 RV: John, let me stop the recording for just a moment to change the disk.

12 JM: Sure.

13 RV: Okay, John, picking up. How were you accepted? How did you react?  
14 With the criteria you just gave me, how did you fit in to that?

15 JM: It's kind of funny because I got there in the dark. It was night when I got  
16 there. So my platoon sergeant had seen me and I'd met the other officers, one of whom  
17 I'd been to officer basic with, a fellow named Brad Burgraff. So that was kind of nice to  
18 actually see a face. We weren't real good friends but we knew each other. We were  
19 acquaintances. So that was nice. Then we walked off LZ Thunder at about three-thirty in  
20 the morning. I think I may have mentioned this. I wasn't really assigned to a platoon  
21 because the company commander was out. He said, 'This will be your platoon so why  
22 don't you hang out with them?' So I was just sort of hanging out. I couldn't figure out  
23 which platoon it was as everybody was walking by in the dark. So I finally just decided  
24 it looked like everybody was leaving I needed to get in. I fell off a rice paddy dike into  
25 the water and all these guys were walking by. So we had this firefight the first day and  
26 everybody just did what—actually his name was Fred Ragland was one of my squad  
27 leaders who'd been there for a while. So I just did what he told me and that seemed to  
28 work out okay with everybody. Then came next day and it was really hard to keep up  
29 with everybody because the company commander showed up. He'd been a recon platoon  
30 leader and he thought our company should do like a recon platoon. He was just a real  
31 hard charger when it came to walking. So it was real difficult keeping up. Then about

1 the third day I was there, we got in another firefight it was sort of an interesting deal. Me  
2 and the platoon sergeant were the only ones in it for a while because he was showing me  
3 how to find tunnels. Showed me this one he thought was empty. It turned out there was  
4 people in it. That turned out okay and after that it seemed like everyday things got a little  
5 bit better. I was pretty good about asking people what we should be doing. They teach  
6 you a lot of things, but a lot of times that doesn't work out. So I tried to listen to people  
7 and learn things and I think they appreciated that. The one strike I had going against me  
8 was I was an ROTC officer and their reputation wasn't as good usually as an OCS or a  
9 West Point person for whatever reason. But after I'd been there about three weeks it was  
10 fine. I had a great lieutenant sergeant. He was a character, but he pretty much took care  
11 of his officers and pretty much ran the platoon. I mean he'd been the acting platoon  
12 leader probably more than he had at different times. Until I got my feet on the ground he  
13 would include me in all the things. But he'd say, 'Well, I think this is what we should be  
14 doing, sir.' He was just a character.

15 RV: This is the gentleman that recently passed away?

16 JM: Yes, Sergeant William Wright. He was a Hawaiian. He looked like he was  
17 Vietnamese and they'd come up and talk to him. He was a real small man. It really  
18 would irritate him. He was just a character. He'd actually shoot at people [our own men]  
19 if they started bunching up too much together. He was just a wild man and had  
20 absolutely no fear and seemed to have some sort of like protective shield around him.  
21 Like I said that was his—he'd been on a combat tour. He was in Korea in '53 when he  
22 was like eighteen or nineteen years old. So he'd actually seen combat before he was  
23 there. He trained this platoon in Hawaii so this had been his platoon all along. Sort of  
24 like John Wayne and *The Sands of Iwo Jima* or something. So they were his people and  
25 he was good. He was really good. But he was hard. Whenever we used to get together  
26 we used to tell Sergeant Wright stories because he was just absolutely not playing with a  
27 full deck it seemed like sometimes.

28 RV: But effective?

29 JM: Yes, and nobody wanted a different platoon sergeant. Half of them hated  
30 him just because he was. He'd cancel somebody's promotion over an argument about a  
31 can of spaghetti in your c-rations. I've actually seen him do that to people. Just do

1 almost bizarre things. There was never any question that he was the platoon sergeant.  
2 And the company commander he was actually the acting first sergeant in the field. He  
3 was the 'field first' besides being our platoon sergeant. He was a great combat soldier.  
4 So that made things I think easier, having a good infrastructure within the platoon, really  
5 good squad leaders and a really good platoon sergeant. The first month I was there we  
6 didn't hit anything that was too big. We ran patrols, we'd run into a few Viet Cong  
7 occasionally, some snipers and things. So I think that gave me some time to grow into  
8 the job a little bit. So by the time in mid-September when we actually did see some  
9 heavier combat that things were, everybody had a sense of how we were going to do  
10 things and what I was going to do and what he was going to do. We worked together  
11 most of the time.

12 RV: What about any race issues?

13 JM: In our platoon and I can't really speak for [other units]. Well, I can to some  
14 extent. Out in the field we just didn't have [any race problems]. When I first got there I  
15 realized that I had a squad of blacks, and a squad where most of the Hispanics were in it  
16 and a squad and a half of mostly white people. I was asking Sergeant Wright about that.  
17 He said, 'Well that's how the guys wanted to do it and the former platoon leader let  
18 them.' I said, 'Well I don't like this.' He said, 'Neither do I.' So we broke it up and  
19 there was a little bitching by two or three of the fellows. The Hispanic guy had two  
20 Puerto Ricans who came and claimed they couldn't speak English. I said, 'Well I don't  
21 know how you got through basic training and AIT and this far in the Army.' So I said,  
22 'If you don't understand English you're probably going to die.' I said, 'I don't speak  
23 Spanish and we're going to give the orders in English here you know.' That was fine.  
24 After that never heard anymore about it. It was just sort of a test. Some of the black guys  
25 didn't want to get broken up, but I had two Hispanic squad leaders, one was from Puerto  
26 Rico and one was from California, and two black squad leaders. They were all really  
27 good. Three of them were shake and bakes, that you know came out of the NCO, OCS  
28 school at Ft. Benning where they just train people to be rifle squad leaders. They didn't  
29 really. When you came out you were either an E-5 or an E-6. So they could read maps,  
30 they could do all the stuff you needed to know in combat. They probably wouldn't have  
31 been a great sergeant in a garrison situation, but they were bright and you had to be pretty

1 bright. They could have gone to OCS, but you had to make a longer commitment if you  
2 did that. So I was really fortunate I think. We had good people that had been there for a  
3 while, and so when we broke them up we never really had any racial problems in the  
4 field, or really in the rear in the platoon. We had a tight group and then the company  
5 there was very low. In the rear areas, back in Duc Pho and especially up at Chu Lai there  
6 were some real racial issues. I mean they would have bands of blacks roaming the beach  
7 at Chu Lai at night, beating up people and bands of whites looking for blacks. It was  
8 almost like gangs sometimes up there at night. They had an incident after I was out of the  
9 field where they finally got a stand down and went to Chu Lai. A group of black soldiers  
10 had attacked one of our white guys outside of a little NCO club. Somebody saw it going  
11 on and both the black and the white fellows from the company went out and defended  
12 him and beat up some MPs that came and tried to break the thing up. It was kind of a bad  
13 situation. But I mean the rifle company itself was a really tight group. They made me B  
14 Company commander for a little while after we got a bunch of new officers in. I think I  
15 was B company commander for three days and then they got even more captains in so I  
16 lost that job. That's how I got in brigade headquarters. When I got there they had a lot  
17 more trouble over Bravo Company than we did. There was a whole bunch of I guess the  
18 proper word is 'malingerers' in the rear that were refusing to go to the field and they were  
19 almost all black guys and said that the NCOs and the company commander didn't treat  
20 them right and they weren't going to go. So I sent some of them to jail and some of them  
21 went to the field. I don't know how that turned out because as I said I was company  
22 commander for a total of three days, took care of that. Then the new fellow showed up,  
23 so at least he didn't have to deal with it. But I think there were by late '68 early '69 there  
24 was a lot of problems in the rear areas. You worked maybe eight or ten hours a day, did  
25 some guard duties and then you had time. When you've got that many young men  
26 together if the wrong people become the leaders of a group, you have a problem. So  
27 that's about all I know about that.

28           RV: Can you tell me about when you would actually go out in to the field, kind  
29 of your day-to-day activities and the tactics you all employed, kind of what a typical day  
30 was like out there?

1 JM: Well a typical day when we were down in the coastal areas—we actually had  
2 two areas we operated in. We operated in the coastal plain, which was all paddies. A lot  
3 of hedgerows. It would break up the paddies and surround the villages and the villages  
4 and an occasional road. You had Highway One that ran along the coast. We had the  
5 South China Sea and then at the bottom of our area of operations the mountains actually  
6 came down and touched the sea. That's where the mountains actually came down and hit  
7 the ocean in Vietnam. We were right at the I Corps, II Corps border. That was one of the  
8 reasons in '69 and '70 there was a lot of activity in our area because the NVA kept trying  
9 to cut the country and that was a logical place to try to do it because you had cover all the  
10 way to the coast. Then the mountains would gradually sweep back until they were  
11 probably fifteen miles in from the coast. Then the mountains would start. You'd have  
12 some foothills and then taller mountains behind. Of course we used to always think when  
13 going into the mountains we were on the Laotian or Cambodian border. That was always  
14 the rumor. Even though it's in some of letters I said, 'We're not too far from Cambodia.'  
15 We were a long way from Cambodia. But at the time it seemed like, 'My gosh, we're out  
16 in the middle of nowhere.' So the tactics varied a little bit depending on the terrain you  
17 were operating in. But most of the time a typical day would be, we would have dug in  
18 the night before, usually late in the afternoons where we'd have plenty of time to dig in  
19 fairly well. We were really good about digging in. The company had seen enough action  
20 earlier, having been mortared enough, they believed in having foxholes. Some of the  
21 companies that hadn't seen as much, they'd try to sneak in and lay up at night. I talked to  
22 one of the company commanders and we got into an argument later on. We were out in  
23 the jungle and we were digging in. You make a lot of noise when you're digging in and  
24 cutting fields with fire and things. We were supposed to be setting up together and he  
25 thought that they should just sneak in and lay down so the NVA wouldn't know where  
26 you were. My theory was they knew where we were because we made so much noise  
27 moving. One hundred Americans loaded down with gear are not a particularly quiet  
28 group.

29 RV: Even with noise discipline.

30 JM: Yes, noise discipline. There's just no way when you're out in the mountains  
31 and you're following trails, looking for base camps or whatever. When you hit

1 somebody earlier in the day they've got a general sense that somebody's out there. Our  
2 theory was, 'We're going to make it worthwhile for them or make it not worth their while  
3 to come after us. If they do, we want to be dug in.' We'd seen a lot of action earlier than  
4 this.

5 RV: How would you set up your defensive perimeter when you would dig in?

6 JM: Mainly it was a perimeter. We usually set it up as close to a circle as we  
7 could make it. We'd literally be a perimeter. We'd find the highest ground we could, dig  
8 in on the military cress someplace, which sometimes when you go over in a helicopter  
9 ever hill especially down in the coastal plain looked like a garbage dump because there  
10 were c-ration cans and things. Then the mortars and the CP would be in the center of the  
11 perimeter. You'd have one platoon tying into the other platoon tying into the other and  
12 then the shape would be generally round. Then you'd set up the machine guns on the  
13 most likely avenues of approach into your area and where they could kind of cover the  
14 front of the platoon. Then we would set out claymores and trip flares. That was  
15 something else we carried I forgot to mention. Everybody carried a claymore and a trip  
16 flare. We would set those out and then usually had two men, sometimes three if we had  
17 enough people to a position. The size of the perimeter often depended on how many men  
18 we had in the field unless we had an area where you had to spread out a lot wider to cover  
19 the likely avenues of approach. We liked to be as tight as we could at some times. We  
20 varied anywhere, I think we had as many as a hundred and twenty-five men in the field,  
21 with the table of organization called for one hundred and fifty-six I think in a light  
22 infantry company. By the time you take out the people that are in the rear, a hundred and  
23 twenty-five in the field is pretty much a full compliment. Now that counted some  
24 artillery people and stuff. So it would probably be actually about a hundred and fifteen or  
25 so from the company. Then we'd be down [in numbers after the heavy actions]. We  
26 were down to as low as fifty several times. Of course they always expected you to cover  
27 the same amount of ground. So that was always kind of difficult. But we would  
28 normally find a good spot and dig in at four o'clock in the afternoon or five, depending  
29 on when it was going to get dark. Usually start digging in about two hours or so before  
30 dark so we could have a good hole and set up and put out depending on where we were  
31 we put out listening posts sometimes which would be usually two men out on the

1 perimeter someplace on each side in likely avenues of approaches. A lot of times that  
2 would be the whole company there. A lot of times what would happen is we'd dig  
3 around with one platoon around the CP and the other two platoons would split up and go  
4 out on ambushes. We'd put out sometimes as many as ten or twelve small ambushes  
5 every night spread all over a whole area when we were down in the coastal plain. That's  
6 pretty much a lot of what we did down there. Then we'd get back together in the daytime  
7 and then patrol as a unit, kind of spread out, put two platoons in front searching an area,  
8 sweeping through an area and one kind of in reserve, pulling in from the rear with the CP  
9 in the middle. Usually spread out over a half a mile or so in width and following the rice  
10 paddies. They told you never to walk on the dikes. That's one of the things we taught  
11 you. Of course we always walked on dikes, because try to walk in a rice paddy with  
12 eighty pounds on your back. The second thing is the Vietnamese were walking on the  
13 dikes, so it was usually if you were down in a populated area, if you'd seen Vietnamese  
14 walking in an area it was probably safe. We'd hit a booby trap occasionally. In the Duc  
15 Pho area that wasn't real often. One time we did get some sniper fire. So we patrolled at  
16 night.

17 RV: Tell me about that, the ambushes that you would run at night.

18 JM: When we didn't get lost, sometimes we'd find some thing. When I first got  
19 there it'd just drive me nuts because you'd be out there in the dark and there's no  
20 landmarks. You're out on this perfectly flat rice paddy broken up by hedgerows. There  
21 was nothing to see. So you started off and if you ended up getting mixed up, you had no  
22 clue where you were. It took me a while to get used to navigating in the rice paddies.  
23 That was just a real mess. But we would go out usually with around five men. So if you  
24 had a platoon you'd put out maybe six ambushes at night. Sometimes they'd leave the  
25 machine guns in with the company, sometimes you'd take a gun to one of the ambushes.  
26 The platoon leader would take one, the platoon sergeant would take one and the squad  
27 leaders would take one. So usually you'd have five or six out at night. You'd go out  
28 anywhere from a kilometer to six or seven kilometers from where the company was dug  
29 in. You'd try to leave after dark so they wouldn't see you or before dark and stop  
30 someplace and then go to your ambush site after it got dark and set up. Pretty much  
31 cover a trail or a junction of two large paddy dikes or watch a village or do something.

1 Most of the time you never saw anything. The thing you had to worry about if you  
2 weren't where you were supposed to be they had 'H and I fire,' harassment and  
3 interdiction fire. The artillery fired at night and those were at random targets. If you  
4 were in the wrong place and you didn't know where those were coming in at they didn't  
5 tell you. They just told you you're supposed to be here and the artillery would know not  
6 to fire into that area. So that always worried me when I first go there that I was lost and  
7 we'd be sitting under some H and I target. Never happened but it was a concern.  
8 Sometimes people, if they'd get lost, just hunkered down. We would have a patrol I  
9 know that would do what we call sandbag. They'd go out two hundred yards and find a  
10 kind of covered position and really not go out to where they were supposed to go.  
11 Occasionally if you'd been in a lot of bad combat and you were down not too many  
12 people you'd have certain squad leaders or platoon sergeants or somebody that would  
13 sandbag the patrol rather than go out and risk, if you hit a lot of combat, risk being  
14 overrun in a small group by a small bunch of NVA.

15 RV: How often did that happen?

16 JM: You don't know. You'd hear about it afterwards. You'd hear somebody say  
17 so-and-so sandbagged the patrol last night. I don't think it happened real often. I would  
18 say it really depended on how much combat you'd seen up before that and how thin they  
19 were making the patrols go out. It got to be almost an individual decision on the part of  
20 the patrol leader. If they thought they were going to go out and get hung out to dry  
21 someplace with no support or they really might run into something bad, sometimes they  
22 would sandbag. Most of the time I don't think the company commander knew about it.  
23 The platoon leaders would only sort of hear about it after the fact, later on. There's no  
24 way to prove that. We had a bad incident outside of Ha Thanh the Special Forces Camp.  
25 There's two versions of what happened. One was the patrol sandbagged and they were  
26 just outside the perimeter when the NVA hit us. So they got caught in between. The  
27 other one was they were trying to get back in the perimeter and they got over run. I don't  
28 know which one's true. To this day I don't know. I just know we lost a whole group.  
29 But it almost knowing the people and that was a different platoon. Knowing the people  
30 and some of the stuff that was going on there I almost believed the first rumor, that they  
31 tried to stick around until just before dark and were going to sneak out because they

1 didn't feel safe. We'd run into a lot of NVA. There's been a lot of combat going on in  
2 the area. Then the platoon leader over there I don't think they had a whole lot of faith in  
3 their platoon leader. He was way too gung ho. A lot of the people didn't think things  
4 through very well. Just, 'I'm in charge and this is what you'll do.'

5           RV: What were the differences between the daytime and nighttime when you  
6 think back in general about that?

7           JM: The daytime you were hot and miserable. You felt better because you could  
8 see. We didn't have all the night vision devices that they have now. Of course there was  
9 a lot more cover than there has been the last two or three wars. The fields of fire weren't  
10 as good. So you're moving at night and it was just kind of like a cat and mouse game.  
11 We were out trying to set up ambushes and we knew they were doing the same thing.  
12 They were moving at night. I never, you used to hear that thing about 'Charlie rules the  
13 night,' you know. We didn't move as much at night but we ambushed a lot at night. We  
14 never felt that they were any better at night than we were. They just knew where they  
15 were. The big advantage they had was knowing the terrain. That was an advantage they  
16 had down in the coastal plains. Up in the mountains nobody knew where they were. So  
17 the NVA and the Americans I think in the mountains were pretty much on equal terms.  
18 We just were moving around a lot more than they tended to so we'd blunder into them. I  
19 hate to say blunder since most of the time we didn't know where they were. We'd just go  
20 out and look for them and sometimes you'd run into them. Often the NVA would have  
21 Viet Cong that would lead them to the coastal plains so they knew where they were  
22 going, where they wanted to set up and we were out just kind of wandering or looking for  
23 somebody to run into. I think by late '68 the body count mentality was starting to come  
24 in. 'How many kills did you get today?'

25           RV: They would ask you that?

26           JM: Kill ratios. I mean that was a big deal. They kept track of it. They would  
27 know, 'Oh that's your fifth kill for this month,' or something. I think we had a pretty  
28 good outfit. I think we didn't count somebody unless you could kick the body. Very  
29 seldom did we kill people that didn't have weapons so I think we had it good. One of the  
30 reasons we had good morale was because we were out there trying to be soldiers I think  
31 most of the time. I think most people felt pretty good about what we were doing. We

1 were out there trying to fight. We were out there trying to keep things under control, not  
2 burning villages and doing stuff. It's hard to do sometimes in certain areas.

3 RV: What did you think of that bodies count policy?

4 JM: I thought it sucked. What happened it was more in the brigade, battalion,  
5 division headquarters. What would happen they would put pressure on lower units so  
6 you would get this [body count mentality]. Really in '69 after I got into the brigade  
7 intelligence because that was one of the things that we were supposed to track. You  
8 could see what was going on. We had a cav outfit that we worked with. They were  
9 really bad. I think what they would do is they would kill one NVA and they'd have five  
10 guys in the track and they'd ask each one of them how many dead people they saw. And  
11 they'd saw one, five guys saw one dead person, that's five. I truly believe that we  
12 probably killed a lot more than we claimed. A lot of it was going out places where we  
13 didn't have combat troops. When you'd interrogate the North Vietnamese they'd come  
14 down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The attrition from the infiltration groups from bombing  
15 and artillery and stuff was incredible but we never knew that. There was somehow we  
16 wanted to know whether we were winning or not. That's a pretty poor way to find out. It  
17 never worked. But certainly I know we had a brigade commander for awhile, Colonel  
18 Donaldson, that was very anxious to make General. He was just obsessed with having a  
19 good kill ratio and a good body count.

20 RV: This is when you were back at headquarters?

21 JM: Yes. When I was out in the field, we really didn't have to worry about too  
22 much. We kept running into them. It was a bad policy. I know they wanted to know  
23 someway. But it also encouraged people I think sometimes to either take credit for things  
24 they didn't do or start firing up places where they didn't need to sometimes.

25 RV: What did you think of the one year rotation policy, especially as an officer  
26 who would usually spend six months in the field and six months out?

27 JM: I loved it when I was there because I knew we were going home. There was  
28 a good sense of morale. There was a good thing to it from that standpoint if people knew  
29 they weren't going to be there forever. Of course the war had been going on for so long I  
30 don't think anybody wanted to be there for the duration plus six. There were lots of  
31 people that never had to go, people that spent their whole tour in Germany or something

1 in the infantry. The other thing that went on and of course the bad thing was once you  
2 started getting short as they said, you had four months to go or three months to go or two  
3 months to go. All of a sudden people didn't want to go on patrol. From that standpoint,  
4 it was a good morale builder for about the first eight months and then it was pretty  
5 negative. The other bad thing, especially I think from the officer's standpoint is about the  
6 time you learned what you were doing, they pulled you out. So I suspect I really didn't  
7 have a good idea about what I was doing until I had been in the field for six weeks or so  
8 and seen enough action to have an idea how to react to things and what to do. Then about  
9 two months later they'd get in this whole influx of new officers and I'm the senior  
10 lieutenant of the battalion and they pull me out. Of course the other bad thing about that,  
11 especially about the thing with the officers were the ordinary grunts spent their whole  
12 tour in the field. There was some resentment for that. If they liked you, they were happy  
13 that you were getting out. If they didn't like you, they were resentful about the policy.  
14 Everybody over there I don't think anybody every resented somebody getting out of the  
15 field there. They thought it was good for them. Especially if it was somebody they liked.  
16 They said, 'Well good for you, you're going to make it home.' So it worked both ways.  
17 The other bad thing that the Army did I think in Vietnam, again it's the same forces and a  
18 long time in Iraq and Afghanistan. Once you had experience they tended to rotate those  
19 same officers back in there. I knew people who were on their fourth tour and of course  
20 there were officers in Germany and the United States that had never been to Southeast  
21 Asia. So there was this sense that once... As a matter of fact it wasn't a sense. It was  
22 absolutely true. Once you had combat experience they kept rotating you back in. That  
23 wasn't good on the morale of the officer corps at all. There was resentment for the fact,  
24 'Well, I did my tour. There's three quarters of the officers corps had never been and  
25 they're sending me back.'

26 RV: How about tension between those in the rear and those who spent their time  
27 mostly in the field?

28 JM: There was a lot of tension there. We did not like the people in the rear.  
29 Actually we may have disliked them more than the NVA. At least you respected the  
30 NVA. They were all out there suffering and doing stuff. You may not like them but of  
31 course, I'm sure you know the expression having talked to a lot of people. We called

1 them all REMFs. To this day, I suspect even though it's better there was just a lot of  
2 resentment by the men in the field, of the men in the rear. Partially it was because they,  
3 in a lot of cases, looked down on the field troops. You'd go up into Chu Lai or  
4 someplace and the MPs, it was supposed to be their job. They would be giving the guys a  
5 hard time that their hair wasn't cut or they didn't have their uniform all up to snuff  
6 exactly or something. Sometimes if you're hair was down way over your collar, that's a  
7 problem with the company. You just really resented these people that were back there  
8 getting their three squares a day and sleeping on a bed and stuff giving you a hard time. I  
9 think that was the case probably in every war. Maybe a little bit more in Vietnam than  
10 other places. I'm not sure that it's worse there than in other places.

11 RV: Why would those in the rear resent you out in the field?

12 JM: They didn't resent us, we resented them. They sort of looked down on the  
13 people. They thought all the dummies are out there in the field. You would have people  
14 that would say, 'They should have attacked harder. Why didn't you guys do this? Why  
15 didn't you guys do that?' It was sort of a game with them. You'd get back there and  
16 they'd say, 'Well these guys aren't very well motivated. They're a bunch of slackers and  
17 stuff.' We had a company clerk in our company that had to take off to Chu Lai every  
18 time he heard that some people were coming in because there was supposedly a contract  
19 out. People he didn't like, he'd tear up their in-country R&R orders. Said they didn't  
20 deserve to do that. I had to send people back one time. They were sending guys in the  
21 monsoon when I was CO out to the field with wool blankets. I knew for a fact that back  
22 in the rear area they were using poncho liners for curtains and bedspreads, because they  
23 looked nice. I had to put some people on a helicopter, a resupply helicopter, send them  
24 back in and literally go thorough the battalion rear with their rifles pulling down first  
25 sergeants' and armorer's curtains and bedspreads. They were saying, 'You can't do that.  
26 That's our stuff.' I had people out there that had wool blankets and when they get wet,  
27 you know? So there was just stuff like that that happened all the time. We had  
28 somebody that was taking all the beer and soda and selling it to the villagers. We  
29 couldn't get any. We were supposed to get one beer and one soda in the field every day.  
30 We were having to buy them from the villagers because there wasn't any in the rear  
31 because this guy was selling them to the villagers. So we were paying a dollar for

1 something we were supposed to be getting free. There were just lots [of incidents like  
2 that]. They'd send guys out with backpacks instead of ruck sacks, the boards you know,  
3 with the strings on them. They were doing something, trading the ruck sacks someplace.  
4 Just a lot of that goes on and went on.

5 RV: So you all actually had conversations with the people back in the rear when  
6 you would go back? You would confront each other? They would actually talk about  
7 you all being slackers or being dummies for being out in the field?

8 JM: Actually most people wouldn't do that to people's face. But when you'd get  
9 back in you'd hear that stuff sometimes. One or two at a time. The guys in the field, a  
10 lot of times they'd come back in and their attitude wouldn't be real good if somebody  
11 would say something like that to them. There was just that general sense back there that  
12 almost a sense of superiority that the lower classes were out there and we're better off  
13 being back here. There was a lot more drug use, especially in '68 back in the rear than  
14 there was in the field. There was just a lot of morale in the rear areas was not as good as  
15 it was in the field in late '68 which was kind of a weird deal.

16 RV: Speaking of having a contract out on somebody, what kind of incidents or  
17 discussion of fragging did you ever hear about?

18 JM: Actually I didn't hear about any of that really until part way through '69. I  
19 think once it became obvious that we were going to pull out there was just a lot more  
20 resentment. There was some, a little bit had gone on up at Chu Lai. You'd hear some  
21 rumors that something had happened. Didn't have much at Duc Pho. We had some  
22 shooting incidents but most of that was over somebody getting mad and arguing. As far  
23 as I know we hadn't had any incidents where somebody had actually come in and  
24 intentionally killed somebody else. In the field, there were rumors of platoon leaders or  
25 somebody being shot. But usually that was a competence deal and not a discipline thing  
26 where somebody was disciplining somebody and they resented it. When I first got to  
27 Korea in '71 there was a lot of it [fragging] going on. We were up in the DMZ and there  
28 was fraggings going on everyday up there practically.

29 RV: Really? Why?

30 JM: People were on drugs. You'd go out and they were giving them live  
31 ammunition and they were putting them out in the trenches on the DMZ at night, eight

1 hours doing drugs. They'd come in and some sergeant would say something to them they  
2 didn't like and they'd just kill him. Or some officer. I actually slept with a .45 under my  
3 pillow the first couple months I was there. There was literally a lot of it going on. That  
4 was one of the reasons they pulled us off the DMZ. That wasn't the official reason, but I  
5 always thought that was a major reason they pulled us back because they wanted to take  
6 the live ammunition away from people. But now, in '68, at least in our brigade you  
7 didn't hear much [about fragging].

8 RV: What about tension between draftees and those who enlisted or were regular  
9 military?

10 JM: There was a lot of joking that went on about being lifers and stuff. There  
11 was a little bit of tension I guess. I don't recall that being a major area. The main thing  
12 people were worried about at least in our outfit was whether somebody was competent or  
13 not. They weren't worried about it. It's like Sergeant Wright. He was definitely a lifer  
14 and they all called him, 'You lifer.' The draftees would get upset when he wanted them  
15 to do something, refer to him as a lifer. Not necessarily to his face, but you'd hear them  
16 talking. The fact that he was competent, that was the thing that people worried about the  
17 most. There was a rumor that one of our lieutenants was shot in the leg by one of his  
18 guys in a firefight. I don't know if that was true or not. It's one of those things you  
19 heard once or twice. Some people would say, 'I don't know if that's true or not.' You  
20 just don't know. The guy just would freeze up in a firefight and they liked him. He was  
21 a likeable guy. So the rumor was they got in this big firefight and one of the fellows shot  
22 him in the leg just to get him out of the field, but they didn't want to kill him. As I say, I  
23 don't know if that's true. It makes almost too much sense not to believe because the  
24 whole circumstance was always a little strange about the deal. I still know him to this  
25 day and he doesn't think that.

26 RV: What about friendly fire incidents?

27 JM: I don't think there's any such thing as friendly fire. I can't believe that they  
28 won't give people Purple Hearts because they're killed by our own artillery. I don't  
29 know if they still do that [not award Purple Hearts for friendly fire]. We had some  
30 incidents; we had two or three actually. One up in the mountains where we had an  
31 artillery LNO. I later found out he was with battalion, flew around with the battalion

1 commander up in his command and control chopper. I understand the battalion  
2 commander made him write L&R on the back of his hands because he couldn't remember  
3 left from right when he was calling artillery in. He called in artillery on us once. We  
4 actually had about twelve guys hit. Twelve or thirteen but none of them were serious.  
5 We were up in the real deep trees so everybody got up next to a trunk some place. We  
6 were lucky nobody got hit real bad. We got a bunch of guys that were cut pretty badly. I  
7 was acting company commander at the time. We were actually in contact, so I put them  
8 all in for a Purple Heart because I could report it as being from grenade fragments. They  
9 were really unhappy with me about that, because they were pretty sure that wasn't it.

10 RV: Who was unhappy with you?

11 JM: The battalion staff. They kept trying to get me to change my story.

12 RV: Did they get the Purple Hearts?

13 JM: Yes, they didn't have a choice. We called them in from the field having  
14 been wounded during contact with enemy forces. We ran onto trail and we had one man  
15 killed, a point man had been killed, shot in the leg. Actually went into shock and bled to  
16 death before we could get to him. We were pushing these two guys back into the trees  
17 and the battalion commander we were calling artillery in behind him. There may have  
18 been three [NVA]. We were calling it in by sound because you couldn't see anything.  
19 He got in a hurry to try to cut them off and had this fellow call in artillery and called it  
20 right in on top of us. He was pretty sure that's what happened [we'd been hit by friendly  
21 fire]. Because there hadn't been any firing for a couple of minutes. But I just called  
22 everybody in for the Purple Heart. I was pretty upset.

23 RV: I can imagine.

24 JM: They all got it because we just told them we were in contact with the enemy  
25 and they were throwing grenades. Two grenades went off and we were just lucky we  
26 didn't have anybody seriously wounded, didn't have to dust anybody off. We had  
27 another incident where they dropped one right into the middle of the perimeter one time.  
28 We were lucky everybody was in the hole, because we were calling in and setting up  
29 final protective fires for the night. It hit right maybe fifteen yards from the CP. If  
30 everybody hadn't been down in the foxholes, we would have had several people hit.  
31 Those are two I remember. It was just one of those things you worried about all the time.

1           RV: John, tell me about your experiences with the dust off teams.

2           JM: They were good and bad. Some of them would come in right in the middle  
3 of things and some of them you had trouble if you were in a firefight. I had been in one  
4 recently if you didn't call them in as an urgent they wouldn't want to send people in. If  
5 you change your mind, we had a trouble one time where we called in one as a routine, not  
6 realizing the fellow had been hit as bad as he was and changed it to an urgent. They said,  
7 'No you called it in as routine.' That was it. We had to threaten to send some people  
8 after the dispatcher. They showed up and it turned out fine. He's fine now, I think  
9 because we got him out of there. Dust off, we loved dust offs. I'm giving you the good  
10 and bad news, the news was almost always good. If it hadn't been for that we'd have had  
11 a lot more guys that wouldn't have made it home. Get them up to the hospital and the  
12 medics were great. You just can't really say enough about the medics and the doctors  
13 and the people and the medics on the dust offs. I mean those guys were just amazing. I  
14 tell you we had some of our command and control pilots that were with brigade aviation  
15 and they would come in time after time under fire to pick up wounded guys if the dust  
16 offs were all filled up. I had a lot of respect for those guys. I worked with a lot of them  
17 after I got out of the field. We literally had command and control choppers come in and  
18 pick up people when we couldn't get a dust off to come in sometimes. Some of the  
19 chopper pilots were just amazing. Some of them were like that guy that dropped the c-  
20 rations on us weren't. I mean a dust off is the sweetest sight in the world after you've  
21 been in a big firefight.

22           RV: How would you rate the intelligence that you received? Obviously I'm  
23 asking you who served.

24           JM: Later on we got a lot smarter after I got out of the field. Most of the time, it  
25 was sort of general and not very good. When I say that, you had a general sense that  
26 something was going on but you never know where it was. I was actually out in the field,  
27 had very little idea other than the company commander would say, 'Okay, the 48<sup>th</sup> main  
28 force battalion out operating in this area. We're going to go out and find them, okay?'  
29 When we went up to Ha Thanh in September and got in all the contact we knew there  
30 was people up there because the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 1<sup>st</sup> had already been up there for a week. We  
31 were getting all the reports back about all the combat. So most of the time, they were out

1 there someplace. We know that they're doing something. Let's go out and see if we can  
2 find them. Wouldn't have any idea how they'd be armed other than the fact they always  
3 seemed to have the same things. If you ran into the NVA they were armed one way. If  
4 you ran into VC they could be armed any number of ways so most of the time we just felt  
5 like we were blundering around in the dark until we found somebody. When I got to the  
6 brigade intelligence shop it seemed like we certainly tried to be organized and we had  
7 lots of information that we mapped out. Some of it was accurate and some of it wasn't.  
8 A lot of the information was sort of like hearsay. We wouldn't map out anything that  
9 wasn't actually spotted by the long-range reconnaissance patrols, people like that then try  
10 to match it with things we were hearing through the Vietnamese or the CIA people or  
11 whoever. Sometimes it would be pretty accurate, but you had a problem if the division  
12 thought something different. There was a lot of times I thought division intelligence  
13 wasn't as good as it should be. We had to post enemy unit sites on the maps. Our first  
14 brigade commander made us do it by division because they were obviously smarter than  
15 we were. We would get something called Usually Reliable Intelligence, URIs. There  
16 was obviously some sort of radio intercepts. That stuff would be pretty good. It would  
17 be some sort of headquarters unit usually. And they were usually out in the mountains  
18 some place. You'd start getting them and you'd get a whole bunch. They'd actually  
19 identify the unit but they wouldn't tell you if it was radio intercepts or whatever it was. It  
20 was a big, dark secret. There were these people up in this little thing surrounded by  
21 barbed wire and the guy would come out and mark our maps for us you know. You'd  
22 talk to him and he say, 'I can't tell you what it is.' You could figure it out. The amazing  
23 thing was they obviously had intelligence coming from the South Vietnamese because if  
24 we would plan for like a B-52 strike in that area about six or eight hours before the B-52  
25 strikes would start hitting, you'd see these things start moving out of the boxes. But  
26 occasionally we'd get lucky and get something. You'd put two or three things together.  
27 We would catch somebody. But a lot of the time you had general information and you  
28 just had to go out and look for them. They'd be pretty widely separated out there. There  
29 was a lot of territory and not that many people to cover it. A lot of cover. I mean you  
30 could be on the wrong side of the hill and there probably could have been an NVA

1 regiment on the other side. As long as they were being quiet and didn't move you  
2 wouldn't see them.

3 RV: Did you unit ever use canine units?

4 JM: Yes, actually the first month I was in the field we used one several times. I  
5 laugh because they were good at finding booby traps and things. They would do that.  
6 When it was really hot, they couldn't keep up. The dogs would get tired and it would  
7 actually slow you down. Anybody that might be around could take off. I mean the dogs  
8 were really bad when it was hot. The only times I ever operated with them it was hot.  
9 The dog handlers were kind of wild men. They were a little different. The guys would  
10 want to feed the dogs because they were big dogs and nice dogs and the handlers would  
11 go crazy. The guys would feed the dogs anyway. They'd have to take them back and  
12 retrain them they'd tell me. We had some trouble. We had a dog handler unit we're  
13 pretty sure killed a South Vietnamese soldier. We don't know if he did it by accident or  
14 not. They tried to cover it up and then they tried to blame it on one of our people. That  
15 was kind of a bad incident.

16 RV: What happened?

17 JM: They went into this little villa with three or four guys and pulled out this guy  
18 that was in kind of a green uniform and shot him. Then they found out he was a member  
19 of like the Regional Forces or something. He had an ID card on him. They threw it  
20 away. The people from the village I guess, they charted him in as being a Viet Cong  
21 main force guy. We didn't know any different. The people that were with them, I don't  
22 know if they actually saw him throw the ID card away. I never got real clear about that.  
23 But what later on the people from the village complained they investigated it. They all  
24 led these guys up and they [the dog team] tried to claim that our artillery sergeant that  
25 was assigned our artillery forward observer had actually done it. We had several other  
26 people that knew that wasn't the case. They had a trial and some things. The dog  
27 handlers were all kind of wild people. They just seemed like they were a little out on the  
28 edge all the time compared to us. But we worked with dogs probably two weeks in  
29 August. It was a lot of fun having them with us. They would sniff out and they'd find  
30 some tunnels and they were always empty in something. But mostly the thing I  
31 remember was the dogs couldn't keep up.

1 RV: Did you all use snipers?

2 JM: No. Didn't have any snipers.

3 RV: Did you work with troops from other countries? Australian, New  
4 Zealanders, ROKs?

5 JM: No we ran into a minefield that had been laid by the ROKs that they didn't  
6 mark once. That wasn't good. Anyway that's what I was told later on. They were all  
7 Bouncing Bettys. They were all around a night defensive position. We later heard that  
8 up at the division they knew the ROKs had laid it and they forgot to tell us. I don't know.  
9 I think the ROKs had laid it because they were all Bouncing Bettys. They were all  
10 American made Bouncing Betty mines and they were laid out like you would lie out a  
11 minefield. The ROKs would do that when out in the field of the Batangan Peninsula  
12 area.

13 RV: What about ARVN?

14 JM: Worked with ARVN a couple of times. That was never real successful.  
15 Worked with the Regional Forces a few times, that was even less successful. The  
16 ARVNs just weren't very well motivated. We actually had the First ARVN Division; I  
17 think it was the First between us and the rest of the Americal Division. They were up  
18 around Quang Ngai City. Occasionally they'd go out and burn villages. I could  
19 understand why the people didn't care for the National Police. Most of my dealings with  
20 the National Police and the ARVNs were not very positive. So we didn't like working  
21 with them. We'd set up a blocking force and they'd come into us or something  
22 occasionally. That was about the extent of it.

23 RV: John, how would you describe the quality of the communication that you  
24 had there within the platoon and within the company and then going up the chain?

25 JM: When you talk about communications, if you're talking about physical  
26 communications with radio, then most of the time that was pretty good. Of course I like  
27 to think communication within the platoon was good. You talk to the guys and they say,  
28 'We never knew what was going on.' I would have an idea and tell the squad leaders  
29 whatever I knew or whoever. The company commander would tell us sort of what he  
30 thought we were supposed to know. I never felt, and this was reinforced after I got out of  
31 the field, that the people up at the higher echelons, especially by the time you got to

1 brigade, had a good feel for what was going on. I just don't think that they [understand].  
2 As I say sometimes we had fifty-two men. I know it probably doesn't matter to them.  
3 They wouldn't look at, for instance, what the field strength of the unit was in assigning  
4 missions. This company gave them the information. One of the things that amazed me  
5 was after having been out in the field, is I knew that the NVA stayed down, mostly there  
6 had to be a stream where they would set up because they couldn't operate without water.  
7 Of course we could have water flown in so we were always on high places. Of course  
8 military doctrine in almost any country says if you control the high places, that's good. If  
9 you're out there living in the jungle you might put some kind of listening post or trail  
10 watchers up in the high places. You're going to have to be in some places where you can  
11 get to water and quite a bit of it. One of the things I found out when I got in the rear, the  
12 fellow before me, we didn't have anybody on battalion staff, on brigade staff that had  
13 actually operated in the area. A lot of them had never actually been in the field, the  
14 lieutenant colonels and the colonels. They were targeting all their stuff for the high  
15 ground. It took me a while to persuade them. Finally we would go out and show the  
16 colonel and some places that all the base camps and things when we started finding them  
17 were always in the low ground. They finally let me start targeting some things. We did  
18 do a little better. I'm not just bragging about that. I just never felt that they really had a  
19 sense of how the enemy operated. That was just the sense there at the 11<sup>th</sup> brigade. Later  
20 on we got a brigade commander that had worked his way up from private and was much  
21 better at that as far as giving the right kind of directives to the staff on how we should be  
22 operating. Can we call it off?

23 RV: Absolutely. Let me go ahead and stop the interview for today.

**Interview with John McNown**  
**Session 3 of 5**  
**December 18, 2003**

1           Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history  
2 interview with John McNown, Jr. I am again Lubbock, Texas. Today is December 18,  
3 2003. It is 8:37 AM Central Standard time. Mr. McNown, you are in Miching, Kansas.  
4 Sir, let's pick up where we left off yesterday. We had been discussing some general  
5 things. I wanted to ask you one thing that affected your daily life I would imagine was  
6 the enemy. Could you describe in general terms your impressions of the NVA and the  
7 Viet Cong?

8           John McNown: Well, naturally I didn't like them much. I guess we could start  
9 off with that. From a general impression I think two things stand out. Number one is we  
10 didn't have a whole lot of respect for the Viet Cong in some ways. That's just not simply  
11 because they were smart enough. They didn't have the weaponry. They didn't stand up  
12 and fight. When you did run into them they certainly weren't as well trained and as we  
13 used to say, 'had their act together.' If they did decide to stand and fight they were pretty  
14 easy to overcome, whereas the NVA were well trained, well motivated. I mean they were  
15 just hardcore people. We had a lot of respect for the NVA. Didn't want to run into them  
16 necessarily because they had adapted their tactics to the fact that we had overwhelming  
17 firepower. So I think I mentioned some place yesterday we used to say they'd [the NVA]  
18 let you get close enough to kiss you before they'd open up. Of course they would  
19 maneuver on you, just very disciplined troops, most of the ones we ran into. So we had a  
20 great deal of respect for them. In terms of course the first people I ran into because we  
21 were operating in the coastal plain were the Viet Cong. They were usually operating in  
22 small groups, which made them easier to handle, of course. You'd see anywhere from  
23 four to seven maybe at a time. Almost a fire team kind of group. They were usually  
24 wearing whatever the people in that area, whether they were villagers or farmers or  
25 whatever were wearing most of the time. They were armed with M-16s, AK-4s, old  
26 French rifles, just about anything they could get their hands on. The thing that we really  
27 didn't like about the Viet Cong was their ability to use booby traps and mines to their  
28 advantage. In Quang Ngai Province we just had booby trap casualties, it seemed at least  
29 every week. In some areas you'd have them every day. That's pretty hard on the morale

1 of the troops. That's why up in Pinkville, which was where My Lai was, they tended to  
2 rotate people in and out of there and didn't leave them very long just because that was an  
3 area where everyday you could count on losing somebody to a booby trap. That's just  
4 frustrating to people. So the Viet Cong were almost like an irritant, except they'd get on  
5 your nerves, whereas the NVA, that was like running into an elephant when you'd run  
6 into a good sized force NVA. They were going to stand and fight and they were going to  
7 maneuver. It was real combat when you did that.

8 RV: What would you say were the main strengths of the NVA?

9 JM: Discipline. They had good fire discipline, most of the people we ran into.  
10 They usually tried to choose the place where they wanted to fight. We usually would  
11 either be dug in and they'd hit us or we would run into them after they were dug in.  
12 Occasionally you'd catch them out in the open someplace. Then it was pretty unequal at  
13 that point if you saw them first. Just seemed to be a fairly disciplined, fairly well led  
14 fighting force. One thing they didn't have was good communication. If you could  
15 separate them out there wasn't very good communication. They didn't have the radio  
16 communications that we did. A lot of the times they would pre-plan their attack and  
17 when something went bad the people that were succeeding wouldn't know that something  
18 had gone bad somewhere else in the line and then you could pretty much defeat them in  
19 detail. So communications probably, that and they just didn't have the firepower. They  
20 didn't have the artillery and that kind of thing. Occasionally they were using, I think they  
21 were 120-millimeter mortars, which were similar to our four deuces. They had 82-  
22 millimeter mortars and a lot of RPGs. They certainly didn't have any air support,  
23 helicopter support or artillery down in our area so they were disadvantaged as far as  
24 firepower went a lot of times.

25 RV: What kind of tactics would they employ usually?

26 JM: Most of the time when we ran into them, which was usually out in the  
27 mountains, they did come down. I was out of the field then but in '69 they came down  
28 on the coastal plain so it was a little different then. Most of the time they would try to set  
29 up an ambush and hope you walked into it. They would be usually dug in fairly well and  
30 camouflaged well. They were really good at camouflage.

31 RV: How would they usually camouflage or typically camouflage?

1 JM: If they were dug in they would make sure they still had bushes that appeared  
2 to be natural in front of their positions, would be dug in behind hedgerows a lot. When  
3 they did come into the coastal plains they would set up behind hedgerows and the  
4 hedgerows were very thick there. That was something that surprised me. You hear about  
5 the hedgerows in France in World War II and I'd never heard anything about hedgerows  
6 in Vietnam. But certainly in the Duc Pho area there were hedgerows everywhere. They  
7 were very thick and you couldn't get through them unless there was an opening  
8 someplace or you blew something out of it. They would dig in behind the hedgerows  
9 with fields of fire across the rice paddies. That was a pretty tough thing. If you got out in  
10 the middle of a rice paddy and they opened up on you, it was pretty hard to get any kind  
11 of maneuver other than straight ahead against something like that. I would say they were  
12 pretty clever in their attack methods. We got hit one time at night outside of Ha Thanh  
13 Special Forces Camp. I mean it took everything we had to keep from getting overrun.  
14 We were fortunate enough we'd called in final protective fires the night before, targeted  
15 them in. That's about the only thing that kept us from being overrun. They were very  
16 persistent, hard-core people.

17 RV: You all had a measure of respect for that?

18 JM: Yes, we did. It's pretty hard not to respect people that don't have the fire  
19 power that you do and keep coming anyway.

20 RV: John, why don't we pick up with one of the questions I asked yesterday  
21 about your daily activities? We began to discuss going out on ambush and things like  
22 that. I'd like to know a little bit more about your daily activities.

23 JM: I think yesterday we talked about we'd dig in somewhere late afternoon.  
24 Then usually one platoon, this was down in the coastal plains, which was where a lot of  
25 our activity took place. We were supposed to be trying to make sure that the population  
26 was friendly to the South Vietnamese government and protect what they call the rural  
27 development area from the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. I don't think we were  
28 very successful. I read a book not too long ago that said eighty percent of the population  
29 of Quang Ngai Province remained loyal to the North through the entire war. There was  
30 only one of two provinces that they felt they had control of for the entire war. We always  
31 felt that way, that the population just really didn't like us much.

1           RV: How could you tell, or maybe that's not such a smart question?

2           JM: It was because of all the booby traps and the mines. You knew people had to  
3 know that they were out there. They'd be out farming and you'd hit a booby trap and  
4 they'd all just be setting there. Then occasionally especially when we were up in the  
5 Pinkville we did some things that probably weren't in accordance with the Geneva  
6 Convention a couple of times. We had been hitting booby traps every day. We actually  
7 pulled some villagers out and put them in front of us and we never hit a booby trap. They  
8 would actually all of a sudden come back and stop and tell us we couldn't go someplace.  
9 So they obviously knew where they were.

10          RV: How many times did you do that?

11          JM: I think twice. We never shot anybody or did anything. A couple of times  
12 when we hit three or four booby traps in an area in a single morning, we finally just  
13 pulled some people out and had them guide us to the next place we were supposed to go.

14          RV: When you say pulled some people out, what do you mean by that?

15          JM: We just went into a village and rounded up some civilians and put them in  
16 front of the point man. Just went down a trail. We were supposed to be going to some  
17 other place. We'd put them on the trail on the way to go. Then they would stop and  
18 indicate that there was something there. Then we'd bypass that and they'd show us  
19 something else. So it was obvious the local population had an idea of where this stuff  
20 was. I think we did that twice as I remember. Both times it was up north of Quang Ngai  
21 City and out toward the Batangan Peninsula, which Norman Schwarzkopf said when he  
22 was on TV a few years ago was to Dan Rather 'it's a bad ass place.'

23          RV: Would you agree with that assessment?

24          JM: Yes, it was terrible. We just lost people every single day and never saw  
25 anybody and that's frustrating. That's why he said he didn't leave people in there.  
26 Sometimes you'd lose lots of people. So, getting back to the daily activities we would  
27 dig in, eat and sometimes they'd bring us a hot meal in the evening. A lot of times they  
28 wouldn't. Then we'd send out usually two platoons on ambush patrol. They'd go out as  
29 far as maybe seven kilometers.

30          RV: Did you rotate platoons? How did you select them?

1 JM: Yes, usually two would go out one day and then the next day one. A lot of  
2 times you would move someplace during the day and then a different platoon would stay  
3 and guard the perimeter at night. Sometimes guarding the perimeter was almost worse  
4 than going out on patrol. You'd have this pretty good-sized area to guard and you  
5 wouldn't be able to put as many people in to a guard position as normal. You didn't get  
6 as much sleep doing that either. So anytime we were actually patrolling two platoons at a  
7 time nobody was getting much sleep. So we go out on the patrol and most of the time  
8 you didn't hit anything. We talked about when I first got there I think I was lost all the  
9 time. There was no point of reference out in the paddies. You'd hit these hedgerows. I  
10 forgot to mention we carried a compass also when we talked about what we carried. So  
11 you'd be trying to go with your compass and you'd get under your poncho with your  
12 flashlight and figure out where you were and take off. You'd hit a hedgerow and all of a  
13 sudden you'd have to move several hundred meters in some strange direction before you  
14 could get through it. Then you'd try to get back on line so you could find where you  
15 were supposed to be going. Then you'd come across a stream. You'd have to find a  
16 place to forge the stream. So a lot of times it was just, especially when I first got there—I  
17 was a pretty good map-reader in the States and even in Panama had done a decent job.  
18 When I got up there on the rice paddies with the hedgerows and the streams it was a lot  
19 different kind of environment to be moving through. You almost couldn't terrain  
20 navigate it was just because of these hedgerows that didn't show up on anything. Next  
21 thing you know you'd be moving and you'd get through it on one side. A lot of times if  
22 there was a trail there'd be a hedgerow on each side of the trail. You'd get through in this  
23 one spot but there wouldn't be someplace else directly across from it to get through the  
24 hedge and you'd have to move up or down the trail until you found a hole to get out the  
25 other side. By that time you couldn't see anything on either side so it was very difficult.  
26 As a matter of fact a funny thing happened at our reunion in St. Louis. Our 81 FO who  
27 was part of the platoon headquarters area unit, he'd been there quite awhile when I  
28 showed up. We were all talking and of course a lot of the fellows from the platoon were  
29 already there. We were kidding around. He walked up and he said, 'Well, John, did you  
30 ever learn to read a map after I left?' That was a huge joke the whole time because all the  
31 rest of them thought I could read a map pretty well. I could by the time he left, but when

1 I first got there out in the paddies it was terrible at night. So we'd go out and do the  
2 patrol, the ambush. Usually it was the five sometimes as many as ten men. You might  
3 have a whole squad. Usually it was five to seven people. You'd set up and hope you  
4 didn't hit anything a lot of the time because sometimes when you hit something you  
5 didn't know if it was the beginning of a larger unit. You weren't sure what you were  
6 getting into.

7 RV: How could you tell what side you were running into? Was it just a matter of  
8 time?

9 JM: If you looked up and you saw five or seven guys and you would blow your  
10 claymores. You usually put your claymores out and then open up. The thing that never  
11 happened to me, but I have friends that it happened to that would be bad. It turned out  
12 that might be the point squad of a company, especially later on when the NVA started  
13 moving around in the coastal plain. The next thing you know you had a whole group of  
14 people getting on line assaulting your ambush position. That was not a good thing to do.  
15 So you hoped—you didn't want to miss the people that went through. Sometimes later  
16 on they'd let those people go through and see if there was anybody coming after them.  
17 Then you would miss both groups if there wasn't. So what you did when you saw a  
18 larger group was usually you waited until you could pull back and then try to call artillery  
19 in on them after they moved up the trail a little bit. You tried to estimate where they'd be  
20 and call artillery in on them. Then in the daytime we'd pull back in after first light.  
21 We'd pull back into the company perimeter, have some breakfast and then we'd move off  
22 to wherever we were going to sweep that day or whatever the mission. Which a lot of  
23 times it was move from here to here and check out these things. Then we'd set up again  
24 for the night.

25 RV: How fatigued were you, John?

26 JM: Excuse me?

27 RV: How fatigued were you?

28 JM: You were tired. After a while you just got used to it. But I literally could  
29 sleep standing up after I'd been there about two months. You could stand up against a  
30 tree and catch five minutes. You could sleep. After two weeks any time you got five  
31 minutes you could just instantly go to sleep. I wasn't as bad. My platoon sergeant

1 wouldn't let me pull guard duty. The first month or so after I got over there, probably  
2 after I got used to the mosquitoes and things probably got more sleep than I ever got in  
3 my life because Sergeant Wright didn't think officers should pull guard duty. So it would  
4 start getting dark and you'd go to sleep and you'd wake up just before first light. When  
5 the company was dug in together just before first light you'd wake everybody up and get  
6 into position because I don't know where it came from. The NVA liked to attack just  
7 before first light. I never saw that happen. I'm sure there was some reason for that. At  
8 Benning they had lots of after action reports that would mention that right before first  
9 light some unit would get hit. So that was a different situation. At some point you'd kind  
10 of hump until somebody decided it was time to take a break. You hoped that you were  
11 toward the front of the unit. The whole unit was moving and company with a hundred  
12 people in it was probably spread out over close to a mile, especially if you were in single  
13 file. So the company commander would get up there and he'd take his five minutes and  
14 decide the break was over and the people in the rear were still pulling into the area. So if  
15 you were toward the back a lot of times you never got to stop moving. Then sometimes  
16 you'd go off during the day and operate as a platoon. 'First platoon go off to the left and  
17 you go out and search this village over here.' The CP and usually the mortar people  
18 would stay in a central position when we did that. We would report back into them what  
19 we'd found. That was pretty much a typical day when we were out off the firebase in the  
20 coastal plain. When we were guarding the firebase, you'd leave one platoon on the  
21 firebase. It really worked pretty much the same way except depending on the size of the  
22 firebase you couldn't put out as many patrols if you had too much area to cover, too  
23 many bunkers. Sometimes we'd left as many as just single person in a bunker because  
24 we had so many patrol out and not enough people to do it. Then when you're out in the  
25 mountains you almost always stayed together at night. You didn't send out patrols at  
26 night when you were in the mountains. The company dug in as a unit and you put out  
27 listening posts, two or three men, out in places that you thought were good areas of  
28 approach. You put them out a hundred to two hundred yards. Then everybody else  
29 would be dug in, in a pretty tight circle. That's where the NVA were.

30 RV: Can you discuss some of your combat situations? When you think back  
31 what do you picture, what do you see?

1 JM: Mostly confusion. When you actually get into combat it's got to be the most  
2 confusing thing in the entire world. That wonderful quote by somebody about plans  
3 never survived contact with the enemy or whatever it is, that's pretty much the case. My  
4 first six weeks there we were down in the coastal plain almost exclusively. I think we got  
5 into a firefight that lasted thirty or forty minutes my first day in the field. We got into  
6 another one with a group of around six Viet Cong that was kind of a joke. I shouldn't say  
7 it was a joke, but I'd been there three days now. My platoon sergeant and I were sitting  
8 around in this village where there was a well. We were having lunch. He said,  
9 'Lieutenant McNown, I want to show you something.' I said, 'Let's get a radio operator  
10 and some other people to go with us.' He said, 'No we don't need them. Just leave your  
11 stuff here. I just want to show you this.' So we walked out about two or three hundred  
12 yards. It shows you at that time how safe they were thinking. They hadn't really seen,  
13 other than this little action a couple days before, hadn't really seen any action in that area  
14 of operation around Duc Pho for two or three months. We go up to this hedgerow  
15 through some dry paddies. He said, 'Now you see anything wrong with this hedgerow?'  
16 I'm looking at it and I can't tell anything. He walks up and he said, 'There's this  
17 pineapple plant here.' He said, 'There shouldn't be a pineapple plant in a hedgerow.' He  
18 said, 'I looked at that and I realized there was something wrong here.' He said, 'That's  
19 strange. I thought I'd left this off.' I said, 'What?' He said, 'There's this tunnel. This  
20 pineapple plant is tied to a trap door to a tunnel.' He had a smoke grenade in his hand  
21 and said, 'I'm going to drop this in here and see if there's any other entrances to this  
22 tunnel.' He said, 'I pulled the door off. I guess I put it back on there.' He started  
23 tugging on the door and he said, 'Well the thing's stuck. This is weird.' Suddenly the  
24 pineapple plant comes flying off and a grenade comes flying out. He yelled 'grenade'  
25 and dropped the smoke, it was a red smoke. I can see that to this day. We start back  
26 paddling through this dry paddy about as fast as we can. Through the smoke you can see  
27 these guys popping up out of this tunnel and shooting. So we're out there and we got  
28 down in a little divot. I'm sitting there and there's about six of them in here. They're all  
29 shooting and going in two directions. I looked up and said, 'What do we do?' He said,  
30 'Shoot goddamn it, shoot.' So I started shooting. But that was actually the first time I'd  
31 ever fired my weapon at anybody and it was just sort of an unnatural thing at the time. It

1 got a lot more natural after that. Then I heard his M-16. I don't know if you've ever fired  
2 one, but they make a real distinctive clang when the bolt goes back and locks in place  
3 when you fire the last round. I heard his lock in place and he says, 'Do you have any  
4 ammunition? Do you have a magazine?' He'd even left his magazines back with the rest  
5 of them. Luckily being new, I still had them tied on my chest so I gave him some more.  
6 Of course by this time there was all this firing going on and the rest of the platoon shows  
7 up. We routed them out. That was my second combat experience. The first one that I'd  
8 had where I'd actually fired my weapon. So then for the rest of the time we were down  
9 there in the coastal plain, I don't know if I fired more than once or twice at people in the  
10 distance. We had sniper incidents and booby trap incidents, which that was bad. You'd  
11 be walking along and you'd hear an explosion and you just knew somebody was down.

12 RV: How did you feel, John, about that first contact you had? Can you describe  
13 what you felt during and then immediately afterward?

14 JM: The first I remember on this, Richard. The first thing, I was stunned that  
15 somebody would actually be shooting at me. You could actually see people that had  
16 gone down behind a paddy dike directly across from us and they were shooting at us and  
17 the rounds were hitting around us. I was just stunned because I hadn't done anything to  
18 these people. I was, that's what I said. I wasn't even sure, even after all that training  
19 what am I supposed to do here? He had to tell me to shoot, which after a while just  
20 became the natural thing to do. You get like Pavlov's dogs. I mean I got to the place  
21 where I knew what kind of a weapon somebody was firing at us and whether it was  
22 friendly. You could hear the noise of a weapon. You could do it in your sleep. I'd sleep  
23 through M-16s going off and M-60s going off. The minute you heard an AK-47 or an  
24 RPD I'd be out and rolling. It was kind of a strange thing to get used to, but you could,  
25 actually. Obviously you weren't sleeping very soundly when you were asleep. Then  
26 once I started firing and the adrenaline kicked in and then we got some help. I guess I  
27 was really scared also. When I found out the guy with me didn't have any extra  
28 magazines with him and there was nobody else around, these people were actually  
29 coming around on two sides of us, I thought I was pretty scared. Then all of a sudden the  
30 rest of the platoon came up on line and started. Then the Viet Cong got up and started  
31 running and then we shot some of them. When the rest of the people got up there I got up

1 and started maneuvering with them. The one good thing about that was number one, it  
2 was sort of funny to everybody that we'd gone out there without anybody and Sergeant  
3 Wright had screwed up. Since it came out okay for us, it wasn't so bad. The second  
4 thing, after that point all the people in the platoon kind of accepted me. I'd been shot at  
5 I'd done okay so I wasn't such a bad guy.

6 RV: Did they look to Sergeant Wright to kind of see if he gave the nod? 'Yes,  
7 this guy's okay.' They actually witnessed it?

8 JM: A little bit but they actually saw that I was out there and doing something. I  
9 jumped up and went after the Viet Cong with them. I just kind of picked up my own  
10 credibility with the people that were there. Then Sergeant Wright, I think he was a little  
11 embarrassed about the whole thing. That wasn't the worst thing that ever could have  
12 happened to me either probably. So really those two incidents, other than a couple of  
13 sniper incidents and things, were my only combat experience until mid-September of '68.  
14 We went out to Ha Thanh Special Forces Camp. Later on found out, I guess they told us  
15 at the time, you don't remember these things later on. The 22<sup>nd</sup> NVA regiment was  
16 trying to overrun Ha Than. It was all part of the Khe Sahn. They'd come down through  
17 Long Bay. I think they hit Sha Bong Special Forces Camp and just trying to overrun  
18 some of the Special Forces Camp. Ha Thanh was probably past the first range of  
19 mountains due west of Quang Ngai City. We'd been on LZ Liz for about a week and a  
20 half. The 3/1, which was one of the other battalions in the 11<sup>th</sup> brigade had been out  
21 there. We were getting information back that there were tanks out there. Of course they  
22 used tanks up at Long Bay. There was intelligence that said the NVA had gotten tanks  
23 out there. How they got them, after I found out more I would have no idea how they  
24 would get a tank out there. There were some old French roads that maybe they could  
25 have brought them over from Cambodia, but it would have been a tough go, especially  
26 not to be seen I think. But they did lots of things like that. But anyway the rumor was  
27 they had tanks. The 3/1 definitely was talking a lot of casualties. About the fifteenth of  
28 September they took us down onto the LZ where you get picked up there off of Firebase  
29 Liz. We'd been running patrols and listening to what was going on. They were supposed  
30 to send in a bunch of helicopters to pick us up. We sat out there all day and nobody ever  
31 came. The bad thing, they brought the chaplain in to talk to us before we went down

1 there. That was the first time we'd ever seen a chaplain. We knew that things weren't  
2 obviously going real well. All of a sudden the chaplain shows up to talk to us.

3 RV: Did everybody else have the same feeling about that?

4 JM: Yes, because some of the guys had been there several months and never seen  
5 a chaplain. So it wasn't a real bright move on somebody's part. But then nothing  
6 happened. We go up and have dinner and we had access to liquor there. So everybody  
7 was having a few drinks and stuff. The next day they sent us down there again and we're  
8 sitting down there and had been sitting down there two or three hours. All of a sudden all  
9 these Hueys appear. I was sitting next to Sergeant Wright and I never will forget he  
10 looked up. Normally when we went someplace they would send like three or four Hueys  
11 and we'd go in, secure the LZ and then they'd bring everybody else in a Chinook. There  
12 was about, it must have been twenty Hueys coming in. He turns around to me and he  
13 says, 'Well Lieutenant, we're in for the shit now.' So they picked us up and actually we  
14 landed on the runway up there at Ha Thanh Special Forces Camp and the captain goes in  
15 and talks to them. By this time it's two o'clock or three o'clock in the afternoon and they  
16 tell us to head north that there's supposed to be an arms cache up there. So we take off  
17 and the first time I'd ever seen very many water buffalo together. That was scary. They  
18 didn't like Americans. We didn't smell right. They would kind of start snorting and  
19 charging around and doing some things. They're a pretty scary animal. You see all those  
20 little kids out herding them. You think they're like cows. When they start moving  
21 they're pretty scary. So we'd seen a lot of water buffalo. We went up over this one set of  
22 little hills and started seeing a lot of NVA signs, Ho Chi Minh sandal prints. Ran into a  
23 couple of booby traps. We found they weren't as good as putting them out as the Viet  
24 Cong were. It started raining really hard as we moved down into this valley on the other  
25 side of this one little range of mountains. I guess they were just good-sized hills.  
26 Pouring rain. This was sort of in between the dry season and the monsoon. We hit this  
27 stream in the middle of these paddies and we couldn't find it. It took us a long time to  
28 find a way to cross. When we did, it was up to some of the guys' necks. We had to be  
29 really careful moving across that. By the time we got across it and up to some ground  
30 that was a little bit higher on the other side, it was getting dark so we had to find a place  
31 to dig in. As we were going down this trail on this little ridge we kept running into more

1 NVA signs and more booby traps that had obviously been hastily set. Nobody was hit.  
2 We kept finding them and seeing the trip wires. People were being really careful. We  
3 pulled back out and went around the edge of this little ridge and found kind of a flat spot  
4 off to the side and we dug in there. It was raining so hard you couldn't dig in very well.  
5 The sides of the foxholes were collapsing as you dug so you ended up with these little  
6 shallow pits that were full of water. My platoon was looking into a place where we only  
7 had about a ten-yard field of fire and then the trees got really thick. It was almost like a  
8 firebreak coming through there. So we dug in on one side of this firebreak and couldn't  
9 see anything and put out two LPs out into the trees. Then we had first platoon that was  
10 dug in over on our right. The 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon was actually facing the paddies. There was a  
11 huge argument between Sergeant Wright and the platoon leader over there where we  
12 were tying in because he pulled back about ten or twelve yards from the edge of this big  
13 dike that came in front of the paddies. There was kind of a drop off of about three and a half  
14 feet or four feet down to the paddy level that was almost like somebody had taken a bull  
15 dozer and come through there on an embankment. Sergeant Wright was telling him he  
16 should be digging in right on the edge of that instead of pulling back a little bit. But he  
17 went ahead and pulled it in there. Then we called in final protective fires. By this time it  
18 was probably nine-thirty at night, it was really dark. The CP and the mortars were set up  
19 in the middle so we had a complete circle. They were supposed to send out a six man LP  
20 ambush through the paddies and about two hundred and some yards out there was a little  
21 grove of trees next to this stream that we had crossed. They wanted them to set up in  
22 there. So that's what I was telling you before when we were talking about sandbagging.  
23 The rumor was that they'd stayed in the perimeter until about four in the morning and  
24 started to go out then and got hit on the way out. The other rumor was they were out  
25 there and were trying to get back. So you never know about that.

26 RV: You lost all, but—

27 JM: All but one. One guy made it back into the perimeter. I've never talked to  
28 him since then. But about one-thirty or two o'clock my LP started reporting they could  
29 hear movement and people talking out in front of their position and quite a few of them.  
30 They were moving from left to right. Then a little while later the LPs in the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon  
31 started reporting it. It was just real thick in there. So what happened, the NVA went

1 down this trail, came around the same way we had come over and actually got into  
2 position under this embankment that I was talking about earlier. About four just all hell  
3 broke loose. I don't know how many. There was a company or more of them. They  
4 really hit that 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon over on that side. I mean there was RPGs, mortars coming in.  
5 They fired green tracers and we used to fire red tracers, it looked like Christmas. So  
6 we're over there just looking in these trees just waiting for people to come out of these  
7 trees ten yards in front of us. We never even got a shot fired from that area. The 3<sup>rd</sup>  
8 platoon, I think they had five men killed and twelve wounded, I think, so they pretty  
9 much lost over half of their people there. We called in those final protective fires the  
10 night before and we started calling them in and the shrapnel was just flying every place. I  
11 think that's all that saved us really. They knocked out two or three positions over other  
12 and the CP kind of made a secondary line and held that. About dawn they disappeared so  
13 then we cleaned up and dusted off the people. Another company that was supposed to  
14 have been moving at night that never actually moved, showed up at that point. Anyway,  
15 that's what Captain Adams said. I didn't know anything about who was supposed to be  
16 doing what. We got together across the paddies then going back after. There was some  
17 blood and some stuff. We obviously hit some of them. You can't do that much shooting  
18 and not hit somebody. We'd actually hit a lot of people I think. We crossed over and hit  
19 another hedgerow on this little ridgeline across from us. It was probably four or five  
20 hundred yards across the paddies. It took us a while to find the firebreak in it. So my  
21 platoon, we were stuck out in the middle of the paddies while they were looking. I  
22 finally got tired and moved off to the left and we found this firebreak and then we  
23 became the point platoon. As moved up all of a sudden somebody noticed some NVA.  
24 There was literally like a firebreak like you'd see in the forest. Up at the top of the ridge  
25 there was a circle. In the middle of the circle there was like a little bamboo thicket and  
26 somebody saw some movement in this bamboo thicket. We went into fire maneuver  
27 immediately. As a matter of fact Ft. Benning would have been proud. It was almost a  
28 perfect example of what you're supposed to do when you run into that situation. I'm not  
29 even sure I gave but one order. I had a really good bunch of fellows then. So we overran  
30 this little four-man position up there, then hit two more someplace else and overran them.  
31 Turned out I don't know if this was the area these people had been in the night before but

1 there were all kinds of packs and food and Bangalore torpedoes and mortar rounds. I  
2 mean we got pretty much a whole Chinook of stuff out of there. So we picked all of this  
3 stuff up and they brought in a Chinook and the colonel shows up. It's kind of funny  
4 because by that time I was just wearing whatever uniforms came out. It didn't have my  
5 name or my rank or anything on them. The colonel wanted to know who was in charge.  
6 And somebody pointed to me. He came over and he really chewed me out for not having  
7 on my—you could get your uniforms laundered if you were an officer and have them sent  
8 to the field. I was firmly convinced that even though it was all black stuff, it still made  
9 you look different from everybody else so what was the point in doing that? I got a  
10 grease pencil and wrote my name on it and my rank and stuff on the collar. So from then  
11 on if I heard he was coming that's what I'd do before he got there.

12 RV: Let me ask you real quick about the night before during that fight. What  
13 were you doing specifically? Do you remember your reaction?

14 JM: I was asleep of course. We had a poncho hooch. My RTO and I were in a  
15 two-man and we had a position that was probably two and a half feet dug. It was really a  
16 fire pit. We finally ended up giving up trying to dig a foxhole and just kind of dug a hole  
17 that you could play in kind of. I think your feet were sticking out it was so small. When  
18 we started getting the reports from the LP about one-thirty or two o'clock in the morning  
19 I alerted the perimeter that we might have to bring these guys back in where we'd open  
20 up and leave a fire lane for them to come back through if we needed to. We started  
21 contacting the CP and we finally had to go back and wake somebody up. Whoever was  
22 supposed to be on radio watch had fallen asleep. That was probably about three when we  
23 did that because we kept getting reports and nobody was talking in the CP. So we were  
24 pretty much wide-awake. I tried to go back to sleep. When the fire had started I'd put my  
25 boots back on. I was completely dressed by then because we'd been getting all this  
26 information. I just picked up my rifle and got in my position and we coordinated getting  
27 our LPs back in. So we brought them back in and then we just sat there waiting to get hit  
28 and listening to what was going on on the other side. I was talking to my people that  
29 were on that flank that were tied in. I think the people on my extreme left flank from my  
30 platoon got off and fired some rounds. Other than that we just were sitting to see what  
31 was going to happen from behind us or if we needed to react and go over. It was just a

1 real scary deal because you were just sitting there waiting and all hell is breaking loose and  
2 there was fire going over you and shrapnel going over you. You just kept thinking  
3 they're hitting them that hard, they're going to come around through these trees pretty  
4 soon and we're not going to see them until they're right on top of us you know. So that  
5 was pretty much it. That's all I remember anyway.

6 RV: Do you feel like you performed adequately?

7 JM: Yes, I thought I did. Our job was to hold that side of the perimeter unless we  
8 were told to do something else. We had a reaction force ready to go. We designated  
9 certain people in case we had to go and reinforce the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon. Then that whole  
10 incident led to a disaster later on about two days later, maybe it was the next day.

11 RV: What happened?

12 JM: The 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon leader, he was a Ranger, Airborne, West Point, very, very  
13 gung ho dynamic kind of guy. He thought he'd been made to look bad and he lost all of  
14 these people and he really wanted revenge. He wanted to take the point; he wanted to  
15 stay on point. He was on Captain Adams all the time, 'Let us get out there, we want to  
16 get these guys.' This was early in the morning on the seventeenth, I guess when we got  
17 hit. On the eighteenth about noon we'd stopped. We were now going southwest to Ha  
18 Thanh. They'd pulled us back to the Special Forces Camp. We'd gone back in there and  
19 then on the night of the seventeenth we dug in with a couple other companies because  
20 everybody had been getting hit. Not as badly as we had but we'd been running into all  
21 kinds of people. So we went southwest to the Special Forces Camp because there was  
22 supposedly something going on down there. We stopped and I actually think they  
23 brought us in a hot meal that day because I remember paper plates. That's kind of a  
24 funny thing to remember. I don't remember eating a hot meal, but I do remember seeing  
25 paper plates. I had incurred Captain Adams' wrath a little earlier because we were  
26 coming through this real thick bamboo and my platoon was pulling up the rear and he  
27 called me and asked me for our position. I hadn't been watching. I had just been  
28 following the people in front of us. He was pretty hacked off at me I remember that day.  
29 I thought it was totally unjustified. That was his deal if he wanted to do it. He was pretty  
30 upset, too. We had taken all those people and hadn't gotten a single NVA to show for it.  
31 We picked up all the equipment and stuff the next day and got the six there. We came up

1 over this little ridge and down through a little finger of trees. There was big expanse of  
2 paddies and we crossed at the narrowest point and third platoon had been hit early the  
3 morning before was in the lead. We were second and they went around this little finger  
4 of trees and started up over another one of these large paddy dikes like I was describing  
5 earlier. The point man went into the trees and it just erupted. The NVA were dug in  
6 behind the hedge at the edge of the paddies. Point man was hit and as soon as the fire  
7 started we were over behind this finger of trees and weren't taking any fire and we  
8 dropped our ruck sacks and I took a bunch of people back into the trees, thinking I could  
9 flank them. Just automatically went back in there. Started moving through the trees and  
10 it was really thick. We kept finding spider holes and trenches and things, but there was  
11 nobody in them at the time. But obviously there had been a lot of NVA in there. They  
12 still had utensils and things out. They must have seen us coming over the ridgeline and  
13 set up. So 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon I guess we got reorganized onto this little dike and they tried to  
14 cross this little five to ten yard stretch of grass, flat ground into this hedgerow. Made an  
15 assault into the hedgerow and Lieutenant Enters, the platoon leader, and his radioman  
16 were killed inside the hedge. At least they went down. The rest of the platoon came back  
17 out and unbeknownst to me Sergeant Wright had taken the majority of my platoon and  
18 moved over to support them. So we got back in there and started taking some fire. My  
19 RTO said, 'I don't think the platoon's with us.' I said, 'What do you mean?' 'I keep  
20 hearing Sergeant Wright talking to the weapons squad and two of the other squads.' Sure  
21 enough we did a pass up the count where and it gets to me and I'm two men back.  
22 There's two men in front of me and everybody else should be behind me. The count's  
23 eight. I said, 'That can't be right.' So we stopped and passed up the count again and it's  
24 still eight. We decided we'd still try to maneuver along and see if we could find a place  
25 where we could get some kind of a little fanning thing going. We tightened up a little it  
26 and I wasn't feeling as confident as I had been, because I thought I had thirty-five people.  
27 So we were back in there and we were a little disoriented because of how thick it was.  
28 We were moving toward the fire but we couldn't find a good line of approach. People  
29 were yelling '3-6,' which was the call sign if their platoon leader was down. Captain  
30 Adams went nuts wanting to know what everybody was doing. It was just a huge amount  
31 of fire going on. So the battalion commander was flying over in trolley Charlie and he

1 found out we were back in the trees and he told us to pop smoke. So we popped yellow  
2 smoke so he could kind of determine where we were and try to help us maneuver in to a  
3 clearer area. When we did that, they popped smoke around us. He told us to get out of  
4 there because we actually had smoke being popped all the way around us except for the  
5 way that we came in. So we backed out and got back with the rest of the platoon. Then  
6 Captain Adams had the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon try to assault in through there again. We tried to come  
7 from the flank right on the edge of the trees, the edge of the paddies. It was so thick we  
8 ended up being divided into three different lines rally instead of doing an on-line assault.  
9 My squad leader on the line nearest the trees was killed. At that point he actually came  
10 across the NAV in a spider hole situation. Had pulled a grenade to throw in and this guy  
11 popped up and shot him in the hand. He dropped the grenade and it went off and killed  
12 him. That's what I was told. I was in the middle section. We were having to crawl. It  
13 was so thick with vines and stuff we were having to cut and crawl our way back. So then  
14 they pulled everybody out. We pulled out, reorganized again in my platoon. Another  
15 platoon tried to get back in again because the battalion commander wouldn't let us call  
16 artillery, drop back and call artillery because he was concerned that somebody was still  
17 alive inside the hedgerow. We were all pretty sure that they were dead because people  
18 had seen them go down. Finally we lost another twenty people wounded trying to go in  
19 there and get them. He finally let us fall back and we called in artillery for about thirty or  
20 forty minutes I guess.

21 RV: On that position?

22 JM: On that position. Then we went back over. By that time it was getting  
23 toward dusk. I took my platoon and another platoon. Brad Burgraph, the lieutenant from  
24 1<sup>st</sup> platoon had been hit so he'd been dusted off. So I was the only platoon leader left out.  
25 So I went over with two platoons and we got online under this little dike again. We  
26 threw grenades and charged over and they were gone, which was a pretty good feeling  
27 actually. It was sort of like World War I, we just kept going over the top pf this dike into  
28 this hedgerow. It wasn't very far but there wasn't any cover either. So we went in, found  
29 the bodies and Captain Adams pulled the rest of the company back and they dug in on the  
30 hill a kilometer or so to the rear. He left us with my platoon to bring the bodies back and  
31 to set up for them to medevac the bodies. So we pulled back across to where the

1 company had been set up on the other side of these paddies. There was a big field  
2 surrounded by trees, a big square field. We put the bodies in there, thinking somebody  
3 was going to come for them. By this time it was dark. It was dark while we were getting  
4 them back across. That's when I found out. You talk about dead weight, you're not  
5 kidding. One of these fellows, Sergeant Kermit Williams, was probably six-four and  
6 weighed about two hundred and thirty pounds. He was a load. We put them in there and  
7 we sat around and it was eleven o'clock before they finally brought something in to get  
8 them out. The guy turns on his landing lights, which I guess they have to do. Of course  
9 we didn't know where the NVA were and there was no support around. The rest of the  
10 company was off another kilometer on top of a hill. We were a little concerned that  
11 they'd lit us up like that. The bad thing was we had them covered with ponchos, the three  
12 dead men. The helicopter of course blew the ponchos off. This light came down, that's  
13 one of the things I remember that's not a good memory at all. It was just a really bad  
14 thing. So we got the bodies on the helicopter and then we went up and joined the rest of  
15 the company. Captain Adams had them dig positions for us. So that was one good thing.  
16 By the time we got back up there it was probably midnight or a little after and we already  
17 had our positions dug for us. So that was sort of a treat. Then the next couple of days  
18 they pulled us out. By this time, we probably had thirty men wounded and five, eight  
19 killed I guess. So we'd taken a lot of casualties. So they gave us another deal. We were  
20 supposed to do something, they sent us up on top of this hill and they were supposed to  
21 tell us where to move off to find something. They never could get their act together, so  
22 we just sat there all day. Then they sent helicopters back to us, one at a time. We only  
23 had one Huey so they ferried us back into the Special Forces Camp. We dug in on this  
24 little hill at the end of the runway. I'm pretty sure the NVA didn't know we were there  
25 because they'd brought us back one helicopter at a time, so it didn't look like any kind of  
26 a unit had come back in. That night they hit every outpost at about three in the morning  
27 simultaneously. There were seven or eight outposts around the Special Forces Camps on  
28 the high ground. The camp itself was in the valley next to the Song Drakook River.  
29 There was a little outpost directly across that was at the end of the Special Forces Camp  
30 at the same end of the runway we were on and it was a dug in position with bunkers and  
31 wires and all that stuff. It was just a little knoll with fortification on top of it. At the

1 bottom of it was the main village for this area. So the next morning we're up there  
2 thinking it had been a real show the night before. We'd been seeing all this stuff go on.  
3 The reported all the outposts had held except they weren't sure about the one directly  
4 across from us. But there hadn't been any firing at that one. As it turned out the NVA  
5 had moved in one side and the CIDGs started finding the ones that were supposed to be  
6 up there back in the main camp. None of the CIDGs would go up there. So they told us  
7 we had to go take the camp back, the little fortification, OP-7. So we set up and we  
8 didn't really believe anybody was up there because nothing had happened. We thought  
9 these guys just left. It was just completely smooth sides with barbed wire and the whole  
10 business around it. We got on two flanks. Sergeant Wright was actually over the 1<sup>st</sup>  
11 platoon now because they'd lost their platoon leader so Captain Adams had put him over  
12 that platoon. I had 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon and we brought our XO in to be over the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon.  
13 They'd swept by the bottom of the hill because we'd seen somebody laying wire coming  
14 out of the village, had shot him out on this road that led southwest out of the village.  
15 That was kind of an odd thing to see a North Vietnamese guy laying wire. That was not a  
16 good sign probably. We just thought that was certainly strange.

17 RV: John, let me ask, how fatigued are you at this point?

18 JM: We're tired. I mean we are just really tired. We're down. We probably  
19 have two platoons. We're probably down to about seventy people, seventy-five or  
20 seventy-six people I think. But the day before we hadn't done much. We just sat on top  
21 of that hill so we had some rest up there. Everybody had gotten some sleep, a little bit so  
22 it's not as bad as it had been like the night before. You know, compared to what some of  
23 the units went through, I feel probably wasn't a while lot. If you look at some of the  
24 things you read about, it wasn't as bad as that.

25 RV: Was it hard to pick yourself up and keep going day after day like this, in this  
26 kind of combat environment?

27 JM: Yes, you were tired, but once you got moving you were okay. You're really  
28 kind of going on adrenaline once you start moving. You just are pretty concerned about  
29 what's going on around you. When you stop you're just worn out. As long as you're  
30 moving, you're just running on reaction. That truly is where the training kicks in. Like I  
31 say, that we overran at the little outpost after we'd been hit the night before. When I

1 think of perfection that's as close to perfection I've ever seen in my life from anything.  
2 People just—and we were tired and beat then. Had been hit the night before and so hard  
3 earlier that morning. Everybody did exactly what they were supposed to do, without  
4 anybody screaming and yelling. It was just... if you'd been up in a helicopter looking  
5 down someplace it would have looked like somebody had choreographed the movement.  
6 I mean everybody did what they were supposed to do. I really think the training and the  
7 fact that we had good squad leaders and platoon sergeants, I think all that stuff kicks in.,

8 RV: How were you psychologically?

9 JM: Worried. We pretty much got our ass kicked before. I thought that we were  
10 going to go out and run into some more of these people and do our job and get it done.  
11 I'm not a big revenge person. I'm sort of more of a thinker. So I'm thinking, 'What are  
12 we supposed to do? How do we do this? How do we do that? If we run in to them, fine.  
13 If we don't run into them, better.' That's pretty much my attitude the whole time I was  
14 there. I figured out things. I pretty much figured out after my first day it really wasn't  
15 worth it. When we worked with those National Policeman and they were beating all  
16 those people and doing stuff. I told them something's just not right here. So from that  
17 point on my attitude was 'We're going to do the job, but we're not going to go out and  
18 really look for trouble.' I wasn't bent on making sure we had the highest body count in  
19 the division or anything. It wasn't a game. So my attitude was 'If they open up we're  
20 going to do everything as right as we can.' Know where we are and like I said even the  
21 next day, he asked me if I was the last platoon back so I'm just following around so  
22 obviously wasn't doing as well at that as I could have. I wasn't probably functioning as  
23 well as I could. I think I got better as the week got on. It just became after the second  
24 day when we lost. I'm the only platoon leader left. I lost all of my squad leaders trying  
25 to get the body out. So there was me and a couple of other guys that had been fire team  
26 leaders SPEC-4s were running the squads. Lost my machine gunners and I mean we  
27 were down to probably twenty or twenty-one men. Had the strength of a hundred and  
28 thirty-five when we went out. So after the second or third day we were down. We'd lost  
29 over thirty percent of the platoon.

30 RV: But everybody performed very, very well is what you're saying throughout  
31 this time?

1 JM: Yes, really really had. I think 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon was pretty much combat  
2 ineffective by that time because they're platoon sergeant, they'd lost their platoon leader  
3 and they'd lost more men than we had. I think they were probably down to fifteen or  
4 sixteen men. Maybe not. We were all down to twenty or so. That's just a hard question  
5 to answer. We were self-functioning. We were not combat ineffective by any means.

6 RV: John, did you have to deal with the issue of fear frequently or infrequently or  
7 how much? I'm talking about you and the men in your unit.

8 JM: I think some people were afraid. There were some people that could not  
9 function. We had a couple of people that you almost had to put somebody behind them  
10 to make sure they go forward when assaulted on something.

11 RV: What would they do? Would they just freeze?

12 JM: Just freeze up. They just couldn't handle it. They weren't bad people. They  
13 just couldn't handle the environment. The Army didn't have a way to test or they didn't  
14 to see if a guy was a good infantryman or not. We had a couple of fellows that after I  
15 became company commander that I knew just couldn't do it. I got them jobs in the rear  
16 and they performed great. I put two of them in resupply and we never had a problem  
17 again about poncho liners again and stuff like that because they'd been out in the field for  
18 quite a while and these guys were their friends. They made sure that they took care of us.  
19 It turned out to be a good move. At first a couple of fellows were really mad because  
20 they thought they'd been rewarded for being chicken or whatever you wanted to call it.  
21 But you know what? They just couldn't function. There were odd things though. We  
22 had a fellow that I found out died two years ago. I hadn't been able to track him down  
23 and found out he'd already died. A fellow named Ken Mackey, a good guy, assistant  
24 machine gunner. Ken Mackey had platinum hair and he'd take his helmet off at night  
25 and you could probably see him for three hundred yards. He would just be like a torch  
26 out there. It really worried Sergeant Wright. Sergeant Wright would just scream at him.  
27 'Get your helmet back on there, Mackey.' I always thought that probably gave away our  
28 position more than Mackey did.

29 RV: The screaming.

30 JM: Yes, he would just go nuts when he would take his helmet off if the moon  
31 was out at night. He finally convinced him that what he need to do, Sergeant Wright did.

1 Convinced Mackey that he need to re-up and take another two year tour and become a  
2 generator mechanic because that's what he wanted to do. He wanted to become some  
3 kind of a mechanic after he got out of the Service. Mackey, by that time, had seen  
4 enough combat that he thought maybe that wasn't the worst thing that could happen.  
5 There were weird things that happened sometimes, especially with Sergeant Wright, who  
6 wasn't superstitious. He tried to be in control of the situation as much as he could.  
7 Mackey, he couldn't do anything about Mackey's hair. It just really worried him. But as  
8 I said we had some people that just couldn't function. You had some people that were  
9 just absolutely magnificent riflemen; they were just born to do the job. You don't know  
10 why because some of them were from the city, some of them were from the country. It  
11 was their Sergeant York thing. It was just some people were good at it. It seemed like  
12 nothing could touch them. I mean I have a good friend from the platoon that went  
13 through his entire tour in the field and was not only in the stuff where we lost all the  
14 people at Ha Than Special Forces camp but in June the next year they lost that many  
15 people in about four hours. Never got a scratch. He was an aggressive, really good  
16 rifleman. For some reason he was just charmed. People wanted to be around him. There  
17 was something about Frank. If you were with Frank, you felt fairly safe because you  
18 knew nothing was going to happen to Frank. You got this sense of people about who was  
19 lucky and who wasn't about things. We had a guy named Alex Shaunt who wouldn't be  
20 in the field two weeks and get hit again. The guy just couldn't. His third Purple Heart,  
21 we finally got him out, permanently. I don't think he ever spent more than six weeks in  
22 the field. He spent most of his tour in the hospital, but he was never bad enough they  
23 sent him home. It was weird that he kept coming back to our unit because a lot of times  
24 after you'd been out for quite a while, you'd come back and they'd send you to some  
25 other unit, which wasn't very good either. Al just kept coming back. It was just strange.  
26 I don't know if fear is exactly the right word. I think you were afraid, but it was more  
27 dread. It was a sense of all encompassing waiting for something to happen. You just  
28 spent everyday, unless you'd been in the time frame. When things didn't happened for  
29 along time, all of a sudden you let up a little bit. That wasn't good either. If you were in  
30 an area where you hadn't had any contact for weeks and weeks you had to be careful not  
31 to get sloppy at that point.

1           RV: What would you do about that as a leader to try to combat that?

2           JM: You just had to keep reminding people and spreading out about doing the  
3 stuff that you were supposed to do. That's about all you can do. Try to get the people  
4 that knew what they were doing to help the people that didn't know what they were  
5 doing. Keep reminding them to spread out and check the weapons, just do all those little  
6 routine things. Just hope. I think that's part of what happened. They'd gone a long time  
7 without seeing any combat in June of '68. I think that when they first got hit, they didn't  
8 react as well as they might have. They had so many new people and it had been so long.  
9 They didn't have a single platoon leader or single platoon sergeant that had seen any  
10 activity or heavy combat. They took a lot of casualties the first couple of hours.

11          RV: John, how much did humor come into play when you were in the field?

12          JM: There were lots of funny things. People told jokes. Of course a little  
13 graveyard humor. A lot of times it was a little cynical. I think without people keeping  
14 some sort of sense of humor and some sort of perspective on things you would have gone  
15 nuts. Things that were funny, may not be funny to people who weren't there. When we  
16 get together, sometimes my jaws hurt when I get back from laughing so hard. But we  
17 had a Kit Carson scout for an example that probably had been a Viet Cong. You know  
18 what a Kit Carson scout was? Maybe had been a former Viet Cong, had cheu hoi'd and  
19 gone over to the government. We figure he was maybe sixteen years old, seventeen years  
20 old at the most. He had probably been a Viet Cong for two weeks or something and  
21 didn't like it or was uncomfortable. Anyways that was our theory. He was just pretty  
22 much worthless. But they insisted that we keep him. That was part of the deal. They  
23 wanted to assign these Kit Carson scouts as they called them to each unit. We found out  
24 he never had a weapon when he was a Viet Cong. He just carried stuff the two weeks he  
25 was with them or whatever it was.

26          RV: No wonder he didn't like them.

27          JM: When he got an M-16 he thought this was... he was like a little kid with a  
28 new toy, which he was. He'd go out as soon as we'd setup and start shooting his weapon  
29 every night. We were not real happy with this. We couldn't keep him to do it. So finally  
30 Dave Bushy, who was our medic, figured out that the guy liked to drink a beer and he'd  
31 give him two 80-milligram darvons and a beer. So the guy would literally pass out about

1 half way through the beer. We'd just leave him lying out there in the rain. I mean that's  
2 not funny. That's not a nice way to treat people, but we all thought this was absolutely  
3 hilarious. Then one day he got really upset because he figured out what was going on.  
4 He actually locked and loaded on Bushey. We had to threaten to kill him. We got rid of  
5 him then. They took him out. But you know a lot of the guys thought he was trying to  
6 tell the VC where we were. I don't think that was it at all. I think the guy was just not  
7 playing with a full deck maybe. He was just excited and he was young. It was just cool  
8 to have his own gun. I remember and everybody kind of laughs the first time I ever saw a  
9 land leech. I didn't realize that a leech could live anyplace but in the water. But when  
10 you got up into the heavy jungle the leaches were literally living on the jungle floor and  
11 in the trees. We were going up this hill and I'd been there about two weeks. We had an  
12 exercise where we were supposed to go out to Ba Tho Special Forces Camp and act like  
13 we were relieving them and the III MAF commander was in the helicopter watching us  
14 do this. I think we took four or five heat casualties because they were making us walking  
15 the paddies instead of on the dikes, across several hundred yards of paddies assaulting us  
16 across into this hill. Totally unrealistic exercise. They had this guy upstairs and they'd  
17 set up a temporary firebase on the spot. It was just like a big exercise except you could  
18 have really run into somebody. So once we got into the trees we went into single file  
19 because they couldn't see us anymore. We had to make our way up the hill. We were  
20 about half way up the hill and like I said I was not in good shape when I got there. This  
21 was two or three weeks later. I'd made it across but I thought I was going to die. I was  
22 just barely able to move. I kept up because that's what you do. But I wasn't functioning.  
23 Sergeant Wright was running the platoon because it was just everything I could do to  
24 keep from falling out. So we're going up this hill and we're in the shade and they're  
25 trying to find a way up and I looked up and coming across these leaves were these little  
26 things that looked like inch worms to me. They were a couple inches long and they  
27 moved like an inchworm, the kind of movements that you'd associate with an inchworm  
28 where they'd pull their back end up. I turned to Sergeant Wright and I said, 'I didn't  
29 know they had inch worms in Vietnam.' He says, 'Where?' I'm showing him and there's  
30 just like hundreds of them right. He yells, 'leech' and everybody drops their pants and  
31 start stripping their clothes off. I'm sitting there with my mouth open. What are these

1 guys doing? They're all getting out their insect repellent in it, which had alcohol in it,  
2 which would shrink the things up if they got on you. I remember to this day that view. I  
3 was sitting there and I show him these things. Instead of showing me what they are he  
4 yells 'leech' and everybody starts stripping. So there were a lot of things that were  
5 funny. That's the good things. When you had a character like Sergeant Wright for a  
6 platoon sergeant you had lots of stories. His RTO was a fellow named Nick Poligee.  
7 We're still good friends. Nick was married at the time. He was a PFC and the promotion  
8 orders came out. So we were calling in who was supposed to be promoted to specialist  
9 four. Nick's name was on the list. I hadn't been there all that long so Sergeant Wright  
10 was pretty much making out who the promotions were. He talked to me about it, but I  
11 didn't know. So we had just called in the people to be put on the promotion orders. The  
12 next thing I know I hear Sergeant Wright and Nick screaming at each other. Nick's  
13 Italian. He had a pretty good temper on him. What had happened Sergeant Wright had  
14 opened a can of meatballs and spaghetti from his c-ration and Nick had said, 'How do  
15 you eat that crap?' That was one of the things everybody liked but Nick, being Italian, he  
16 wouldn't eat meatballs and spaghetti because it was just beneath him to even call it  
17 Italian food.

18 RV: I understand completely.

19 JM: They get in this huge argument. Sergeant Wright's telling him the Army  
20 wouldn't put it in there if it wasn't good. It was the best stuff that you could possibly get.  
21 Just typical lifetime Army kind of stuff. Nick's telling him bullshit. They're yelling at  
22 each other. Nick loses it and says, 'Look, you stupid pineapple.' That did it. All of a  
23 sudden Sergeant Wright comes over, picks up my radiophone, which is on the company  
24 net and calls in and cancels Nick's promotion.

25 RV: How did Nick take that?

26 JM: Not well, because that was a big pay increase and he was married. Nick, I  
27 thought they were going to kill each other before it was all over. Then about a week later  
28 he calls back in and said, 'I shouldn't have done that. We need to get him on the  
29 promotion orders.' That's just how he was. He was a huge volatile man. We all have  
30 these stories about him where he would do something like that. I think he'd been busted  
31 a couple times for drinking or something. So he was like an E-6, but he wore E-7 stripes.

1 At one time a staff sergeant wore two rockers, this old Army and new Army stuff. For  
2 some reason some of those people could still do that. I never did quite understand how  
3 they grandfathered some things in. So after this day I was telling you about where we  
4 had to take this outpost back the next day at Ha Than, Sergeant Wright had performed  
5 really well, which wasn't surprising. Colonel Ngyuen and the sergeant major had come  
6 up and asked Captain Adams. He was up there critiquing. He had all the people sitting  
7 around after we'd gone and taken the village back, after we took the OP back and the  
8 village below it. He was critiquing the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon about what they'd done because they  
9 didn't have a platoon sergeant or a platoon leader. They were not the best platoon in the  
10 company at the time. I think we had the best at that time because we had good squad  
11 leaders, and good platoon sergeants. 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon was a good platoon but they were all  
12 shot up. Then 1<sup>st</sup> platoon had not been running as well in the last month or so because  
13 their platoon leader was kind of weak and they had a pretty weak platoon sergeant. So  
14 Sergeant Wright's talking to them and kind of critiquing what they've done. The  
15 battalion commander asked Captain Adams, 'What's the deal with him? He seems to be  
16 an excellent leader of men.' Captain Adams is telling him he didn't know exactly what.  
17 He had a couple problems but that he was a great platoon sergeant. He said, 'Well we're  
18 going to have to get him promoted.' About the time he said that Sergeant Wright reaches  
19 up and just knocks the hell out of this guy. Hit him right in the face with an open hand  
20 because he wasn't paying attention. Captain Adams said, 'I think that's one of the  
21 reasons he hasn't been promoted (laughter).' I mean that's just how he was. The guy  
22 was just hugely volatile. He was the best combat soldier I ever saw.

23 RV: Did you all get a chance to see him after the war?

24 JM: You know what? I wrote him a couple of times and I never heard back from  
25 him. I found out where he was and Captain Adams has seen him and he didn't want  
26 much to do with Captain Adams, Captain Adams said. He died actually November 17.  
27 He was going to come to Reno and we were all just looking forward, really, truly.  
28 Everybody that had served with the guy because he was one of those people you just  
29 never forget. Louie Rios one of the fellows from our platoon had gone over to Hawaii  
30 and he had Dick Haney had gone and found out from Captain Adams where he was and  
31 spent a day and a half with the guy and sent us some pictures. He was seventy-three, I

1 think. He was coming to Reno. He told them, 'Yes, I'll be there. I may not come to any  
2 of the dinners. You guys may have to come down to the bar and see me but I'm going to  
3 come out there.' Then he up and died on us, which was one of the more depressing  
4 things I've had happened to me lately. He was sort of like your father. Somebody you  
5 just don't think can die. He was just absolutely—he would stand up in the middle. I'll  
6 tell you a story now. So going back to when we took this OP back, we're going up one  
7 side of this hill and he's leading a platoon up the other side and we get up and find a hole  
8 in the wire. I think this is kind of weird. Now we're fifty meters from the trench line in  
9 the bunkers. We haven't seen anybody and nobody's opened fire. The 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon had  
10 already gone by the bottom of the hill and not taken any fire. We're pretty much  
11 convinced that nobody's in there. Me and Louie and my RTO Bob Sheen goes through  
12 this hole in the wire. As soon as he goes through the hole, the air just gets filled with  
13 grenades. They were throwing CHICOMS, which is sort of like a potato masher. It had  
14 the handle on it and it has a friction fuse that you pull. When this smoke starts coming  
15 out of the handle after the fuse had been pulled. So you could see them coming. We hit  
16 the ground and they went off. I got hit, not too badly. The other two guys, one of them  
17 had thrown himself back down the hill. Louie went back through the wire about as fast  
18 as you can go. I'm bleeding from the head and I'm angry. I never want to be that angry  
19 again in my whole life. This was sort of like you were in a football game and you got hit  
20 in the nose and your nose started bleeding. That was how I felt. My adrenaline was just  
21 so high. I was so angry about being so foolish and about these people getting hurt.  
22 That's really what I remember. I was just enraged. Tried to get me to go back and get  
23 dusted off. I'm just screaming at people, 'Get up this hill. Kill these mother fuckers.' I  
24 am just enraged. Somebody's telling at me that there's booby traps on this fence. I'm  
25 wanting them to pull this barbed wire fence down so we can get at them. I said, 'I don't  
26 care. You get up the hill or I'm going to kill you.' So they pulled the fence down. I  
27 mean I was serious. If I would have had somebody that disobeyed orders I would have  
28 shot them right there. I was just infuriated. So we get this fence down and there's  
29 bamboo fence up around there. We take a bunch of LAWs and blow the hell out of it. I  
30 started on up the hill and by this time of course they were firing at us with everything  
31 they've got. We keep going up. I finally make the last little rush and get into the trench.

1 I'm in a little firing position and the trenches go on either side of me and we've got NVA  
2 in there and nobody else is in there with me I notice. I'm a little concerned about that. I  
3 was just in this huge rage. I'm firing down the trench and all of a sudden my rifle locked  
4 up. I go from being enraged to being absolutely totally scared. I pull my thing back and  
5 it's still locked up and it won't fire. I finally changed magazines and then it starts firing.  
6 It turned out I'd taken a round through the magazine and didn't realize it and it cut the  
7 spring. But in the meantime, Randy Less who had been the company commander's RTO  
8 and he was a buck sergeant, a real young kid. He was twenty-one or so. He'd always  
9 wanted to be in second platoon. He convinced Captain Adams that morning that he  
10 wanted to be in 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon and take over on me of our machine guns. As I told you, we  
11 didn't have any machine gunners that were trained left. He had actually worked a  
12 machine gun in training or something. He was a pretty good-sized kid. Randy came up  
13 the hill and stood up and started putting fire on the communication trench that was  
14 coming down from the middle of the thing and on either side of it. That enabled me to  
15 get out of the trench. Then he took a round and went into shock instantly. I think he died  
16 right then. I got the rest of the people up and we got into the trench. It gave us enough  
17 time to get in and start clearing out that side. In the mean time we're down there and the  
18 NVA have pulled back to the other side of the outpost. We're firing across the middle of  
19 the outpost at them. All of a sudden Sergeant Wright jumps the trench on his side, runs  
20 over jumps in with us. The only thing I've ever seen like it was did you see *Band of*  
21 *Brothers*, that show that Captain Spears running through that German position in that town  
22 from one side to the other and running back?

23 RV: Yes, absolutely.

24 JM: That's exactly what Wright did. He jumped across this trench, runs across  
25 the center of this position, between the two groups, jumps in with us and said, 'What are  
26 you doing? I've trained these people better than that. You're acting like bunch of  
27 cowards. Get those people over there.' I said, 'Your guys aren't even up here yet. What  
28 are you yelling about?' He said, 'Get their ass moving, Lieutenant.' He jumps up and he  
29 runs across the deal again back to them. He did that twice.

30 RV: Oh my gosh.

1           JM: Nothing ever hit him. He was an amazing guy. So we went over and took  
2 this corner bunker and then they came over the other side and we took the position. Then  
3 we found out they were down in the village. We had to go down and clear the village  
4 out. So we did that. By that time we were out of ammunition, we'd run out of grenades,  
5 we'd run out of everything. Been resupplied once and then about a mile outside of town  
6 there was a CIDG group coming back that had two green beanies with them. They got hit  
7 by a bunch of NVA and were threatening to kill the Green Berets unless somebody came  
8 to get them. We were the only people around. By this time, Randy was the only fellow  
9 killed that day. I was wounded and we had three or four other people that had been  
10 wounded, but really done pretty well considering. I think we killed about sixty NVA.  
11 We got some helicopter support going to the village but we didn't get any on the OP. We  
12 didn't fire artillery because it was too close to the village. So we just redistributed the  
13 ammunitions and we actually fixed bayonets. We went out to get these Green Berets.  
14 Luckily we got there, fired a few rounds and the NVA took off. So we picked up the  
15 CIDG wounded because they left their people there and took them back into the Special  
16 Forces camp. The next day they took us out.

17           RV: When you say cleared the village, what do you mean? How did you do that?

18           JM: We got on line on this hill and there were some trenches in there and a LOH  
19 came in that had a .60 gunner hanging out of it. He fired up these trenches and then we  
20 went online into the village firing down into it. We hadn't actually seen these trenches.  
21 They were in the middle of what we used to call potato fields. They were some kind of a  
22 starch plant that they raised that grew above ground. They would dry them out and cut  
23 the stocks into real thin pieces and dry them out. They looked sort of like potato chips, so  
24 we used to call them potato plants. I have no idea what they really were. Anyway we  
25 hadn't seen these people and we started down in there. All of a sudden somebody  
26 noticed that there was NVA in these trenches. So they came in and started firing out of  
27 this LOH at them. We started firing support to them down there and after the guy  
28 finished up then we assaulted into the village. Went hut to hut through their trench lines  
29 because there were trenches all around the village. The CIDGs had made and just  
30 cleaned them out. I think there was about twenty of them down there. The fellow with  
31 the LOH I think had gotten most of them. I think there were only four or five that

1 weren't either killed or wounded by the time because they were in these open trenches.  
2 You could pretty much see them. We were holding them down with our fire coming  
3 from off the hill.

4 RV: What did you do with the enemy wounded?

5 JM: There weren't any. I guess to be honest, there may have been some that  
6 were wounded pretty badly when we went through there. As we crossed over the trench I  
7 gave the order that I didn't want anything moving behind us because we didn't have any  
8 people, we still had areas to clean out and they were wounded really badly. Any of them  
9 that may have not been dead, were dead by the time we swept through.

10 RV: When you would go hut to hut would you give me a procedure of how you  
11 would go in there? Is it chaotic or is it ordered?

12 JM: It's pretty much ordered. You have three people that would go in there and  
13 you would have a guy go in high and a guy go in low and just take a look and see. Most  
14 of the villagers were in the little bunkers, the family bunkers they had. We really didn't  
15 because we knew there were still villagers in there, there weren't very many. They'd  
16 pulled most of them out back into the camp. They told us it was all clear, but it wasn't  
17 completely clear. We didn't grenade anything until we made sure everybody had a  
18 chance to get out. We were real fortunate that we didn't kill any of the villagers as we  
19 were going through, but most of them were gone.

20 RV: Was it easy to distinguish a villager from, I guess these were NVA?

21 JM: These were NVA so they were. They were actually in uniform. They had  
22 little green shirts and green pants, and webbing on. They were NVA. The only people  
23 that were left in the village were women and kids. All the men were in part of the CIDG  
24 thing and they were in the main camp after they'd been hit. So that wasn't a problem  
25 there. Now when you got out in the costal plain there was just no telling who was who.

26 RV: I imagine that presented a major problem.

27 JM: Huge problem. You just suspected everybody was a Viet Cong. I mean that  
28 was the way you operated. We'd go into a village and round all the people up and put  
29 them into a central place and put them under guard and then we'd search the village. We  
30 pretty much had procedures on how that worked. That was something, nobody liked to  
31 do that. Just because if you did get fire, it was just so likely that you might hit somebody,

1 a non-combatant. I think in our company we realized that we were over there to be  
2 soldiers. Even though it was not a good situation I only remember one time that we even  
3 started lighting a village up. We got that stopped immediately. I say that and I mean  
4 they were setting fire to the thatch on the roofs. The day we hit the minefield we came  
5 down on the other side there was this village. There was actually people in there. We  
6 had guys that were really upset. This was probably about three weeks after we'd been  
7 out in the mountains so we were pretty much still under strength. People were pretty  
8 nervous. We had some guys all of a sudden start lighting. When we got that stopped a  
9 couple of them were pretty vocal about wanting to do it. It took a little persuading but we  
10 got it stopped and got out of there but we didn't have any major incidents. That was out  
11 in the Baton Peninsula. We'd been taken casualties every single day. Knives, booby  
12 traps, there wasn't supposed to be any civilians out there. They were supposed to have  
13 moved them all out. Every village you go in, there were still people there.

14 RV: So bad intelligence and it was supposed to be a free fire zone, but you can't  
15 do that? What about this stereotype that goes along with some Vietnam veteran in the  
16 whole conflict that the Americans were committing these atrocities in villages, burning  
17 this and burning that.

18 JM: It's hard to deny that went on. As a matter of fact, the Charlie Company of  
19 our battalion was the one that committed the My Lai Massacre, which is something that's  
20 pretty hard to get over. I never understood how something like that could happen. It's  
21 one thing if somebody gets hit in the crossfire but I always thought they should have  
22 hung Calley. I just talk about poor leadership. Unimaginable that an American officer  
23 would allow that to happen, actually lead something like that. I knew Medina, I don't  
24 know if I ever met Calley. Medina for everything I knew was a good officer. I didn't  
25 hear about that when I was in the battalion. I didn't hear about that really until after it  
26 broke when I was back in the States because I was in brigade intelligence. I got  
27 interviewed when I was out at Ft. Hood, Texas by a CID guy out of Washington. That  
28 was a very uncomfortable thing because it turned out I'd had access to files that  
29 supposedly had stuff in them. Of course I never looked back that far, because that would  
30 have almost been a year old in that, looked for something that was a year old. Then I  
31 guess some of them disappeared from this file. So they were interested in what I knew,

1 which wasn't anything. Then when they found out I was in the same battalion they  
2 thought surely I knew something, but I never heard anything about it. Of course you  
3 didn't know that many people from the other company. You usually were operating  
4 pretty independently. I knew a company commander there real well, Captain Webb, that  
5 came in later on. But other than that I think he was the only person that I knew from  
6 Charlie Company very well during the war.

7 RV: John, let me break just for a moment to change out the disk. Okay, John,  
8 picking up. While we're on the topic of My Lai can you give me your thoughts on that?  
9 You talked about Medina and Calley but just in general?

10 JM: I can understand what caused it, having been worked the same area. That's  
11 the same area where I told you we actually went in and picked up civilians and put them  
12 on the trail in front of us, which was the only place we ever did that in. That was actually  
13 out to the west of My Lai but same situation. We actually had people that were really  
14 good people I think would have shot one or two of the people if we would have had  
15 different leadership. They were just so angry that we were taking like two or three a day.  
16 We were losing two or three people a day and there was nobody to strike back at. You  
17 know these people know what's going on. That whole area up there, well all of Quang  
18 Ngai Province like I said was very sympathetic to the North Vietnamese. I think Vahn  
19 Bien Dong was actually born in Mo Duc, which was a town right in the middle of our  
20 area of operation. Supposedly that's why in '69 the North Vietnamese just came out of  
21 the woodwork, came down in the coastal plain and just never had that happen before.  
22 The rumor, actually I don't think it was as rumor was that the North Vietnamese peace  
23 talks that they got into some kind of a hassle about who controlled what. Supposedly  
24 Key was there and said, 'If you're so good how come you can't even take Mo Duc where  
25 Phan Ban Dong was born?' He was I believe the premiere of the pull up bureau at the  
26 time. Ho Chi Minh was the chairman and he was the premier. There was also two or  
27 three other high-ranking Vietnamese that were from Quang Ngai Province. It was also I  
28 understand the French never had control of it during the war. Just pretty much a hot bed  
29 for the Communist nationalist hierarchy in Vietnam. So I do think in retrospect it does  
30 seem like at the time nobody liked us. In retrospect everything you can read says that  
31 was probably the case. But getting back to the point, they never taught us. We didn't

1 know the language, which is always a problem. The people were certainly alien in the  
2 rural Vietnamese areas compared to anything that most of our soldiers had ever seen. Of  
3 course they were instilling in you that you can't trust these people. They were farmers by  
4 day, Viet Cong by night. They're putting battery acid in Coca-Colas. There were all  
5 kinds of stories that you heard. I'm sure there was some truth in one of them someplace  
6 kind of like urban legend kind of things. But you'd get in there and you'd hit the booby  
7 traps and you'd get sniped at. You'd get one burst of automatic weapon fire at your point  
8 man or at the rear guy out of a village. When that goes on day after day, the frustration  
9 level gets so high and you want to blame somebody. So the natural people to blame are  
10 the people that are there. It's real difficult. We troop in that kind of an environment for  
11 very long and not have serious consequences because people are scared. You talk about  
12 being scared, walk into a place where you know you're hitting booby traps all the time.  
13 That's fear. The other thing like I said there is a sense of dread out in the mountains.  
14 You're just waiting for something to happen right? Once it happens on the booby traps  
15 you know it's going to happen and there's nothing to do about it. You're just helpless.  
16 When we hit the bouncing bettys up there that day I think we had just a couple of guys  
17 killed but probably fifteen or twenty men. Actually it was fifteen wounded in about thirty  
18 minutes and there's nobody there. You just don't want to take the next step because  
19 people behind you are tripping them, people in front of you are tripping them. So you're  
20 setting down there doing the thing with the bayonets or whatever you do. At that time we  
21 didn't have a very good company commander so that was not a very helpful situation.  
22 But he wasn't around too long. You know the whole business about turning over  
23 command we talked about that before. I think that leads to some of it. That wasn't the  
24 case with Charlie Company because those people had all come over with the 11<sup>th</sup> brigade.  
25 So they trained together, came over together. I think that's an aberration but I do think  
26 there were a lot of things that took place. You got over there and people though the rules  
27 didn't count sometimes after they'd been there for a while. If you had a leader that  
28 thought the same thing it was pretty easy for that to spread n that kind of an environment.  
29 I think they certainly should have. There's just absolutely no reason, no acceptable  
30 reason and no excuse for the Army I think not to have done something more than they  
31 did. It ruined a lot of people's careers I think. For instance, Colonel Ngyuen was our

1 battalion commander when I was in the field. He'd actually been MAC-V province chief  
2 for Quang Ngai Province and his career was ruined because they accused him of being  
3 part of the cover up. I don't think that's true. I don't think anybody believed it. I saw a  
4 piece of propaganda and I told the CID guy after I was in the S-2 area that said the  
5 American Wolves with blood dripping from their teeth. That kind of hyperbole. You  
6 look at something like that and you just think that's propaganda right? Well it turned out  
7 it was about the My Lai thing and there was some truth to it. I saw that and I thought  
8 American soldiers wouldn't do something like that. This is just Communists trying to get  
9 the people stirred up. It was in English, which was a wonderful thing. I suspect that  
10 people, Colonel Henderson, who was our brigade commander, who I know was  
11 reprimanding people may have heard about that and just didn't believe it. Now I don't  
12 know if they actually talked to what was his name? Rettenhower? The helicopter pilot  
13 that broke the thing after he came home?

14 RV: Yes, Rittinhowler, I believe was his name.

15 JM: But I don't know who he talked to. Certainly if you would have heard that  
16 from an American you would have thought that might be something you might have  
17 wanted to check into. But the stuff I saw came from Vietcong sources and I just didn't  
18 believe it. I'd been up there and I knew things were bad but we'd never had anything like  
19 that. Never even occurred to people to haul out women and children and start shooting  
20 them.

21 RV: When the story broke and you heard it what was your initial?

22 JM: I didn't believe it.

23 RV: You didn't believe it?

24 JM: You know it hurt that it was my battalion when I found out it was true. For a  
25 long time I just didn't really want people to know that. It gave a black eye to the whole  
26 division too. There wasn't any question about that. I remember one time being at Ft.  
27 Hood and we were talking about we had some kind of an exercise going on. Of course  
28 we were practicing saving Europe because we were in the 2<sup>nd</sup> armor division. They had a  
29 scenario where you had all these civilians that were trying to get away. What do you do  
30 with them? You're trying to advance and they're in the way and somebody raised his  
31 hand and he said, well I can give you the Americal solution. Everybody started laughing.

1 That really hurt. When you had gone over and tried to serve honorable and your people  
2 gave up as much as they did to have one group like that, all of a sudden just give the  
3 entire division I'm sure they'll never put the Americal back on active duty because of  
4 that. It's my suspicion. You'll never see the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division on the rolls in the Army again.  
5 Although it's been nice with Colin Powel and Schwarzkopf and people wearing the  
6 patch. In all the movies now you see all the high-ranking general officers have on  
7 Americal patches. That's been kind of pleasant to see. Now people I think realize a lot  
8 more that you don't hear that kind of thing from other veterans that you did at one time. I  
9 used to always wear my 11<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade patch because nobody knew what that was,  
10 just to avoid people talking about it. I was authorized to do that because people that  
11 served up to a certain point you could do either one.

12 RV: Do you talk about it with the men now? Does it ever come up?

13 JM: The My Lai? Yes, at the Americal division there's people from Charlie  
14 Company there. I actually met a fellow and I don't remember his name. He was a  
15 Hispanic guy, a Latino down in San Antonio that came out. I think he had actually been  
16 there and he seemed to have some real problems. He found out and most of the people  
17 that were from the 120 were all Alpha Company people. So he hung around with us for a  
18 while. But he was real almost introspective and drank too much. His wife was a very  
19 nice person. I know some other fellows from Charlie Company. There may be more in  
20 Reno than we've seen in some other places because I know Bill Allen's been trying to get  
21 some together. When we get together we don't talk about it much. We are all talking  
22 about our own experiences and what's been happening in our lives since we came home  
23 and things like that.

24 RV: Of course. John, would you like to break for today?

25 JM: Yes, I would.

26 RV: Ok, John, we were just chatting after we stopped. You were mentioning  
27 something that you thought of last night that you forgot to mention yesterday that you  
28 carried.

29 JM: I carried and one of them was a compass, which I think I mentioned a little  
30 earlier. That was a very important thing that you had to have. I carried a camera. I think  
31 everybody had a little instamatic or some kind of a camera. Unfortunately most of my

1 film got wet. I didn't do a good job. Had a billfold and I kept a little bit of money that I  
2 had. I kept it in a plastic container. But I carried one of the things that was kind of  
3 funny. A lot of people carried some kind of a pin up. I had the playboy Miss September  
4 folded up and in my helmet liner. It was just another one of those things of how I told  
5 you, you wanted everything to be exactly in the same place everyday when you started  
6 off. I don't know why I did that but it got to be almost like a good luck piece. So I had  
7 Miss September up there. I think she's the one that later married John McEnroe if I  
8 remember right. When I got hit on the outpost, I got hit in the head with this shrapnel  
9 and I bed on it. That was another thing later on I was really upset with those NVA about  
10 was they'd ruined my pin up that I'd had in my helmet there for six months or six weeks.  
11 So it took me another month to find the same one. I didn't want just anyone. I wanted  
12 that one in my helmet. After I got hit and didn't get killed it became even more  
13 important to me then. There must be something good luck about that particular thing.  
14 Then I carried an air mattress the whole time I was there. They were pretty heavy at the  
15 time. As I was saying one of the good things about them was they gave you a layer of  
16 insulation between you and the wet ground and the cold once the monsoons started. We  
17 were up in the mountains and we were up there one day and my RTO was sitting there  
18 flipping his bayonet like doing mumbly pay or something. We had stopped for the day  
19 and were setting up for the evening. Had our poncho hooch made. He flipped his knife  
20 right into my air mattress and destroyed it. I didn't have a patch. I was just so mad at the  
21 guy. Just completely almost lost it with him because he ruined my air mattress. That was  
22 one of the traumatic experiences of my whole tour that all of a sudden my air mattress  
23 wasn't working. But later on more and more people started carrying air mattresses just  
24 because it did help keep you warm. In the monsoon we finally found some jungle  
25 sweaters somewhere, which were a lightweight sweater. Most of us at night when we  
26 would go into our little poncho hooch would put that on to help keep warm and be kind  
27 of dry. But in the daytime you didn't wear them. You put it in a plastic bag trying to  
28 keep it dry. Even though they're supposed to dry out pretty fast when it rains all day  
29 every day pretty hard to dry anything out. If we could get some whiskey occasionally I  
30 made the RTO carry a bottle of this terrible rock gut stuff. I think it was Vietnamese. I  
31 think it was something made out of rice and then they would color it with iodine or

1 something to make it look like scotch or something. It was just awful. You couldn't  
2 drink much of it, but when we were up in the mountains we used to pass the bottle around  
3 and everybody take one swig out of it and kind of warm up, which was probably not  
4 according to regulations. Sheen used to complain all the time because I made him carry  
5 this whiskey and he didn't drink. But I wasn't going to carry it, that's what he was for.  
6 He was supposed to be a packhorse. He was my RTO, a fellow named Bob Sheen. A real,  
7 real bright kid. He was about nineteen and he could run the company. If we had all been  
8 hit but Sheen remained, things would have still functioned. He thought he was really  
9 smart and really was. It was kind of funny, he went into radio television kind of stuff  
10 after he got home. I doubt he liked talking on the radio I guess. They give the Bronze  
11 Star and there's actually three ways to get it. Once you get it for service, which is for a  
12 period of time and for valor and there's also a Bronze Star for like merit. He's the only  
13 person I ever knew that got the Bronze Star for merit. That's where you do some thing  
14 for a set but very limited period of time. During Tet '69 he was on the brigade radio net  
15 when it broke out. All hell was breaking loose and he stayed on the radio for almost  
16 twenty-four hours. Because he had all this experience in combat and being the combat  
17 RTO later on after he was my platoon RT after I moved up to company I moved him up  
18 with me. Then got him out of the field later on. He didn't such a good job they put him  
19 in for the Bronze Star for merit. He's the only person. I didn't even know they had one.  
20 A good fellow except he did put a hole in my air mattress and I've never forgiven him for  
21 that. It took me two or three days to get a new one out. So that was it.  
22 RV: Okay, we'll go ahead and stop for today then.

**Interview with John McNown**  
**Session 4 of 5**  
**January 28, 2004**

1           Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history  
2 interview with Mr. John McNown, Jr. Today is January 28, 2004. It's approximately  
3 8:36 AM Central Standard Time. I am again in Lubbock, Texas. Mr. McNown is in  
4 Mission, Kansas. Sir, let's pick up where we left off. We had discussed some in the field  
5 experience and some of the combat and various things like that. Let me ask you a couple  
6 of general questions about life in the field. Tell me about how you all kept up with news  
7 and what was happening back in the rear and then also really overseas, back home in the  
8 United States.

9           John McNown: We had several sources for news when we were in the field. One  
10 was people carried transistor radios. Often you could pick up Armed Forces Vietnam  
11 Radio so there would be some kind of news. Of course it was usually wasn't direct from  
12 NBC or something. I think they filtered it quite a bit for us. You could get news that  
13 way. A lot of whatever radio songs were popular at the time, you'd pick up that. It was  
14 kind of funny. They would actually—as they showed in the film *Good Morning Vietnam*,  
15 they actually censored some of that. I remember there was a song and I think it was by  
16 the Animals called 'Sky Pilot,' maybe early '69, late '68. They played it once or twice  
17 and then somebody figured out it was about chaplains and it wasn't very nice and they  
18 quit playing it. They banned it from Armed Forces Radio. Of course everybody  
19 immediately wanted to try to get a copy sent from home if they were back in the rear area  
20 some place so they could have it. So you would get it from the radio. I know they had  
21 television at some of the larger areas. I was up at Da Nang when I went on R&R and saw  
22 that they had some kind of Armed Force television up there. We didn't have that in any  
23 of the areas where I was during the year. Then occasionally we would get a copy of *Stars*  
24 *and Stripes* out in the field, which was the Armed Forces newspaper. We'd pick up news  
25 from there. Then people subscribed to local newspapers from home. For instance I had a  
26 subscription to the Springfield, Missouri paper, which is where I had gone to college. I  
27 used it mostly to keep up with my old college sports team. You would pick up news that  
28 way. We would pass those things around when we got them in the mail, which wasn't  
29 too often. Often they made sure you got all the letters first. Depending if there was room

1 they'd give you your magazine subscriptions and things like that. For instance people  
2 that subscribed to some of the magazines like *Playboy* they would often arrive without  
3 the centerfolds out in the field, because people in there rear would open the people's mail  
4 and take out the part they wanted sometimes, which wasn't too exciting. Then letters  
5 from home. People would say things in letters from home and all that information would  
6 get passed around so that's mostly how we kept up with what was going on in the States.  
7 Then occasionally when you got new people in they'd have some information. People  
8 would ask them about things, especially when things started going badly as far as the  
9 public opinion about the war. When people would come in the States they would say,  
10 'What's going on over there about this or that?' People were concerned about that. They  
11 didn't make you feel very good that you had people back in the United States that were  
12 upset about what we were doing. Of course we were doing what we thought the country  
13 was asking us to do. Then it was funny because those things would all get mixed up  
14 sometimes. You would get rumors started. There was a rumor I know one time that  
15 Gene Dixon—and this had come out of *National Inquirer* or something—had predicted  
16 that everybody in the 11<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade with a serial number ending in six would be  
17 killed between two dates. That just swept all over. I think that was around the whole  
18 brigade in about three hours. That persisted for a long time and I don't know where that  
19 came from. Then we had one that was just a real treat. We were out south of LZ Clark,  
20 which was quite a ways out in the mountains or at least for us for being out in the  
21 mountains. It was November and the monsoon and things were just pretty miserable.  
22 This rumor got started that Captain Robb, who was the company commander of Bravo  
23 Company, had a baby boy. We hadn't seen anybody from Bravo Company; we hadn't  
24 seen anybody from Charlie. We hadn't seen anybody in probably two weeks. We had  
25 just been out there in the mountains humping around looking for NVA. I just couldn't  
26 believe it. We got someplace where we could get a hold of Bravo Company on the radio  
27 and I called and congratulated him. He said, 'I didn't have a baby.' I said, 'You didn't?'  
28 He said, 'No.' So I started going back down the line to find out where this came from and  
29 it turned out that if you remember I think it was Lynda Baines Johnson married a Captain  
30 Robb that was a Marine Corps that later became a senator I believe in Virginia. They'd  
31 had a baby and somehow that had passed from being Captain Robb the son-in-law of the

1 president to Captain Robb in D Company. So things like that would happen all the time.  
2 You'd get these rumors. Somebody passed it along like the only thing you played in  
3 school with gossip. By the time it got to somebody it had completely changed and then  
4 that story would become real.

5 RV: Tell me about the anti-war movement. What were your feelings about it?  
6 You mentioned it briefly there. How did effect morale for you out in Vietnam?

7 JM: Actually in '68 it really hadn't got a full head of steam going yet. I don't  
8 think it really started. I think the main thing that was hurting morale at that time it was  
9 just starting up. It had become apparent that we hadn't figured out how to win the war.  
10 We just kept sending people over and didn't have a plan. I think that was pretty apparent  
11 from watching the news and certainly after Tet of '68 the news had become much more  
12 negative about our involvement and the fact that we didn't have a plan. The people over  
13 there may not have wanted us to be there. Then in November of '68 they stopped the  
14 bombing of the North. That affected morale a lot because at that point it was just real  
15 obvious. Of course that was played up in the *Stars and Stripes* and on everything there in  
16 Vietnam. That was big news. But it became apparent that we had pretty much given up  
17 the idea that we were going to win the war. We just wanted out even to the average front.  
18 At that point I think the morale of the Army really started going down just because  
19 nobody wanted to be the last man killed in Vietnam. I think that affected morale at that  
20 time more than the anti-war movement. I think that probably came later in '69 and '70  
21 after I left after the anti-war movement had picked up a lot more steam and a lot more  
22 publicity. People didn't like the fact that we were over there. I think there are a lot of  
23 people to this day that served in Vietnam that are very much opposed to any kind of anti-  
24 war movement on the basis that it gives aid and comfort to the enemy. No matter what  
25 the national policy is because of the way the news goes around the world and affects  
26 things it's undermining the morale and the ability of the Armed Forces to do whatever  
27 they have to do. So from that standpoint I do think that people really resented the fact  
28 that we had people, especially the ones that were waving North Vietnamese or Viet Cong  
29 flags. That kind of thing I think they resented that more than the fact that they wanted us  
30 to come home. I think the people that were on the extreme end of the anti-war  
31 movement, I think everybody resented that. There was a lot of anger over that.

1           RV: Did you notice as events unfolded back in the United States and then of  
2 course you were there '68, '69? This moves into your time in the rear area, back at  
3 brigade headquarters. Did you notice anger or what was the dominant emotion when it  
4 came to what was happening back in Washington and the rest of the country?

5           JM: I would say that resentment and anger. I don't know if anger during my time  
6 would be the real, but there was a lot of resentment. I'd say it hadn't gotten to the point  
7 that you might say it was real anger. There was some anger I think among people. A lot  
8 of that depended on the unit and how much they let people dwell on that I think. It's like  
9 a lot of things. If you let people dwell on it and it festers you know it turns from  
10 resentment into anger. I do think there was a lot of resentment that we were over there  
11 doing what we were trying to do and what we were being told to do and people back in  
12 the States. I really think the anti-war movement got out of control as far as the blame  
13 they placed on the individual troops rather than focusing on the government. There was a  
14 lot of anger about that part of it I think. I never experienced much if any of that when I  
15 came home or while I was in the Service. You hear stories and you wonder how much of  
16 them are like urban legends where it happened once or twice and it got spread out about  
17 people spitting on people and people shooting people that got off of airplanes because  
18 their son didn't come home. All those stories got spread and the more they got spread I  
19 think the more anger there was among the troops. It just wasn't fair. I think that's what,  
20 if you looked at the source of the anger was that it wasn't fair. 'I'm over here doing what  
21 I've been asked to do and these people are acting like I'm some sort of a monster.' I  
22 don't know how much of that. I've heard some stories from a few of the fellows there in  
23 our unit, but not a lot. I think it really had to do with where you are. If you were in the  
24 Midwest you probably didn't experience much of it. If you were from the San Francisco  
25 area or the Washington D.C. area I understand things got pretty bad in Washington D.C.  
26 I've talked to people whose sons or husbands were killed and who are buried in the D.C.  
27 area and I guess they actually had protests at their burials. That's supposedly firsthand  
28 information, but I never saw any of that here in the Midwest.

29           RV: Going back into the field, what did you all do for entertainment and keeping  
30 yourself on the lighter side?

1 JM: There were lots of various ways to do it. In a way there wasn't a lot of  
2 entertainment. They finally started having stand-downs in January '69 after I was out of  
3 the field. Our unit hadn't had a stand down I don't think since like April or March of '68.  
4 We were either on a firebase or in the field constantly for nine months. So we'd get our  
5 beer and soda ration and that was always something to look forward to. Some people, if  
6 we were in an area where there wasn't much going on and a couple of people could get  
7 together they might play some cards or something. If we thought we had a relatively safe  
8 area and they were back some place where there was some cover you might see some of  
9 that especially like in a bunker on a firebase during the daytime when things were  
10 relatively calm. We had one fellow that when you go into the villages these kids would  
11 come out and try to sell you things. One of the things they sold they had little things  
12 about pictures. They were about the size of playing cards and they were on stiffer  
13 material and they were all pornographic. We had a couple of fellows that amused  
14 themselves by buying these pictures. Then they'd try to trade them with the kids or with  
15 each other to get like collections of certain kinds of things. So that was the only thing  
16 you could buy when you were out in the field. It really had nothing to do with the porn.  
17 It had to do with it gave you something to do. We had people that were actually fairly  
18 decent artists that would draw things. I actually saw a guy carve a little thing in a tree  
19 stump one time. We were in a place for a couple of days and it was soft wood. He  
20 carved something in it. You could listen to the radio. You'd have an earphone after we  
21 dug in or something somebody could be listening on the radio. I remember the big event  
22 that the Tigers and the Cardinals played in the World Series that year. I was a Cardinal  
23 fan and we had several fellows in my platoon from the Detroit area. Two or three in the  
24 morning, whatever the time it was coming on live on AFVN, we would kind of crawl  
25 back into the center of the perimeter and listen real quietly. We'd be sitting there  
26 listening to the ball game. That's about the only time I remember doing something like  
27 that. Then a couple of people had early models of cassette tapes I think. I think they had  
28 just come out as I remember. Somebody had sent somebody a cassette tape. They  
29 actually carried it in their pack as additional weight and everybody made fun of them.  
30 They could record and send stuff back to their folks. For the most part, there wasn't a

1 whole lot of things to sit there and entertain other than you'd have some gallows humor  
2 occasionally. It wasn't a whole lot of entertainment going on.

3 RV: What role did music play in your time in the field and in your life in  
4 Vietnam in general?

5 JM: I always think of it as a rock n' roll war. Every place you went there was  
6 music. I remember going in on a combat assault in a Huey and I was wearing a helmet  
7 talking to the pilot because I was the acting company commander at the time. He had his  
8 radio on the NAV channel, which was where you could pick up the AM stuff. I  
9 remember we were going in and the gunships were going by us firing into the LZ.  
10 Steppenwolf was on playing 'Magic Carpet Ride.' To this day, when I hear that song I  
11 can picture those gunships going down there and us coming n on those choppers. A lot of  
12 stuff like that. When you're someplace special and you hear a song it brings that back.  
13 There's a lot of things like that. A lot of Lou Ralls. I think a lot of people remember the  
14 same songs. I think 'Detroit City' was really popular for a while when I was over there.  
15 Janice Joplin, 'A Piece of my Heart.' There was time if you were in the rear area just  
16 about any place you went you could hear Janice Joplin singing, 'Peace of my Heart.'  
17 These people in the rear would have stereos coming in from Japan and it would just be  
18 basting out in the evening there. So a lot of music.

19 RV: What about drug and alcohol use in the field and in the rear?

20 JM: In our outfit in '68 there was very—I only know one fellow that was using  
21 any marijuana in the field. He was pretty harmless. His job was to carry the red  
22 mailbags for the company command post if we couldn't get them back on the choppers.  
23 He had a rifle that wouldn't even fire as a matter of fact. It was just weird. He was  
24 almost like a company pet. Wally, everybody liked Wally but they knew he just didn't  
25 have any business out there. He thought as long as he was with us he was perfectly safe  
26 and he didn't need bullets. It was okay.

27 RV: A gun that didn't fire? Was it rigged?

28 JM: It had been hit by a mortar in May I guess up north. It actually had a little  
29 bend in the barrel and a crease where this piece of shrapnel had hit it. He just never got  
30 any more bullets. The company commander thought that was fine. He was worried he  
31 couldn't keep Wally away from the pot. He'd find some someplace. If you were going

1 to villages and stuff you could buy it if you wanted to. When we were back on the  
2 firebase depending on where the firebase was, if it was down along Highway 1 and close  
3 to some villages certainly there was alcohol use. I know that in the bunkers in the  
4 evening sometimes people would get a little mellow up there in the firebases. There was  
5 that. I just don't remember any heavy drug use when I was with the company in the field.  
6 When I got back in the rear it was a whole different story. A lot more drug use going on  
7 in the rear. As a matter of fact, we caught a guy smoking grass out in the field one time  
8 and he got the hell beat out of him. You just didn't do it. You just weren't alert. It was  
9 just not something we put up with.

10 RV: What were the drugs of choice back in the rear?

11 JM: Can't tell you for sure. I do know that you could get LSD. You could get  
12 marijuana that was laced with opium, which was supposedly a much better deal. Then  
13 you'd have some pill poppers I think. I don't know exactly what they were taking.  
14 Occasionally somebody would pick up opium from someplace. I heard a lot about people  
15 smoking marijuana that was laced with opium to get a bigger high. They actually used to  
16 sell pre-packaged marijuana cigarettes that were in Cool packages. I think they spelled  
17 the word Cool differently on them. You could actually have them so appeared you were  
18 smoking a real cigarette rather than rolling your own. I think the reason in the rear area  
19 you saw so much more was people were bored. They'd be on duty eight hours, ten hours,  
20 twelve hours or whatever. Then all of a sudden they'd be off someplace where they were  
21 either back in a various kind of a deal or sitting in a bunker on the perimeter someplace  
22 with nothing to do. I just think a lot of it had to do with boredom. Then I understand  
23 from people that were back over there in '70 and '71 the drug use was a lot more  
24 pervasive then. I was on the DMZ in Korea in '71 and the drug use was really bad there.  
25 I think that by that time the morale had gotten down so low in areas and the discipline  
26 just wasn't there so there was a lot of drug use then.

27 RV: Tell me about your contact with home and family and how that transpired.

28 JM: Most of it was letters of course. I was engaged when I went over. I got to  
29 talk to my fiancé once. I talked to my parents once on MARS. You have to go up and  
30 use MARS radio. There'd be these huge lists of people to get up there. Sometimes it  
31 worked and sometimes it didn't. It was real spotty so most of it was by letter. Even

1 when you were out in the field you could tear the top off a c-ration carton and write a  
2 note on the back and address it and put “free” on it and it would get home. So that’s how  
3 most of the correspondence to place at that time.

4 RV: How often did you write?

5 JM: I was really good when I first got there. My dad had given me this huge  
6 fistful of postcards and told me I needed to drop a note to my mom everyday. I was  
7 pretty good before things got real busy. Once they got real busy it got harder. So then I  
8 was a little more sporadic. I tried to write home at least once a week. Especially when I  
9 was out in the field I tried to get some kind of a note off every few days. Just, ‘I’m all  
10 right and walking through the rice paddies. See you in nine months,’ or whatever. Then  
11 after I got in the rear I’d write more elaborate letters. I probably wrote either my fiancé  
12 or my parents probably three times a week. Then I think I got more lax about it as I got  
13 shorter. I know one time I went almost a month without writing anybody. My mother  
14 had written the Red Cross or somebody. She got worried about me.

15 RV: What about the role of religion in the field? Can you talk about your  
16 personal experience and what you witnessed?

17 JM: Yes, I remember seeing a chaplain while I was in the field twice. Once right  
18 before we went off to Ha Than to this real heavy combat. We didn’t like that. It did not  
19 seem like a good omen that they brought the chaplain in to talk to the troops because  
20 we’d already been hearing things. Then I saw a Catholic chaplain actually out at Ha  
21 Than doing mass about the fifth day. Other than that I had a good friend that was a  
22 chaplain after I was in the rear. I went to services a few times. A rocket hit his office.  
23 He wasn’t there when it hit, but attendance dropped way off. I don’t know if people  
24 didn’t think he had it in good with the Lord or what. I’d be hard put—like myself I don’t  
25 see where God is on the battlefield. I spent a lot of time thinking about that. I’d gone to  
26 church pretty regularly when I was in college. I was sporadic. Once I got in the Army I  
27 was probably less than sporadic. Just really occasional. I think it’s just the time of your  
28 life. When you’re younger you have the tendency. I know that you talked to some  
29 people and they say there aren’t any atheists in the foxholes. I’ve talked to people that  
30 have been in foxholes that believe that. I think there’s a lot of atheists in the foxholes  
31 myself. I think they would like God to save them but they don’t have any confidence

1 that's going to happen. I just don't think in combat there's whole lot of place for  
2 religion. It was interesting at our reunion in Reno this year we're going to have the 1/20  
3 chaplain is joining us, a guy named Mac Sullivan. He actually did the invocation and the  
4 dedication prayer at the wall. He received the Silver Star for treating the wounded in  
5 Alpha Company under fire in June of '69. He actually would get out and walk with the  
6 troops and I've heard about chaplains like that. I didn't personally experience that. But I  
7 know all these guys think a lot of Chaplain Sullivan. I think being a chaplain in a combat  
8 situation would be a tough deal. It's really hard to figure out where God is out on the  
9 battlefield. Took me a long time to reconcile that after I got home.

10 RV: Have you been able to do so?

11 JM: I think so. I had a bishop tell me one time two things. I believe that in some  
12 ways combat is the most Christian experience if you're a Christian, if you're a Muslim it  
13 could be a Muslim experience I suppose, that you can have. It's the only place that you  
14 can see on a daily basis that people are willing to sacrifice themselves for their friends. I  
15 think there's something truly noble and probably religious about that. I think that's the  
16 reason that people who are in combat units together, even though they may be  
17 sociologically and all kinds of different, they really are close to each other because you  
18 don't have too many people you know that are willing to do that. You know they're  
19 willing to do that. I think that if you look back at the experience you can take it and learn  
20 something about yourself and humanity. Maybe by learning something about that, learn  
21 something about what God would have us to be rather than what we are. I do think that  
22 there is in retrospect things that you can learn about religion from having been in combat.  
23 I think at the time there's not much you can learn about it. I think it had to be something  
24 you look back and when you meditate and review things you can bring religious lessons  
25 from it. It's not a religious experience in itself. I think you have to learn a lot about  
26 forgiving yourself and forgiving others if you've been in combat, which is a religion  
27 thing. It's a hard thing to do sometimes.

28 RV: Have you been able to forgive yourself for anything that you might have  
29 done or others?

30 JM: Yes, I had a bishop—I'm an Episcopalian and I had a bishop who was a very  
31 bright and very profound man. He's also been an ambitious man who just cruises

1 everything. Works the same way, became bishop of New York eventually from being a  
2 bishop in Kansas. I was telling him that we had a situation at Ha Than where we went  
3 through this. I think I may have mentioned it where we went across this trench that I told  
4 everybody I didn't want everybody moving behind us. There was a lot of NVA that were  
5 wounded just horribly but we didn't have anybody to fall back when I mentioned that.  
6 For along time that bothered me just having given the order. To this day I would give the  
7 same order in the same circumstance. But it just really bothered me for a long time. I  
8 was talking to Bishop Grime one day and I said, 'I just have this thing that I just can't  
9 forgive myself for.' He said, 'That's arrogance.' He said, 'That's nothing but arrogance.  
10 It's not up to you to forgive yourself for things. God takes care of that for you.' I  
11 thought about it and it was. If you think there's something that's so unforgivable that  
12 God can't forgive you then that's just arrogance on your part. I think he's right about  
13 that. That was a really helpful thing to have somebody tell me.

14 RV: John, let me ask you a couple other questions about in the field. I'm curious  
15 about the terrain of Vietnam. What were your impressions of where you were?

16 JM: I think it's beautiful. Vietnam is as beautiful a place as I've ever seen where  
17 we were. We were at a place called Duc Pho, which is on the coastal plain. But the  
18 mountains sweep down from the north along the coastal plain there. At the bottom of  
19 Quang Ngai Province actually touches the ocean. Depending on where you were the  
20 mountains were either closer or further away. So you have these rice paddies in these  
21 rivers coming out of the mountains with tree lines along them and little villages and  
22 beautiful beaches. Just absolutely gorgeous beaches. Florida or Hawaii even would kill  
23 for the beaches in Quang Ngai Province I think. Then when you got up in the mountains  
24 there were these clear rivers and these waterfalls. There's the trees and of course they  
25 were full of bugs and things, which wasn't good. But as far as just being a beautiful lush  
26 place, palm trees pineapple plants. Just a beautiful place. Of course when you're looking  
27 at it from our standpoint it was also a dangerous place because the rice paddies you'd be  
28 out in the open for a long time and they were always surrounded by hedgerows. There  
29 was a lot of hedgerows in the area where we were in Vietnam that lined the trails and the  
30 streams and cut off one hamlet's rice paddy area from another one. So anytime you were  
31 crossing paddies there were always these thick hedgerows that you were walking into.

1 One of the things that made it kind of quaint and pretty almost like a jigsaw puzzle,  
2 beautiful and also very dangerous. Of course once you got up into the mountains and you  
3 got back up in the canopy things were just very thick. You couldn't see. Crossing  
4 streams was always dangerous so you'd have to find a place to ford. As far as the terrain  
5 went itself, it was just absolutely I think a beautiful place.

6 RV: What about your experience with the animal wildlife of Vietnam?

7 JM: We got around to saying it's not wildlife. The most dangerous animal we  
8 probably ran into was water buffalo because they didn't like the way we smelled and they  
9 were huge. If one would lose control and start charging it was a really scary thing. I  
10 remember seeing very little wildlife. Partially, I was out with a rifle company and we  
11 were kind of noisy I suspect. You've got a hundred guys all burdened down and slipping  
12 and sliding and whatever. Unless you were on point I don't think you saw much wildlife.  
13 I remember seeing a couple of small deer, snakes. I remember specifically seeing  
14 bamboo vipers because we kept finding them in one of these night defensive positions  
15 we'd set up. People wanted to move.

16 RV: What do you mean they were in the holes?

17 JM: No, we were dug in around a big clump of bamboo up in the mountains and  
18 they were in the trees. All of a sudden people started finding them or they'd drop down.  
19 But we didn't really have the opportunity to move. So we just hope we killed them all.  
20 Nobody got bit or anything as it turned out. The leeches were worse than the vipers. I  
21 remember a lot of insects, mosquitoes, land leeches, water leeches. Birds, you'd see  
22 birds of course. You'd see birds along the ocean and when you got in the mountains  
23 there were different types of birds. I don't ever remember seeing monkeys. I think I  
24 heard some a couple times. I don't remember that particularly. I knew people that have  
25 seen elephants and tigers, but I never saw any really major wildlife even when we were  
26 back in the mountains. When we were back in the mountains it was during the monsoon  
27 so they may not have been moving that much.

28 RV: Were you ever exposed to any of the defoliants that you are aware of?

29 JM: Yes. You know what I think? My personal opinion is everybody got  
30 exposed to defoliants. We were never in a defoliated area. I need to differentiate  
31 between that. So when you're talking about moving through a defoliated area like you had

1 up along the DMZ and other places we were never operating in an area like that. They  
2 used to use Agent Orange around the firebases and the brigade base camp to keep the  
3 foliage down there for the fields of fire. I don't think that's something they've ever  
4 talked about much. But I've noticed now they've changed the rules on that. Anybody  
5 that served in Vietnam is eligible. I think that's the reason because it finally came out.  
6 Finally we had the fellow that was in my platoon and he died of a very rare cancer that  
7 the VA finally said a few days after he died gave him his certification that it was an  
8 Agent Orange related cancer. But it was a very severe form and rare form of bone  
9 cancer. I'm pretty sure he got it after he became company clerk. He spent a lot of time  
10 out in the evenings. He would be on bunker duty on the brigade base camp. My  
11 suspicion is and we all wrote a letter into the VA about how they used. They combined  
12 the helicopters and would spray around the brigade base camp. I'm pretty sure that  
13 anybody that was there and maybe people in the rear got exposed more than people in the  
14 field, depending on where you were. But we never had the problem with drinking water  
15 and that kind of thing that you hear about with some of the units.

16 RV: What about R&Rs? Did you get to take one?

17 JM: Yes, I went to Sydney, Australia in April of '69 and had a wonderful time.  
18 I'd like to go back someday. I was down there during their An Zac Celebration. I was in  
19 Sydney and every veteran of World War II and Korea and whatever in Australia seemed  
20 like was in Sydney. I don't think I brought a drink the entire week because they knew  
21 that I was an American because my hair was a lot shorter than anybody else's there.  
22 When they found out we were in the Americal division, because the Americal served in  
23 the South Pacific during World War II and they all knew that down there. It was  
24 amazing. They knew more about it than people in the United States did. I'd never heard  
25 of it but the people in Australia knew about the Americal division. Just very gracious,  
26 nice people. I had a wonderful time.

27 RV: Did you go by yourself?

28 JM: Yes. There was a couple fellows I knew that turned out that we were down  
29 there at the same time. We kind of hung out for the first couple of days. I took a ferry up  
30 about forty miles up the coast one day on a Sunday cruise. I think there was only two  
31 other Americans on it. There was probably five or six hundred people. It was just an

1 absolutely wonderful day. People met some families, did some things. Went to the zoo  
2 one day. I still am kind of a zoo freak. I love to go see exotic animals. I knew at that  
3 time there were animals that they didn't let out of Australia. The only place you could  
4 see them was there. So I went over to see a platypus. I didn't get to see it. It didn't  
5 come out. So that was a disappointment. Saw a lot of other animals and met families  
6 there. People were just very, very nice to us. I just have very fond memories of all the  
7 people in Australia. It was a clean city and a neat place at the time.

8 RV: How did you feel when you got back? Were you rested? Were you ready?

9 JM: No, I was worn out. It was a long flight down there. Partied. I'm telling  
10 you about the nice things. I also went out every night and stayed up half the night and  
11 drank a lot more than I should have and just had a heck of a time. I think that's when I  
12 found out I thought was pretty clean from him. I had been out in the field by that time I  
13 came out of the field, late November and this was probably like the tenth of April, like  
14 the fifteenth of April, right around there. So I'd been out of the field along time. I had  
15 been taking showers and I thought I was pretty clean. I took a bath. What a wonderful  
16 thing. Turned all this hot water on and took a bath. My pores opened up and all my tan  
17 came out. Just a wonderful time. April is the fall down there so it was kind of cool. As a  
18 matter of fact I still own a sweater that I bought while I was down there. I bought me a  
19 really good wool sweater and I still have it. The weather was crisp and nice, probably in  
20 the seventies. It felt kind of cold actually to me. It was just a great time.

21 RV: Did your unit ever engage in civic action while you were out in the field or  
22 in the rear?

23 JM: No.

24 RV: Was that encouraged or discussed?

25 JM: No I don't think it was part of the mission there. I know we had an F-5 area  
26 at brigade. I think they even had an F-5. I think Lieutenant Calley was an F-5 officer at  
27 one time, which was a civic action person, which that seems kind of ironic.

28 RV: A little ironic, yes.

29 JM: Really in Quang Ngai Province I don't think there was a lot of that going on.  
30 When we were in the field we didn't have any of the cap units and things like that. I  
31 really truly believed that even though they had a bunch of designated friendly villages

1 along the highway there. They had what they call the rural development area, the RD  
2 area which ran either side of the highway. That was supposedly under government  
3 control, the villages there. I don't ever remember a village not getting at least sniped at  
4 while we were out in the field. They didn't like us. So, no, the answer to that's no. It  
5 never even occurred to me. I do think we did things, individuals going through. We  
6 helped treat some Vietnamese with the medics if we were around the village or going to  
7 be around there for a day or so. I mean it was just something you did. I think we acted as  
8 well as we could given the circumstances. We never had any orders or any program that  
9 I was aware of, at least in the rifle companies there to do that.

10 RV: Can you talk to me about Vietnamese civilians? What was your impression  
11 of the indigenous population?

12 JM: They were small and they didn't speak English. That's funny. They were  
13 mostly farmers where we were. We were in an area that was primarily rural. We never  
14 operated in any big villages. We're going through hamlets all the time. All you saw was  
15 farmers. I felt sorry for them. We were going through in the daytime the NVA were  
16 coming through at night. I thought what a terrible way. It's a hard life. It's a hard life  
17 being a farmer in rice paddies in a place where there's no mechanization to begin with.  
18 Most of them were poor. A lot of the women chewed beetle nut and had red mouths and  
19 lips because they weren't getting any dental care. They looked old before their time.  
20 You'd see young women that were beautiful young girls out there. They'd be eighteen or  
21 seventeen and then you'd see women that were probably twenty-six or twenty-seven and  
22 they already looked old. You just thought it was a hard life. Where you very seldom saw  
23 a young man. Anybody above fifteen got drafted by somebody. So if you saw one you  
24 picked him up as a suspect. So you saw old men and women and a lot of children. Their  
25 clothes I thought were actually fairly clean if they were in the villas. Considering the  
26 circumstances they were washing them in streams and things. It seemed to me like they  
27 were fairly industrious people as far as the farmers went. You'd go in to their little  
28 homes, their hooches as we'd call them. They had mud walls and thatched roofs. Things  
29 were always pretty neat in there. They had little brooms. They had dirt floors but they  
30 would kind of keep them swept. I just thought they were industrious. Probably would  
31 have been good people under other circumstances. Of course they resented us. If we had

1 armed people coming through our homes we'd resent them I'm sure. I guess if I had an  
2 overall feeling I didn't trust any of them because there wasn't any question. We had  
3 booby traps outside every village. We'd get sniped at. There wasn't any question that  
4 these people did not want us there. But at the same time I just felt over all it was just  
5 kind of a sad feeling for them. I just thought not so sad that we didn't do what we needed  
6 to do. It was just not a life I would want. I remember reading a poem years ago by a  
7 Vietnam veteran. I can't remember the guy's name. It was about a platoon of tracks  
8 going through a rice paddy. One of the farmers started hitting one with a hoe. It made  
9 him mad. So instead of going through in single file where they just broke the dike in one  
10 place they turned and went on line and broke his whole dike down. The last line was if  
11 you have a home in hell and a farm in Vietnam, sell the farm and go home. I thought  
12 that was pretty appropriate. That's pretty much how life would have been there.

13 RV: The notion that you couldn't tell the enemy from your friend, was that true  
14 in Vietnam?

15 JM: Certainly where we were. They all looked alike. The Viet Cong, they all  
16 dressed like the normal people and not necessarily black pajamas. Shorts or whatever.  
17 They were just somebody that was out there in the fields someplace. Sometimes they  
18 were farmers by day and soldiers by night. Sometimes they were just soldiers all the  
19 time. Certainly the population there hid those people. They truly were fish swimming in  
20 the seas now said. They had main force Viet Cong elements, they had regional force Viet  
21 Cong elements, they had NVA. We had everything you could see. We'd run into all  
22 different kinds. You could tell how hardcore they were by whether they tried to  
23 maneuver on you or not. I don't think there was ever a question when we went through a  
24 village whether it was really a friendly village. They'd tell us stuff and the kids would be  
25 nice trying to make money or something. It was never a question. You didn't see fear  
26 and resentment in people's eyes.

27 RV: You mentioned this resentment. How could you tell? Just by the look?

28 JM: Just their body language. Just the way they stood and the way they watched  
29 you just like any place where you walk in. All of a sudden you think that you don't  
30 belong. It was that feeling. You walked in and we don't belong here and those people  
31 don't want us here. By the time I got there, we'd come to these burned out huts and the

1 4<sup>th</sup> division had been through there, the 101<sup>st</sup> had been through there. The 1<sup>st</sup> air cav had  
2 been through there. Obviously there was no reason for people to think we were there.  
3 You just don't send that many divisions through one province.

4 RV: How did you coach your men on how to handle the civilian and how to treat  
5 them and talk with them or what kind of contact to have with them, etc.?

6 JM: Well if we had to search a village we'd have to go around everybody and put  
7 them up. We would put reasonable people in charge of watching them. Then we'd come  
8 through there. For the most part we tried to keep them from putting their hands on people  
9 if we could. Most of the guys were pretty good guys. Occasionally you'd have one that  
10 you'd have to be careful of that would be just like a bully would be in the States. You'd  
11 have to be careful. All of sudden you'd look and he was slapping somebody or doing  
12 something. Yelling at them. 'VC o dau?' Which means 'where are the VC?' Of course  
13 they're speaking and yelling at me something in Vietnam. 'VC no bic' or whatever in  
14 Vietnamese. The guy would be getting madder. You'd just have to pull him off and say,  
15 'Hey get out there on perimeter guard,' or something. The difficult thing I think is when  
16 you work with the PRUs, the Provisional Reconnaissance Units of the South Vietnamese  
17 Army or the National Police. They were brutal people. Just absolutely unmerciful.  
18 You'd see them treating these people that way. So certainly there wasn't any good  
19 example to be gained by worked with the ARVNs or the National Police. It was not a  
20 good situation there in Quang Ngai. So as far as I know we never had any incidents in  
21 the company. I remember we were out in the Pinkville there, which is a bad place. We  
22 had some guys starting to light a villa up. We got that stopped and a couple things like  
23 that. We tried to remind everybody that we were there to be soldiers all the time. We  
24 weren't a mob. We didn't use those words but that was the message all the time. We had  
25 a good unit and I think we acted that way.

26 RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese since Vietnam?

27 JM: Just a few here in Kansas City. A lot of them are younger. I think I've only  
28 met one person that served in the South Vietnamese Army. To be honest if I was going  
29 to have contact with the Vietnamese, and most of them will claim they're from Saigon or  
30 Da Nang so I have no idea what life was like for them. To be honest, if was going to talk

1 to somebody I'd rather talk to an NVA or a Viet Cong. I didn't care for the South  
2 Vietnamese Army much. I have no positive feelings about our allies.

3 RV: I know we've already talked about that a little bit but in general, why?

4 JM: Jus because I think that all my contact with the South Vietnamese Army they  
5 either ran off, the regional forces or whatever. When contact started they obviously  
6 didn't want to make contact, the units in our area. The regular ARVNs, the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN  
7 division was just north of us. The regional forces actually had bridges overrun.  
8 Everybody pretty much just massacred squads because the people that were supposed to  
9 be helping hem guard ran off and left ten guys there or six guys there to face an NVA  
10 company or something. So you don't have good feelings about those kind of people.  
11 Then my dealings with the National Police every time I saw them they were beating or  
12 torturing people. I just don't have any good feelings about them even though I don't  
13 think the Vietnamese people were necessarily better off, probably not better off under the  
14 Communists. But certainly the regime we were in there supporting in our area was  
15 certainly not worth the effort.

16 RV: John, why don't we take a break for a moment?

17 RV: Okay, John, let's talk about your transition to the rear of your brigade. How  
18 did that happen and what were your duties? What was your life like back in the rear?

19 JM: I remember the date. It was November 20, 1968. I had been actually the  
20 acting company commander running the company out in the field. Captain Bartlett,  
21 who'd been our company commander had been wounded on the 7<sup>th</sup>. Then we had this  
22 Lieutenant Davis who was the XO. They brought him back in. Anyway he came back in  
23 on about the eighteenth and on the twentieth all of a sudden they pulled me out to go to  
24 the rear because we had a new captain coming in, Captain David Walsh to take over the  
25 company. The battalion commander had decided to give me Bravo Company so I was  
26 supposed to go back and sign for all the equipment and everything in Bravo Company.  
27 They picked me up out in the jungle and I went to a place called LZ Cork, which was if  
28 you've ever talked to anybody from the 11 infantry brigade that's been out there, it was a  
29 unique place. Out in the mountains. Got there and there was no more helicopters. Once  
30 I got there I couldn't get back to Duc Pho. I met Captain Walsh and I had a couple of  
31 beers out there on this forward firebase and talked about the company because he wanted

1 to know about that. So then I went back in. Actually I guess when I originally went back  
2 in I was going to be a pay officer and an executive officer. This other guy was leaving.  
3 So I went back in to do all that stuff. The next thing I know come out and pay the troops  
4 at the end of the month. I think I went back and I slept for about two days. I had a cot  
5 and I literally slept, got up, ate, went back to sleep for the first two days I was in the rear.

6 RV: Where was this again?

7 JM: I was in Duc Pho at LZ Bronco, which was the 11<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade base  
8 camp. That's where our battalion rear area was. So I went up and I paid the troops. I  
9 had to go up to Chu Lai to division headquarters to pay the people that were wounded in  
10 the hospital up there. So I went up there and that was just a real experience. I had been  
11 out in the field now since August without coming in. I got up there and the hospital had  
12 like a cafeteria. There were these nurses in civilian clothes there. They were off duty.  
13 They had MPs and stuff. It was like surreal. I just sat there and ate for along time and  
14 just kind of looked around. Then I went in and paid the fellows that were in the hospital.  
15 I went back to Duc Pho. When I got back there Colonel Ngyuen told me I was going to  
16 take over Bravo Company so I didn't understand why they didn't give Captain Walsh  
17 Bravo Company and let me keep my old company because I knew people and stuff. So I  
18 went over started signing for all the equipment and stuff. You have all this paperwork  
19 you have to do if you take over as a company commander. So you have to sign for the  
20 equipment. I was signing for the equipment and I was bringing people in. We had a  
21 number of soldiers who were refusing to go to the field in Bravo Company for whatever  
22 reason. They had some morale problems in that particular company I think. Some of  
23 those I think given the choice either pick up their stuff or go to jail. So we set up some  
24 special court marshals for some of those. I had been there about three days getting that  
25 all straightened out before I was supposed to go out into the field and take the company  
26 over. Suddenly we got another rash of captains and new lieutenants in. So they had this  
27 captain show up and of course they had to give him the company because I was a 1<sup>st</sup>  
28 lieutenant. So they sent me back to Alpha Company. The colonel came in and said,  
29 'Look, John, we've got a request from brigade to nominate somebody to go forward and  
30 interview for a job at brigade headquarters. I'm going to nominate you.' He said, 'But  
31 you have a choice. I think this is a good job. You don't want to send somebody up

1 there.' He was very nice about the way he did it. He said, 'or you can stay back and be  
2 executive officer and I can take somebody as a second choice, but you're the senior  
3 lieutenant in the field.' He said, 'You know I was going to put you in charge of a  
4 company. I'd like for you to go up and interview.' So I said, 'Sure I'll go up and do it.'  
5 I found out the job paid flight pay, which was a real incentive. So I interview with the S-  
6 2 up there who was Major. I don't even remember his name now. He wasn't there a  
7 whole long time after I got back up there. I interview with him and the brigade executive  
8 officer. I don't think I ever talked to the brigade commander. They had six people  
9 interviewing for the job and I got it.

10 RV: Let me ask you, what kind of things were they asking you? What were they  
11 interested in for this position?

12 JM: It was mainly what my experience was. They took a look at my records,  
13 asked what I'd done at Ft. Benning, what I'd done after I got out of Benning before I  
14 came to Vietnam. They talked to my battalion commander about what I'd done in the  
15 field. Just basically talked to me about running patrols and doing paperwork. I don't  
16 remember a whole lot of specific questions that we went through. I just remember  
17 talking to these people. When I got all done they called and said okay on the next day,  
18 'You've got the job. You need to get up here.'

19 RV: This is at Chu Lai?

20 JM: No, this is the 11<sup>th</sup> brigade headquarters at LZ Bronco.

21 RV: Still at Bronco.

22 JM: Yes, we've been going up to brigade headquarter instead of staying with the  
23 battalion. So they were around. There was a big mountain in the middle of the brigade  
24 base camp called Montezuma. It was on the west side of Montezuma and the 1/20 was  
25 on the south side. So I moved a quarter of a way around the mountain. So I get up there  
26 and they wanted me to turn my rifle in and get one from them so I made a deal with the  
27 S-4s to keep my own rifle. You know what I mean it was kind of like a security blanket.  
28 So we traded rifles out and we moved in. Went to work in this tent kit, had a big tent kit  
29 and that was the intelligence, brigade intelligence shop. There was me and another  
30 assistant. I was the assistant brigade intelligence officer for air, the S-2 air, and we had  
31 another assistant brigade intelligence officer that was a captain. He was a lawyer named

1 Jerry Simmons. We had a master sergeant that was a brigade intelligence sergeant and  
2 two or three clerks. Then we had a major who was the actually S-2 for the brigade. He  
3 spent most of his time flying around with the colonel with the brigade commander in the  
4 command and control chopper. Then the rest of us sorted through information and did  
5 various things trying to figure out what the NVA and the Viet Cong and the NVA were  
6 up to as well as we could, with the information that we had.

7 RV: Can you describe how you got that information and what kind of things you  
8 had to sit through?

9 JM: I tell you my job I was called the S-2 air. My job was to do all the requests  
10 for air support that was not immediate air support for a unit in contact. So if we had  
11 some area that we felt warranted some kind of a bombing, a B-52 or just a fighter bomber  
12 strike someplace I would do the request of that and send it up through II channel. I  
13 would do the visual reconnaissance. I flew visual reconnaissance most days, either in the  
14 O1, two seater little planes. Sometimes flew out with the Air Force FACs in the second  
15 seat. Flew in light observation helicopters a lot just going out and checking out things in  
16 the mountains, just looking for things. I did all the coordination for the long-range  
17 reconnaissance patrols that ran out of the brigade. We would get information from the  
18 South Vietnamese police, the South Vietnamese Army. We'd get stuff from the division  
19 headquarters intelligence staff. We would run side looking airborne radar mission and  
20 get information from that. Photoreconnaissance mission sniffers, which was a two deal  
21 with a helicopter where they had a big scoop and they'd be going out testing the air.  
22 They'd get these little readings that were supposedly ammonia and given off by people  
23 sweating in the mountains and then you'd mark them on the map and that would give you  
24 intelligence. Toward the end we were staring to get in, I forgot what they called it but  
25 they were sensors. You could put sensors out and they'd pick up metal, they'd pick up  
26 movement or they'd hear things. We were planting those. So you just take all this  
27 various information and then try to make a picture out of it.

28 RV: What was the most effective one of those? Or a couple that were really  
29 good?

30 JM: The side looking airborne radar was pretty worthless but the Air Force loved  
31 it. So we would run those missions and use them. Most of the time they'd pick up

1 running water. They couldn't tell the difference between running water and a truck. So  
2 if we wanted a mission out in the mountain someplace and we knew there was a lot of  
3 running water but we couldn't see it. Half of the streams weren't even on the maps  
4 because the jungles covered them but they'd pick them up from the radar. We'd run a  
5 SLAR mission out there and use it as part of our justification even though we knew it  
6 didn't mean anything. The Air Force never understood that. The sniffers were  
7 sometimes good, sometimes bad. You could fake those if you wanted to by firing  
8 artillery a couple of days before hand. You weren't supposed to but that would leave  
9 enough residue that they would pick it up like there was people there.

10 RV: So you guys would create the artificial intelligence?

11 JM: Yes, if we had information for instance and the best information was actual  
12 sightings either by LRPs or American units. That was like if somebody actually saw  
13 something. That was the best. The next best you'd have to start sifting through was  
14 sometimes the information provided by the Special Forces camps. I went out every week  
15 or every two weeks to all the Special Force camps. We flew out there and talked to the  
16 people out there. Sometimes their information would be pretty good as far as the  
17 movements coming through the mountains heading toward the coastal plains. Then  
18 actual contact with the enemy was always a great one. Occasionally you'd get some  
19 helicopter pilot or somebody anything that was reported by an American was good. Then  
20 after that we had an intelligence unit, an MI unit that was attached to the brigade. They  
21 were kind of weird. None of them had any rank on. You never knew what they were and  
22 they ran around in jeeps and did stuff. Sometimes they had agents I think they actually  
23 paid and stuff out in the field. We'd get information from those and after a while you got  
24 to where you just sort through. The main thing as far as I was concerned that was good  
25 was actually someone taking this information if you'd start remembering it and plotting  
26 it. All of the sudden you'd start seeing a real pattern develop from different sources.  
27 You could figure something out. That's mostly how we worked it. The S-2 officer really  
28 didn't do much. Most of the work was done by Captain Simmons. He was actually a  
29 lawyer that had practiced for a while. He'd been in ROTC and they called him up. He  
30 and I, I sifted through a lot of the stuff. He would start looking for things and then pass

1 them on to me. I'd been out on the ground. We had a really good intelligence sergeant  
2 so we would just look for patterns on things.

3 RV: Such as troop movement?

4 JM: Troop movements or rumors that something's going on and that rumor  
5 would tie in with something from two or three days before. We got a lot of these little  
6 reports every day from the South Vietnamese that were just almost like hearsay.  
7 Sometimes we'd actually get Viet Cong propaganda that would actually tell you  
8 something if you sifted through all the information in them.

9 RV: I assume you had somebody who could translate for you?

10 JM: Yes, we had a translator. A lot of times the Viet Cong were printing things  
11 in English and leaving them back. They always would read some of that really bad  
12 Communist over blown English with all the descriptive stuff in it about how terrible we  
13 were, trying to get people to give up and how we were terrible to the people. We were  
14 really good and we should leave our leaders and join their cause.

15 RV: What kind of things would you look at or look for when you did the aerial  
16 reconnaissance?

17 JM: You looked for movement. If you flew an area often enough you looked to  
18 see if there was something that looked like it was different from before. You try different  
19 angles at different time of day to see if you were out in the mountains. You might be able  
20 to see some thatch from a hut that was back in the mountains some place. Just catch  
21 something. All of a sudden you'd pop up over a mountain and there was somebody  
22 moving down there and they hadn't had time to hear you and get out of the way. Come  
23 in low and see if you could catch some fire someplace. That was always a good one. I  
24 didn't like that. As I got shorter that one wasn't as nearly as much fun. The Air Force  
25 guys loved that one. They loved going down low and catching fire and then calling in  
26 fighters on them. I was out with a guy named Captain Jones. We were out in an O-2  
27 which was a little push-pull weird little airplane. I think a Huey would actually out climb  
28 them. We were in there and it was side-by-side seating. He was flying and I was out  
29 there and we went way out in the mountains and he was down way too low. We caught  
30 some fire from an AK-47. He called six sets of fighters in on this guy and dumped all  
31 their ordines because it made him mad because they fired at him. They were supposed

1 to be smart enough not to fire at a forward air controller plane. Then we flew back down  
2 there and the guy shot at us again. They missed him. They dropped bombs, they strafed.  
3 We came back down there and he fired at us again and it really made him mad. He said,  
4 'I'm going to go in really low and I'm going to shoot out my window an you shoot out  
5 your window.' That was totally against regulations. As we're coming back we're  
6 picking up brass and throwing it out the windows. We missed one piece. The funny  
7 thing is the third time we went back the guy didn't shoot at us. Now I'm sure we didn't  
8 hit him but he just decided it probably wasn't worth it anymore. So he got grounded for a  
9 month and had to go around in a jeep. He kept shooting out the window.

10 RV: How did they find out about that?

11 JM: There was a piece of brass still in the plane. Somebody saw it. I'm sure it  
12 wasn't one of the regular maintenance people that reported him.

13 RV: 'What's this casing doing in the airplane?'

14 JM: Yes. I remember one time—when you're first new you don't understand  
15 things. You used to drop white phosphorous grenades out of them to mark things. White  
16 phosphorous grenades that we used in the field were all timed. They were on like a four  
17 and a half second fuse. The ones they used out of the airplane were point detonating so  
18 when they hit the ground they went off. I didn't know the difference. I was out with this  
19 Army warrant officer. We were in an O-1 and we saw an NVA base camp out in the  
20 mountains. They were pretty sure it was. He wanted to mark it. So when we came  
21 around again we didn't have a spot. He said, 'Do you have any white phosphorous?' I  
22 said, 'Sure.' He said, 'When I tell you, you drop it.' So I'm holding this grenade out the  
23 window. He tells me to drop it. About four second later the thing explodes. I don't  
24 know if you know anything about a white phosphorous grenade. They actually throw  
25 white phosphorous further than you can throw, the average person can throw anyway.  
26 You have to throw it and run backwards. Of course this white phosphorous came  
27 shooting up past the airplane. He was just livid. I don't blame him. He didn't realize  
28 there were two kinds of white phosphorous grenades. Neither did I. I thought he knew  
29 what I was doing and he thought I knew. From then on I found the right kind. I didn't  
30 bring my own.

31 RV: How as it being shot at in an airplane?

1 JM: I hated it. It's absolutely scary. I mean the tracers look like they're  
2 basketballs. I read that someplace else but it's absolutely true. They start off being little  
3 pinpricks and they seem like they're getting bigger. There's no place. You can't duck.  
4 If you're not flying you're not even in control of which way you're going to dodge and  
5 weave. So I just did not like being shot at in an aircraft at all. I didn't like being shot at  
6 on the ground particularly. At least you always—after awhile after you'd been shot at a  
7 couple of times and you were walking you knew where the next divot was or the next tree.  
8 You always had an idea of what you were going to do if somebody opened up on you. In  
9 an airplane you're just sitting up there. It was not a good feeling. Being a helicopter  
10 driver wouldn't have been a bad job I think. It was not as bad as being a grunt. They talk  
11 about all this stuff, but it was amazing how many of the grunts wanted to be door gunners  
12 because it was so much safer. Even though you were up there and being shot at and it  
13 was really scary from a personal standpoint you knew it was going to be over pretty  
14 quick.

15 RV: You would fly every other day or so?

16 JM: A lot of times I flew every day, sometimes twice a day. We'd go out and fly  
17 for an hour or two hours and then come back in. I'd do paperwork or do something. But  
18 that was part of the deal. A lot of times I'd fly the fixed wing missions in the morning  
19 and they'd come down from Chu Lai and we'd fly. That wasn't everyday, but then fly  
20 the observation helicopters almost everyday. We'd go out and do some sector or do  
21 something. If we'd been getting some intelligence from someplace we'd go out and  
22 check it out just to see if we could see anything out in that area if anything looked weird.  
23 I did that the whole rest of the time I was in Vietnam. The last month or so I found a  
24 couple of LRPs that wanted to go out and thought that would be cool to do. So I let them  
25 do some of the critical missions. But some of the just routine stuff I let somebody else  
26 that had an eye about what was going on, on the ground. I was about the only person on  
27 the brigade staff that had ever been on the ground in the area of operations.

28 RV: Was that a problem?

29 JM: I think it's a problem. Of course I was only a 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant so what did I  
30 know. I mean they actually—some of them hadn't even been to Vietnam before. They  
31 actually thought the NVA acted like they would teach us in training and would be on the

1 high ground or up in the mountains rather than down where the streams were. They  
2 would take American military tactics and try to put them on to the North Vietnamese or  
3 the Viet Cong to some extent. That didn't work very well usually.

4 RV: Was it frustrating for you?

5 JM: A little bit. We had a brigade commander for a while that was very  
6 frustrating. He was getting his ticket punched. Why not name names? Colonel John  
7 Donaldson. I think he was a VMI. He was a grad from one of the military schools back  
8 east. He was an up and comer but he'd never done anything except a general's aid on  
9 some general's staff his whole career. Missed the Korean War and really I don't think he  
10 ever been a platoon leader. He'd always been assigned to some staffer in Asia. He was  
11 very interested in making general.

12 RV: How did you know he was a ticket puncher? This is just by his actions, his  
13 words?

14 JM: Yes. He looked like a soldier. He let everybody know that he was on the  
15 fast path. He was very impressed with himself. He spent a lot of time looking good.  
16 Every time some general officer would show up he would be there. For instance one  
17 time we were having a lot of action and General Cooksy who was the division assistant  
18 commander for maneuver showed up and wanted a briefing. I did the normal S-2  
19 briefing, the nightly briefing. That was part of my duty. So I was in there and I'd started  
20 the briefing and we were getting a lot of action. This was in the spring of '69. I think we  
21 were getting most of the action in Vietnam at that time. All of a sudden Colonel  
22 Donaldson who had been out where this combat was going on, somebody told him  
23 General Cooksy had landed and gone into the briefing tent. He comes running in and I'm  
24 giving them the staffing. He says, 'I'll take over now.' Then General Cooksy says, 'No I  
25 want to hear what this man has to say. This is his job I want to know what he thinks.'  
26 He said, 'Now where do you think the 22<sup>nd</sup> NVA is?' I said, 'Well on the map we're  
27 showing them here. That's coming from division.' We usually posted the maps by  
28 whatever division intelligence told us we were supposed to do. That's how Colonel  
29 Donaldson wanted it because those people up there knew what they were doing. They  
30 had all these people. He said, 'Where do you think they are?' I said, 'I think they're out  
31 here on the coast because we've been getting this information and stuff and we haven't

1 had any sightings.’ Colonel Donaldson just went nuts after the general left. As badly as I  
2 was ever reamed in the Army. The next day Charlie Company ran into the 22<sup>nd</sup> NVA  
3 regiment on the coast. But you know that was his deal. He was somebody was worried  
4 about kill ratios and the numbers. Every time when he came in one of the assistant A-1s  
5 would talk to him about what he was doing and try to write him up for some kind of a  
6 medal because it was important for him to look good when he came out of this command  
7 position. He did make general not too long after that. My understanding was he was the  
8 first general officer to have court marshal charges brought against him since the Civil  
9 War. One of his command and control chopper people turned him in for shooting  
10 civilians out of the Charlie Charlie. He was reduced back to his permanent grade of  
11 colonel I think and asked to resign. He was just a dink hunter. Sometimes you've got  
12 those people who are in helicopters and they run around looking for trouble you know.  
13 The next guy that came in was Colonel Thompson. He worked his way up from private  
14 and had the Medal of Honor from World War II and DFC from Korea and he was a great  
15 guy to work for. He understood what was going on and he understood soldiers. I really  
16 liked him. Some of the other people didn't like him as well. If he didn't think you were  
17 doing a good job he'd get you out of there. It hurt soldiers if you weren't competent. He  
18 also fired the assistant S-1 that was right hand to Colonel Donaldson all the time. The  
19 guy came in, didn't know anything about him, hadn't done his homework. About the  
20 third day he showed up asking what he'd been doing. He says, 'Why are you so  
21 interested?' The guy told him and, 'Isn't that infantry brass on your collar?' He said,  
22 'Yes, sir but I've always been an adjutant.' He said, 'Not any more.' He put him out on  
23 some god-forsaken firebase for a long time not doing anything important. Just got him  
24 out of there. I really liked him actually.

25 RV: What were your briefings like?

26 JM: We would go in every evening at a certain time unless something was  
27 coming on. We had a big map that took up a whole wall in this tent of the area of  
28 operations. Had a big piece of Plexiglas over it and these fluorescent lights coming along  
29 the sides so when you'd write on it with a grease pencil it would glow. At that time, that  
30 was high tech stuff. So I would go in, take all the days' reports. I'd report the weather  
31 anything about enemy forces that we knew, any contacts that had taken place and what

1 happened during the day and the night positions of the U.S. units. Then the S-3 would  
2 take over, the operations officer, and he would report what the plan was for the next day,  
3 what they expected the enemy to do. That kind of stuff.

4 RV: To whom were you reporting?

5 JM: I reported to the brigade commander, the brigade executive officer, the  
6 brigade staff and anybody else that might be I there like if they had a battalion  
7 commander or whoever was in there, any visitors that might be there. We just did this  
8 nightly briefing every night and then the S-4, the supply people whoever would come on  
9 then after that. So a daily operational report of what was going on for the next day. Then  
10 if we had some visitor pop in during the day, like I said, Colonel Donaldson we had  
11 visitor who usually like to do the reporting. But it was kind of funny because the major  
12 who was sometimes a lieutenant colonel who was the operations officer always did the  
13 briefings. But on the S-2 shop I always did the briefings because the major didn't like to  
14 do them. So that was kind of fun. You knew what was going on, you have to go over  
15 and check where everybody was. I really enjoyed my time in the intelligence shop. It  
16 was mentally challenging kind of thing. You got to do some stuff that was kind of fun.  
17 Doing B-52 strikes was always fun.

18 RV: Calling in the B-52s?

19 JM: Yes. We never would hit anything because about the time that we'd have to  
20 ask for him a long time in advance. In the DMZ and down around Saigon got first crack  
21 at them. Then when we'd actually get one the South Vietnamese, we had to go through  
22 the South Vietnamese and they'd usually let somebody know. We'd never get anything.  
23 A couple of times we got diverts because of weather or whatever. It wouldn't be  
24 weather. I don't know why they would divert them because I don't think weather would  
25 affect a B-52. Then we'd usually get something because they hadn't had time to warn the  
26 NVA to get out of the way. I mean they were big, long involved things. Once you got  
27 something the Air Force loved you. If you had some kind of bomb damage assessment  
28 where you could actually prove you hit something at that point on you were just golden  
29 with them. They just loved getting reports that they hit something.

30 RV: I imagine that was very frustrating, the fact that you had to go through the  
31 South Vietnamese.

1           JM: Yes it really was. I do think that we could have done a lot more with the  
2 airpower if we wouldn't have had to do that. We used to get where we'd have a  
3 communications detachment there. They were all inside this little wire compound inside  
4 the compound. They were tied in with NSA somehow. They couldn't talk about what  
5 they did. We'd have this lieutenant that would come in every day and he'd mark on our  
6 brigade intelligence map. Then we'd put them on the briefing map, these little circles  
7 with an 'x' in it. It would say 'URI' for usually reliable intelligence. Of course you  
8 knew they were radio intercepts. Sometimes they'd actually even identify the unit with  
9 them. So if they thought it was a headquarters and they had reason to believe that so  
10 you'd get these clusters of these URIs. That was usually pretty good information for two  
11 or three days. All of a sudden you'd get these intercepts from the same area that  
12 something was there. About the time we'd get a bomb mission set up for the next day or  
13 something all of a sudden you'd see these things start moving out of the boxes. So  
14 obviously somebody was telling them. We had to go through the 1<sup>st</sup> division  
15 headquarters at Quang Ngai to have anything approved.

16           RV: Was there any attempt to not go through the Vietnamese?

17           JM: We weren't allowed to do that. It's like the R&B area there along the  
18 highway. If you got fired at out of there you were supposed to get permission to fire  
19 back. Sometimes you did and sometimes you just couldn't wait. You'd get written up  
20 and they'd send you this little thing you shouldn't have done that. Then they'd usually  
21 take a unit that had done that and they'd move them out in the mountains or something  
22 for a while, they'd punish you. Although I'm not sure it's punishment. It certainly was a  
23 rule. Each one had it's own peculiarities about what was tougher about operating in that  
24 area. Like in the rear you actually felt kind of guilty, almost like you'd abandoned  
25 people. We used to hate all the people in the rear when we were in the field call them  
26 REMFs and different things. In the R-1 you feel really bad about it. But the other thing  
27 that you feel is that you probably are going to make it home. I had thirty-five men in my  
28 platoon when I first got there. In the four months I was in the field we had three men  
29 killed and twenty-seven wounded so your chances at that time of getting out in one piece  
30 weren't real good if you were a line unit. I always wondered when they talk about  
31 casualty figures if anybody ever did a figure on the line units because they always act like

1 Vietnam was all one deal. You weren't safe in the rear. The rear was the best place in  
2 the world to be. You know we'd have problems. We couldn't get supplies and the rear  
3 was just over running with poncho liners and they would send guys out to the field with  
4 blankets instead of poncho liners. There was just a lot of resentment by the field troops.  
5 I think that's probably the case in every war. I don't think Vietnam was unique in that. It  
6 certainly went on there. So after you get back to the rear we had a little tiny officers club  
7 a little tent kit thing with an awning and a patio. They'd have steaks up there sometime.  
8 We'd have little movies and stuff. You go up there and have a couple of beers, watch a  
9 movie and then go back to work some more if you were in the intelligence shop because  
10 there was always something to do and then go to bed.

11 RV: What were your quarters like?

12 JM: We had tent kits which had wooden floors that were raised up off the ground  
13 about half way up they'd be wood and then they'd be screening wire above that. Then  
14 they'd have canvas tops in the tent. They're actually the size of a GP large or a GP small  
15 or something. The one I lived in was divided off. I think it was the GP large and there  
16 was like five or six guys in there. There was a little tiny corridor down the middle of it.  
17 It had little half walls and screens up. You had a little kit and a cot and a locker in there.  
18 You didn't spend a whole lot of time there. It was pretty nice and you could get hot when  
19 it got warm, they'd be pretty warm. They were open. Then you'd have sand bags usually  
20 half way up to above where you were sleeping.

21 RV: Around the outside?

22 JM: Around the outside, right. Then of course the TOCs and some of those  
23 places were bunkered in pretty good, the tactile operations centers. Sometimes they were  
24 dug underground and you would see all kinds of stuff over the top of them. Then there  
25 were bunkers spread throughout the living area so you could run down. You usually dug  
26 down in to the ground and were all covered with sandbags and stuff. So you could run in  
27 there when we were getting rocket and mortar attacks.

28 RV: Tell me about that. How often did that happen?

29 JM: When I first got there in December I bet we went—we'd go weeks without  
30 getting around it into the perimeter. That was a big camp. So sometimes somebody  
31 would get one way up to the other end. Then in Tet '69 we started getting hit pretty

1 often. As I said we were taking a lot of the casualties for the whole country, like from  
2 about March. There was a period in '69 where we were just getting hit really hard. The  
3 NVA came out really hard onto the coastal plain really active. We went, I think it was in  
4 March right after Tet of '69 started. We were getting hit in the daytime and at night.  
5 We'd take a hundred and forty or a hundred and fifty rockets a night sometimes. Then it  
6 would let off for a while. Then it started up again like in May or so. We'd start more  
7 mortar fire than rockets. We'd kind of take care of the rockets. We had kind of a coup  
8 during that time. One of the outfits ambushed an NVA patrol and they brought—there  
9 was a guy with them that had a bunch of paper and a map. I think I still have the map. I  
10 brought it home with me. I had an NVA map of Quang Ngai Province. There were all  
11 these places marked on it. Not on the map itself but on an overlay on it. Then he had a  
12 whole bunch of information on there. It turns out we got it translated pretty fast. They  
13 were the sights for the rocket launchings that were coming in. It turned out he was the  
14 intelligence officer for one of the regiments for the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> NVA division. So we pre-  
15 plotted these places with artillery. When they lit them off all of a sudden we hit them all  
16 and got all kinds of stuff from that. Just lucky secondary explosions going off and all  
17 kinds of things. That was just a sweet deal. That didn't happen. You didn't luck out like  
18 that very often.

19 RV: What was it like being wakened up in the middle of the night by mortar  
20 attacks, rocket attacks?

21 JM: Pretty much like getting shot at in the field. You get to where you can hear  
22 things, you can hear whether it's friendly fire incoming or outgoing. So basically it'd be  
23 real scary to be asleep there. The next thing you know you'd be on the floor moving.  
24 Just rolled out of bed and took off. People that had been in the rear the whole time  
25 weren't usually quite that good. They'd sit up or jump out of bed or something. You  
26 could tell the people who had been in the field compared to the people that had been in  
27 the rear. I had a friend came down when we were having some trouble down there came  
28 down from Camp Eagle, the 101<sup>st</sup> which I guess was a huge place. He couldn't sleep all  
29 night. He was down there for about four days because there was out-going artillery all  
30 the time and people shooting from the perimeter. I was able to sleep right through that  
31 stuff. We were there about the third night and this guy looked really bad. Big bags under

1 his eyes and stuff because he can't sleep. About the third night we were there an AK-47  
2 started up out in the perimeter. They had a little probe out there. I was out of bed and  
3 moving. By this time the guy was so tired he was just sleeping. I had to pull him out and  
4 get him going. He couldn't believe that you could tell the different while you were  
5 asleep.

6 RV: What kind of trouble was going on? You said he came down?

7 JM: They were probing the perimeter. When I said there was trouble we were  
8 getting rocketed and stuff at night. So they were shooting a lot of H&I, harassment and  
9 interdiction missions with the artillery and things. We had a colonel's mess. The food  
10 was great there. It was air-conditioned. That was nice. Things in the rear were fairly  
11 livable other than the fact that you couldn't go anywhere. Had a little PX. They had a  
12 barbershop. The Koreans ran everything. They had some kind of a concession from the  
13 U.S. government as part of the two Korean divisions down to run the concessions of all  
14 these places. Then all the brigade sized spaces and everything the Koreans ran the little  
15 PXs and the barbershops and all that stuff. There was actually Korean nationals in there  
16 doing all that work. As I was leaving I noticed there in Duc Pho and at LZ Bravo back in  
17 between one of the little ridges on this big mountains they were putting up this cement  
18 block building which was the only one that I'd seen. I was asking somebody what was  
19 going on. The Koreans had gotten a concession to put a steam bath in. One of the other  
20 things that got weird, it just seemed like it got weird. As I was leaving it just seemed like  
21 it was weird. They brought in some guys from the Atlantic and Pacific Engineering  
22 Company to teach the Vietnamese how to fight fires. They were supposed to take over  
23 the firefighting functions in our brigade base camp. They wanted these Vietnamese to be  
24 in there at night. We had a huge fight whether we were going to let the Vietnamese be in  
25 there. There were three of them. One of them was about a twenty-year-old guy and he  
26 was drawing all kinds of money and nobody could figure out why he wasn't drafted. He  
27 was like 4-F or something. He was over there with the rest of us working the radio  
28 making a ton of money. Those guys were not real well accepted. Those guys finally told  
29 them at three o'clock they all had to leave. Then they called MACV because they  
30 couldn't do their contracts and stuff. Colonel Thompson had actually served in  
31 Abraham's battalion in World War II. Got a direct commission while he was with him.

1 They were buddies so he just called Creighton Abrams and said, 'Look I'm not letting  
2 these guys on my brigade.' He said, 'You're the commander. You do what you want.' It  
3 was pretty nice having somebody that had contacts like that. He'd pick up the phone  
4 very once in a while when things were going really bad and we weren't getting any  
5 support from the South Vietnamese there. He'd pick up the phone and call General  
6 Abrams and he'd come out of a meeting or whatever if he called. It was kind of an  
7 interesting situation. He didn't do that often. You just don't do that. Actually the whole  
8 chain of command showed up at Duc Pho one time while Colonel Thompson was there  
9 because Creighton Abrams came when we were having all this contact. All of a sudden  
10 he showed up. I've got a picture of him walking out of the briefing room. The  
11 commander and the vice commander, the division commander and all these guys right in  
12 a row come down.

13 RV: John, you want to go ahead and stop for today?

14 JM: That'd be great. That'd be fine.

**Interview with John McNown**  
**Session 5 of 5**  
**January 30, 2004**

1           Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone and I'm continuing my oral history  
2 interview with Mr. John McNown Jr. Today is January 30, 2004. It's about 8:33 AM  
3 Central Standard Time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and John, you are in Mission, Kansas.  
4 Let's pick up where we left off a couple days ago, John. We were talking about your  
5 time back at Brigade. I had a couple questions about your intelligence gathering I wanted  
6 to clarify or delve into a little bit deeper. When you went out on these recon missions,  
7 what was your judgment of how good the NVA and the Viet Cong were of hiding from  
8 you and disguising themselves and actually evading the intelligence gathering process?

9           John McNown: I thought they were very good for the most part. It was very  
10 difficult to find, especially from the air to see where their camps were back in the  
11 mountains. I mean really did a great job of finding places back in the trees and streams  
12 that were covered. So when they were going down to get water you wouldn't see them  
13 moving. They had great light discipline. You just never saw fires and things. Then  
14 when you would run into them if they were prepared they were very difficult to find and  
15 very difficult to hide. Their main problem was they didn't have very good  
16 communications. I know that we would find things. After our engagements at Ha Than  
17 one of the units found a big sand table they had made that everything was almost in  
18 proportion. They'd obviously been going over the attack on the Special Forces Camp.  
19 Once they started it appeared they had no way to modify or alter the plan. When one part  
20 of it wasn't going well the rest of them would continue with whatever the original plan  
21 was. Of course that was often their undoing. But they were very good at hiding their  
22 camps and their movements. They did a lot of their movements at night with good light  
23 discipline most of the time. They had the same problems we did. The soldiers would  
24 talk when they were moving through the jungle and stuff. They had a tendency to use  
25 trails just like we did. The NVA were in some ways more similar to the U.S. Forces.  
26 Even though they may have been down there for along time it was still not their home  
27 ground necessarily. Especially when they would come out in the coastal plain they were  
28 having to rely on either maps or guides to get them where they were going. They had  
29 some of the same problems we did without the technological advantages. The whole

1 business, especially during Quang Ngai, of trying to gather intelligence is once again  
2 from what I've read since and my experience at the time is that population was  
3 sympathetic to the North Vietnamese, therefore we just didn't get very good intelligence  
4 often on the people. It was really difficult to pin down what was happening around us  
5 sometimes.

6 RV: How much of an advantage do you think they actually had when they're in  
7 Vietnam in their own backyard per se as a lot of people talk about that. It was a huge  
8 disadvantage for us. You were there gathering intelligence. You were there on the  
9 ground commanding troops. How much of an advantage do you think they actually had?

10 JM: I think they're primary advantage was our lack of intelligence about what  
11 they were doing. Of course it doesn't seem to have improved much in the last thirty  
12 years and reading in the papers. I don't think they had a huge advantage as far as terrain.  
13 Some of those things I read in books and things really wasn't my experience. I think  
14 their main advantage was probably in morale and just the sense that we were invaders  
15 and the advantage that probably gives you as far as the reason you're over sacrificing for  
16 something. Then the population, the local population certainly in Quang Ngai was really  
17 good at putting out booby traps and sniping. They had, as far as that part of the equation  
18 goes, they had a big advantage over us because they did know the ground. They  
19 normally initiated the attacks. With the NVA where we were we often ended up in sort  
20 of meeting engagements. At that point really nobody has an advantage. They had an  
21 advantage primarily if we would walk into one of their pre-prepared positions. Then if  
22 they would do that to us, we had a huge advantage. I really didn't feel that the NVA had  
23 a big advantage as far as fighting on their home ground because they weren't. They were  
24 from the north, most of them. By the time I got there the Viet Cong—I got there after Tet  
25 of '69. I mean '68. The Viet Cong really weren't as big. Their forces had been pretty  
26 much decimated in early '68 and mid '68 so we ran into Viet Cong very seldom. Most of  
27 what we ran into there were very small units, four or five or six people, booby traps and  
28 snipers a lot of that. As far as actual fighting goes I didn't think the NVA had a big  
29 advantage over us. I do think they were better informed about our movements than we  
30 were about theirs.

31 RV: John, were you ever wounded?

1 JM: Twice.

2 RV: I think we touched on that a little bit. How did you deal with death on the  
3 battlefield in general and being in that environment for that amount of time?

4 JM: I think in my case I mostly vacuumed it. You don't really do that but you do  
5 it as much as you can I think. I think that I pretty much—once somebody was dead and  
6 we put them off on the chopper I didn't think about it much, especially when I was out in  
7 the field. You took care of them, you got them out of there and then you didn't think  
8 about it. To me, that was how I got through the deal. I didn't dwell on looking at people  
9 that were hit and stuff. We turned them over to the medic and went to do something else.  
10 I guess everybody deals with that differently. In retrospect I think about the two or three  
11 incidents we had where we had some contact for a while with dead people. I think those  
12 probably bother me as much as where we had to watch over bodies for a while and  
13 things. Suddenly you were around there for a while. I remember those things I think  
14 vividly, but who know whether it's vividly or not. Your memories change as they have  
15 proven more and more. Sometimes what I think happened may not be what happened.  
16 You get that in with movies you've seen. I don't think I have but I do know we had  
17 several cases where we were in some pretty intense combat and I frankly only kind of  
18 flashingly remember seeing anybody hit or wounded. A lot of times you don't actually  
19 see them because you're so busy you almost have tunnel vision looking through your  
20 front or wherever you're looking for trying to preserve yourself and give orders. When  
21 people get hit, it's just sort of out of the corner of your eye and you're still doing  
22 something different. I would think somebody like a medic—I never had a really close  
23 personal friend that was hit when I was there. I had people that were hit that were my  
24 people and I was responsible for them. To this day I don't feel good about that. You  
25 always think about sometimes you play the tape recorder over and think could I have  
26 done something differently? I do know people that had friends they shared a foxhole  
27 with or something for six months and all of a sudden they would get taken out. That was  
28 a really traumatic thing for those people. I've seen that happen to guys. Just pretty much  
29 break down when somebody got hit. Usually if you were in a firefight you don't see that.  
30 Usually from a booby trap or a sniper where you have just an isolated thing. All of a  
31 sudden people have time to sit there and think about it or mourn or there's something

1 going on. I think that may be different for everybody. I was fortunate enough that the  
2 two times I was hit neither time was serious enough that I would have spent any time in  
3 the hospital or anything. All it did was make me angry, like getting hit in the nose with a  
4 football field or something. I mean it was more serious than that but the same kind of  
5 reaction. Just think that you feel just kind of angry. Somebody hurt you and you weren't  
6 doing anything to them. What's the deal?

7 RV: When you think back to your time in the field, when you think about brave  
8 incidents or bravery in general what do you see? What do you feel?

9 JM: I think there was a great quote. I think it may have been fellow Major  
10 Winters in *Band of Brothers* at the end of the show where they were interviewing several  
11 of them. He said one of his grandchildren asked him if he had been a hero. He said, 'I  
12 served with a company of heroes.' I think that's probably how most people that were in a  
13 good unit feel. I think one of the things over the year is I felt that we don't do a good job  
14 in the American Army. I don't think we recognize that fact enough. We sometimes give  
15 out valor awards to people who may or may not deserve them. A lot of private and  
16 corporals and people because of the individual actions and nobody sees them there's not  
17 time, don't get written up. Often officers have a chance to get written up and non-coms  
18 more than PFCs or Spec-4s who probably do a lot of the work as far as going above and  
19 beyond. I do know in our own company we used to never write people up for bringing  
20 back under fire. I mean that was expected. I got out of the field and found out that  
21 people got written up for that. I felt bad that we didn't do it. That was just expected. If  
22 somebody was hit we expected somebody to go out. We put out a cover fire and  
23 somebody had to go out and get them. That was just what you did. When I got back and  
24 found out that people were getting Silver Stars and things for that I was incredulous. In  
25 the Alpha Company that was just your job. I know we've had several men I know we  
26 should have written up for valor awards and didn't. I always kind of reconciled that after  
27 the fact with the fellow I told you, Colonel Thompson had the Medal of Honor and the  
28 DFC and had risen up through the ranks. He said to me one time, the only thing that  
29 matters is whether somebody's wearing a combat infantryman's badge. So many people  
30 don't get recognized for what they do. Anybody that's wearing a CIB, the reason it goes  
31 above the Medal of Honor and every other award is because it recognizes the fact that

1 infantrymen don't get the recognition they should get. That's why that's sitting above  
2 everything else. If you see somebody with a combat infantryman's badge than that's  
3 really all that matters. Of course in some was it's not. But certainly the people I know  
4 with the Medal of Honor did things that were just incredibly brave. I do think that as far  
5 as valor awards go there are too many given to people that may not deserve them. There  
6 are not enough given to the ones who might have.

7 RV: Did you know the exact date you were leaving?

8 JM: Yes, I knew pretty close. I don't know if I knew to the day. I had a date in  
9 mind that I thought I was leaving. I think I ended up leaving a day or so earlier than that.  
10 A lot of it had to do with when you left the States and different things. I got a two week  
11 drop so I spent eleven months and two weeks in Vietnam because I'd been to Panama  
12 before going to Vietnam, which was sort of an interesting thing. It shows if your parents  
13 have been in the Service you know how to manipulate the system even though I hadn't  
14 really gone directly from Panama to Vietnam, which was what the rule had been written  
15 for. If you left there and then left Panama and went to Vietnam you got this two-week  
16 drop. I was on orders to go to Vietnam when I went to Panama. Even though I had my  
17 two and a half weeks of leave before I went to Panama and then almost a month after I  
18 came home, it still counted on my time because I was on orders to have left one post and  
19 report to Vietnam. So I ended up knowing within a day or two when I was going to go.  
20 Most people did that.

21 RV: Can you tell me about those last few days, that last week you were in  
22 country?

23 JM: Yes, about the last two weeks I was there I started sleeping in a bunker.  
24 We'd been getting shelled in June and I left in the middle of July. There was a bunker  
25 right outside the S-2 shop at Duc Pho there. I got myself a fan and a cot and I just kind of  
26 moved into this bunker because we were getting shelled and stuff often enough I thought,  
27 'You know I'm really close.' As you got to where you could see and about the last  
28 month I flew VR missions as infrequently as possible. We'd get one of the LRPs or  
29 somebody that wanted to go out and fly around. Everybody loved flying in helicopters if  
30 you weren't going in on combat assault. You could get somebody to go out and do the  
31 mission for you. They thought it was really cool to be able to go up there and fly around

1 and look for stuff. There were all these people and usually people from our long-range  
2 patrol from the squad leaders to the platoon leader I'd have do that for me. I just sat there  
3 waiting to get on a helicopter, waiting to get out of there because that was my last. The  
4 last two weeks I really got pretty nervous. Then I remember fellows when I was in the  
5 field that were getting short. They kept wating someway they could get a job in the rear  
6 for the last month or so. So I appreciated that a lot more as I got short. You just think, 'I  
7 got through this and all I've got is another two weeks and I'm out of here.'

8 RV: Were the men around you supportive of your actions to kind of lay low?

9 JM: I did my job and everything. Instead of sleeping in my tent at night, I  
10 decided I was going to go down and sleep in the bunker. Everybody thought that was just  
11 reasonable. When people got short they just started findings ways not to not do their job  
12 but just to try to avoid danger as much as they could. I don't know of they were  
13 supportive or not. But it was just such a common thing. I don't think anybody though  
14 anything about it. They just thought well they're getting short and good for them.  
15 Everybody was really happy. When somebody got a job out of the field and you were in  
16 the rifle company everybody shook hands with him or was really happy for him. You  
17 didn't see any resentment from the people in the field on people going to the rear that had  
18 been in the field. They resented the people in the rear, but they thought it was wonderful  
19 that something happened as long as it was a good person. Occasionally you wanted  
20 somebody out of there because they weren't very good in the field. It was really kind of  
21 a joyful thing for somebody to make it out. It was pretty much that way even in the rear  
22 areas when people were going home, people were just happy for them. Of course like I  
23 say by '69 we knew we ere going to pull out eventually. Had a funny experience as I was  
24 going home. I picked up and as a matter of fact I don't even remember getting on the  
25 airplane once I got to Da Nang. I remember landing in C-TAC but I'm not even sure I  
26 remember taking off from Vietnam. But when I was flying up to Chu Lai from Duc Pho  
27 I got up just north of Quang Ngai City. We were flying out and a lot of times the VR  
28 didn't take us up north. We usually went out west because all the action was south of the  
29 Song Tri Cook River. That was our area and that was mostly where I flew. I hadn't been  
30 up north up Quang Ngai City for a couple months and I got up there and Highway One  
31 was paved. I couldn't believe it. I was just incredulous that they had paved the highway

1 because half of what we did was trying to keep that road open. It was dirt. I found out  
2 that I guess coming through the 11<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade area of operations that was one of  
3 the last pieces of the road that got paved they'd been paving from the south and paving  
4 coming down from the DMZ because there NVA and Viet Cong were so active in Quang  
5 Ngai. One of the things they kept trying to do was blow the bridges and keep the roads  
6 closed, keep Highway One closed. It had never occurred to me that you could pave it. It  
7 just didn't occur to me. I thought, 'Well maybe we're doing better than I thought we  
8 were.' That was one of my last thoughts as I was leaving was, 'They've paved the road.'  
9 That seemed like progress. Well it turned out it wasn't. It was just an incredulous thing  
10 to me that the road was paved.

11 RV: What was that flight home like?

12 JM: I'm sure it was long. I don't remember much. I remember people both on  
13 my R&R flight to Australia and coming out of Da Nang going home people cheered  
14 when the plane lifted off. I remember we had pretty decent food. It's just a really long  
15 flight. I remember landing at C-TAC. Like I said that's the main thing I remember. I  
16 remember being in a helicopter, seeing the road paved and I don't remember the rest of  
17 the trip. It's funny because I remember the trip over but I don't remember going home. I  
18 don't know how we got there. I don't know if we landed in Japan. I don't have a clue. I  
19 remember landing in C-TAC and it was night, probably one in the morning. It seemed  
20 like it was freezing. It was in July and it was probably in the sixties. I was just miserably  
21 cold. We had to wait for a bus. They had a bus that was going to take everybody down.  
22 But if you were an officer you could take a taxicab. So me and three other lieutenants got  
23 a cab and we went down. It turned out that was a mistake because we didn't know where  
24 we were going. We just wanted out of there. So we went down to Ft. Louis and we got  
25 there and couldn't find anybody that knew anything and wandered around freezing for a  
26 while. We finally saw a big line of troops going into some barracks and the lights were  
27 on and we could see they were barracks. It looked like transient barracks. So I walked  
28 up to the front of this line and I thought, 'I'll just get me a bunk here and find out where  
29 I'm suppose to go in the morning.' I just wanted to get some sleep. There was a sergeant  
30 first class that was sitting down. He was taking people's names and assigning bunks. I  
31 remember I went up and said, 'Pardon me, Sergeant.' He just looked up at me and said,

1 'Get back in line.' Just started giving me a hard time. I said, 'No, I'm a lieutenant'. He  
2 said, 'I don't care who you are. Get back in the line.' Of course I didn't feel like putting  
3 up with that. It was sort of embarrassing but we pretty much lost the guy. We stood him  
4 and reamed him out right in front of all these guys that were going over to Vietnam. I  
5 think they were very pleased about it because he wasn't being very nice to guys who  
6 were coming through the barracks there either. He finally told us where the transient  
7 BOQ place was. We went over and got a place to sleep then. I don't think he wanted us  
8 around anymore. Then we took care of our business to get blustered though and on our  
9 way home the next day.

10 RV: What was it like going home? Did you have any problems at the airports?

11 JM: No, actually I went up to the C-TAC Airport and I had on my khakis and  
12 stuff so I could get a military space available deal. I walked in and I was going to St.  
13 Louis. I'm pretty sure it was Continental that I flew home on. The people behind the  
14 desk were just as nice as they could be. They stuck me in first class. Gave me a space  
15 available ticket and then put me in first class. They were just awfully nice. The people  
16 on the airplane were nice. I got home and my folks and my fiancé met me at the airport  
17 there in St. Louis. I went home and went back to life for a while.

18 RV: What was that like? Was it difficult to transition back to life in the States?  
19 You stayed in the military though right?

20 JM: For another two years I did something weird. I actually got out because my  
21 fiancé didn't think she wanted to do that. I went to grad school for a semester and was  
22 substitute teaching and she was a teacher. I got married three weeks after I got home. I  
23 didn't have a clue what I wanted to do. I didn't dislike the Army. I didn't want to stay in  
24 the infantry. I really liked my job in military intelligence. I really enjoyed doing that.  
25 All of a sudden I got assigned to a reserve outfit. I was the only person that had been to  
26 Vietnam with combat experience that I knew got assigned to a reserve outfit. It was  
27 some transportation company. I had absolutely no desire to be a weekend warrior,  
28 especially in a transportation outfit. So I went down and decided to go back in and get  
29 my other two years in at least and maybe stay in so that I wouldn't have any reserve  
30 obligation. Then if I decided I wanted to stay in, I could. I really didn't have an idea of  
31 what I wanted to do. When I'd gone through school what I wanted to do was be in the

1 Army. After two years I wasn't sure about that. I didn't have another idea about what I  
2 wanted to do. So I went down and that was a hassle. It turned out they turned my  
3 records. I was trying to find my records admit was really difficult to find them because  
4 they were sort of in transition. They finally got it all straightened out and I went back in  
5 and was assigned to Ft. Hood Texas in April of '70 and stayed in for another two years.  
6 After two more years I decided I just can't put up with this. I couldn't get out of the  
7 infantry and they took me to the DMZ and I was with the 2<sup>nd</sup> infantry division in Korea  
8 for thirteen months as a captain. That was just a really bad experience.

9 RV: Why?

10 JM: Drugs were very bad. I got there about two weeks after they sent the 7<sup>th</sup>  
11 infantry division home. The 2<sup>nd</sup> infantry division had come back of the Z, actually of the  
12 Z. We were at Camp Casey, which is where the 2<sup>nd</sup> infantry division still is. That's  
13 probably ten or fifteen miles south of the DMZ. We were actually at Camp Hovey. I was  
14 in the second brigade which was about two miles away but they're all behind one big  
15 place there. The main reasons I think they brought the American troops back off the Z as  
16 far as I could tell was drugs were such a problem. They were having fraggings and  
17 shootings almost on a daily basis up there. I think the reason they brought them back was  
18 to get the live ammunition out of the hands of the troops. The discipline was just really  
19 poor there. The mission was just sitting there waiting and we'd have MIGs fly over the  
20 top of the camp every once in a while. They'd just come streaking down to see if they  
21 could do it. Of course they could and that made you feel really good because there was  
22 only one road out. It was cold, terribly cold in the winter. You couldn't go to the field  
23 very much because there wasn't very many places to maneuver so you were basically  
24 running a garrison in place where there was nothing for the troops to do after they got off  
25 but get in trouble. We had just a lot of problems. I ended up being the headquarters  
26 commandant for the brigade. That was not a job I would have ever wanted. I got it sort  
27 of by accident. The brigade commander decided that he liked me. The Koreans had  
28 taken over when I was down. One of the rifle battalions had taken over the supply area  
29 for the division and were wanting higher wages and were kind of doing a set in and  
30 threatening to burn the place and refusing to leave. So they finally decide they had to  
31 call. The MPs could handle it and they decided they wanted to call infantry troops in to

1 drive them out. So I was the operations officer for this battalion at the time. They sent  
2 me over first to find out what we were going to have to do. The brigade commander was  
3 over there and he had been the chief of staff for the division before he'd taken over our  
4 brigade. He knew some of these people and wanted to go in and talk to them. He said,  
5 'Somebody go in with me.' I said, 'Sure, I'll go in if you're going in.' Nobody else  
6 volunteered and so we went in and he actually talked them out. I think maybe what  
7 persuaded them was the trucks had started piling up with the troops in it. The next day I  
8 get a call from him and he wants me to come up to brigade headquarters and hadn't gone  
9 through my battalion commander or anything. He was another guy that had worked his  
10 way up through the ranks. He'd relieved his headquarters company commandant and put  
11 me in charge. So all of a sudden I had like three hundred in the headquarters company,  
12 the brigade. They were all drivers and clerks. I had no experience with dealing with  
13 people like that. It was okay as long as the 1<sup>st</sup> colonel was there. Then we got a 2<sup>nd</sup>  
14 colonel in that thought he was Mr. NATO. He used to tell us at the Pentagon he was  
15 known as 'Mr. NATO.' We finally explained to him that we didn't care. There was  
16 nothing going on in Europe. A bunch of the captains did and that was the end of the  
17 world. It was not a good experience for me anyway. Then I called so I decided I was  
18 getting out. I had the assistant division commander call me over and was going to give  
19 me a regular commission because I had worked for him at Ft. Carson and he remembered  
20 me. I told him, 'They're going to end me back to Vietnam next year as an advisor.' I  
21 had checked with some people to see what would happen. I said, 'I can't get a branch  
22 transfer and I can't go back to Vietnam as an advisor.' I said, 'There's no way. It's just  
23 time for me to move on to something else.' Korea turned out to be sort of a good thing  
24 for me because it made up my mind about what I wanted to do. So then I came back and  
25 got in the yearbooks by accident. They were looking for people with operations  
26 experience in the Army. They were on a hire vet kick in the company I recently went to  
27 work for. So I got a job. That way was a good thing. The Army got me a house. So that  
28 was good.

29 RV: Did you talk about your Vietnam experience much? Did people ask you  
30 about it when you first came home and then over the next few years?

1 JM: Actually nobody talked about it very much. Occasionally somebody would  
2 ask something or say something. Of course even with people that were there in different  
3 places, my thought is that it was probably that way for every war. It's really good to talk  
4 to the people in your company in your group because you're at the same place. For  
5 instance over in the 3/1 it might have been at Ha Than the same time we were that know  
6 something. I think Vietnam was sort of a strange war. It was different depending on the  
7 area you operated in. The war in the delta was completely different from where we were.  
8 If you were up in the central highlands the whole time it was different. We were  
9 bouncing back and forth between the coastal plains and the mountains. I think that in  
10 talking to people it seemed like a lot of people operated in the same kind of terrain most  
11 of their tour so there wasn't really anybody to talk to and you're busy. You just got  
12 married and you've got all these things you're doing. I used to wonder. I only had  
13 contact a couple of times with people from the company. It was really hard to know what  
14 happened to everybody because everybody was going home and you don't necessarily  
15 remember where they were from or anything. I had one of the fellows that had been one  
16 of my squad leader showed up in 1974 in Topeka, Kansas when I lived there. Called me  
17 out of the blue and came by. He was a guy that was a carpet layer and he decided that he  
18 was going to wander around the country and lay carpet. He remembered where my folks  
19 lived. He called them and got a hold of them so he came out and he spent three or four  
20 days at my house and then got an apartment and stayed around for a month or so and  
21 decided he didn't like Topeka that much and went off someplace else where he knew  
22 somebody was. Then I was actually eating lunch with some clients in a restaurant over  
23 there in the mid seventies and I looked up and I kept seeing this guy. I thought, 'Man he  
24 looks familiar.' I finally decided he looked like somebody on a television show. As he  
25 walked out I realized it was Doug Faulk, one of the other platoon leaders but his hair was  
26 longer and he was in a suit and everything. So I ran out and I had missed him. I'd  
27 walked behind him several times so I actually recognized him from his body, from his  
28 walk. So I saw his license plate and he was from a county south of Topeka there. So I  
29 called the sheriff and I told him what the deal was and he said, 'Well I can't give you the  
30 number but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go out and see him and you give me your  
31 number.' So he called and we got together a few times and then he ended up moving

1 someplace else. But other than that I didn't really have any contact with anybody until  
2 probably the late eighties. I had a list of people that I wondered what happened to them.  
3 I wasn't sure what all they were involved in. It wasn't a good way to look for people  
4 then. But anyway in the late eighties in the Americal division in the veterans association  
5 had a meeting in Topeka because at that time the guy that did the newsletter was from  
6 there and he volunteered to do it. Of course not a whole lot of people showed up. I saw  
7 something in the paper. I didn't even know they had an organization. I went over for the  
8 banquet the first night and there wasn't anybody there I knew. There might have been a  
9 hundred and fifty people there was all maybe. Nobody I knew. There actually was a  
10 battalion commander from the 3/1 and his operations officer were there. I sort of had met  
11 them and I knew who they were. I got to looking through the rolls and there were two  
12 names there from my platoon, one guy named Damon Bassington who was wounded in  
13 October and we never saw him again. But it was an easy name to remember. There can't  
14 be too many Damon Bassingtons in the Americal division. So I was able to get in touch  
15 with him and a guy named Louie Rios who I thought was dead. I looked for his name on  
16 the Wall I don't know how many times. I was able to get in touch with him. From there  
17 we started picking up people. Since probably about '87 or '88 I've been looking for  
18 people then I've got other people looking for people. Then with the Internet directories  
19 coming online we've been able to do a lot better. People would remember, 'Okay, so and  
20 so I think he was from Macomb, Mississippi or something.' So as we would get  
21 information together we'd start looking for people. That's been a very rewarding thing. I  
22 think we now have addresses for about three hundred and ninety guys. We had gotten  
23 people to send us orders so we could kind of put a roster together. The Army won't help  
24 you do that. I think we had a list of about nine hundred people that either served in or  
25 were attached to the company while we were in Vietnam. We've found about sixty of  
26 them that have died since we came home. Of course we had seventy-seven killed in  
27 action in the four years we were over there. We have addresses for about three hundred  
28 and ninety. So we've managed to track down over half of them so far. That's pretty  
29 good. It's amazing when you think about it. I used to tell people I bet there'd been a  
30 thousand people in the company and they just didn't think that was possible. There's

1 only a hundred and fifty-six men on the table of organization. I think someday we will  
2 have close to a thousand who served in the four years that we were over there.

3 RV: John, I need to stop for a minute and change out this mini-disk. John, how  
4 much did you keep up with the war effort when you came home and then over the years?

5 JM: I watched the news. I didn't join. I'm not a joiner. I just don't join things. I  
6 don't know, even in college I wasn't much of a joiner. So that's just not my thing that I  
7 do. I did keep up with the war news. I watched it because by the time I came home I  
8 thought—I don't know if I mentioned this but I actually voted on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September  
9 1968 in a foxhole at Ha Than. I had my absentee ballot and I remember at the time  
10 Humphrey, I come from a family that's very democratic. At the time Humphrey hadn't  
11 broken off from Johnson and Nixon said he had a plan. So I remember voting for Nixon  
12 because I thought he was going to get us out of there. Maybe not me, but he would be  
13 getting the people out. By then it was just obvious that we weren't going to win. Where  
14 we were the people didn't like us so what was the point? I couldn't figure out. It  
15 obviously wasn't worth the effort to go full bore into it. We were going to do nothing but  
16 take casualties and eventually fall out. Even in September of '68 that was obvious. So I  
17 voted for Nixon. When I came back I was just really upset that he didn't really seem to  
18 have a plan to get the troops out of the field. Things didn't get any better. '69 was still a  
19 bad year. Then finally slowly started pulling people out. I kept up with the stuff  
20 especially when they'd have something about the Americal division. Usually that was  
21 not good. When the My Lai thing broke there I think sometime in late '69 or early '70 of  
22 course that was my battalion. So I kept up with that a lot. I just couldn't believe it. At  
23 first I didn't believe it then when I figured out it was true I thought they should have hung  
24 somebody. That's just a failure of leadership at a low level. We've talked about this  
25 before. I'm not sure there was a conspiracy to hide things. I just don't think that people  
26 necessarily believed it. I don't know who had talked to the helicopter pilots. That's the  
27 thing you don't know. Just listening to the Vietnamese I wouldn't have believed it. I  
28 kept up with that. That was another reason I think I hardly ever wore an Americal patch.  
29 I always wore an 11<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade patch because nobody knew what that was. You  
30 didn't take as much flak on different post. They were giving the people that served in the

1 Americal a lot of flak for a while, the rest of the Army was. Of course now it's a big  
2 deal. Every movie you see, they've got an Americal patch on.

3 RV: So today it's okay?

4 JM: Yes, I think Colin Powell and Schwarzkopf after they became famous in the  
5 Gulf War, if you go to movies half the people you see or the higher ups in the movies and  
6 the people that supposedly served in Vietnam you see they've got an Americal patch on.  
7 I will always love those two guys because I think most of the people that served in the  
8 division were like most of the people in the other division who were over there. They  
9 were doing the best they could under difficult circumstances, trying to serve honorably  
10 and all of a sudden we got the bad rap. I think they sort of restored our reputation to  
11 some extent. That's a good thing.

12 RV: What did you think of the Vietnamization policy?

13 JM: I didn't think it would work. I wish they'd done it faster and gotten us out of  
14 there. There was no way the situation was going to be saved. I think it was basically  
15 something that Henry Kissinger and Nixon came up with to try to save face. We could  
16 have made a deal with the North Vietnamese and gotten out of there and saved everybody  
17 a lot of trouble. I mean that's kind of a cynical way to look at it. You know it wasn't.  
18 After we decided we were going home it wasn't worth any more lives on anybody's part.  
19 There was no way the South Vietnamese Army was going to win the war over there.  
20 They just were poorly led and after twenty years I remember we had an interpreter one  
21 time that told me that I was taking too many chances, Sergeant Wa, that I should get  
22 behind a tree and direct men. The war had been going on since the Japanese were there  
23 and it would be going on long after I went home. There was no point in getting killed.  
24 So even the South Vietnamese, their motivation was they just didn't have any. There was  
25 no real purpose. I don't know exactly how they kept the Army together as long as they  
26 did.

27 RV: What did you say to this guy when he said that to you?

28 JM: I said, 'That's not the point. The point is they're my people. You don't  
29 waste your people. My job is to be the leader and not the director. That's how we do  
30 things. I just have a different job than they do but we're all out here together.' He told  
31 me that wasn't the point. I had a chance to go home and he didn't and I should not do

1 that kind of stuff. It was just a different outlook. I think Kissinger had delusions of  
2 grandeur I think sometimes about being Meteran or somebody. Just figured he could  
3 manipulate the situation and the North Vietnamese were never going to be manipulated.  
4 They were pretty focused on what they were going to do. They didn't really care whether  
5 they made deals and broke them or not. I think Kissinger was kind of the same way only  
6 he wasn't quite as good as they were.

7 RV: What did you think when the United States withdrew in 1973?

8 JM: I was happy that we got the Army out of there. We were pulling out. It was  
9 a huge waste. It was just a huge waste of lives and a huge amount of suffering. In the  
10 big picture it may not have been a waste. I am talking about the policy of containment.  
11 But that supposedly wasn't why we were over there. We were over there as part of the  
12 policy of containment. When we were over there we were supposedly going to win the  
13 deal. We weren't supposed to be fighting for a draw. You never want to tell an army  
14 you're fighting for a draw. By that time it was just a huge waste. The impact on the  
15 country was not worth the lives and the effort to continue. The government didn't have a  
16 vision that the people could accept. At that point you've got to look at it and say it's time  
17 to cut the loses and run. We certainly waited about two or three years too long to do that.  
18 I think one of the worst days of my life was on April 30 in '75 when we finally pulled out  
19 altogether. At that time it just seemed like I couldn't imagine all the people that had  
20 suffered through that. All the people here at home, all the people that were in Vietnam.  
21 Then just to pull out in that way. Be forced out in a way. I remember sitting there  
22 watching that with a bottle of bourbon just getting drunk and crying. That was one of the  
23 worst days in my whole life I think, even though I thought we should be getting out, just  
24 sitting there and watching it all actually happen. That whole last week or so, or month  
25 was just almost too much to watch because we put so much into it. I put a lot into it and  
26 my friends put a lot into it. It was just all a waste.

27 RV: I can assume that you do not think the United States achieved peace with  
28 honor as Kissinger and Nixon said?

29 JM: No. We kept trying to manipulate the deal and didn't get it done and had to  
30 just run. I think in '69 Nixon could have developed a withdraw plan but he would have  
31 had to say that we didn't have the wherewithal to do it. He wasn't willing to do it and

1 maybe in his position I wouldn't have been as willing to do that either. We certainly  
2 didn't negotiate a peace with honor. All we did was negotiate a time frame to extend the  
3 suffering for another four or five years.

4 RV: Can you give you assessment overall of U.S. policy in the Vietnam War?

5 JM: I think that we started out and I don't know if this is what you want. I think  
6 we started out with the best of intentions and the real feeling among the government that  
7 it was important that we save the world from Communism. There was no question of the  
8 Truman Doctrine if that's what you want to call it was the right thing. Communism is a  
9 terrible thing the way—certainly the Soviets and Chinese aberrations of what Carl Marx  
10 was thinking. So we start off and we're going to help these people. Then we find out the  
11 people are sort of beyond help and we think that's it's because they got bad leaders and  
12 we start making bad decisions. We overthrow the DMs. At that point it should have  
13 been obvious that something wasn't right there and that we aren't going to be able to  
14 accomplish what we want to accomplish at that point. You go all the way back to the  
15 fifties I guess when I guess Ho Chi Minh had made some overtures to the United States.  
16 We pretty much rejected them because he was a Communist. I don't think that we  
17 necessarily understood that Communism wasn't really a single monolithic movement. It  
18 was different from place to place just like democracy has different phases in places. So  
19 we start off and then we get involved to the point that it's really our deal. Then once it  
20 becomes our deal then we don't know what to do with it. By that I mean we've  
21 overthrown the government or at least aided in the overthrow of the government. Then  
22 we decide we've got to go in and prop these people up. Again I think the intent was they  
23 actually believe the Domino Theory so we keep throwing people in. What the strategic  
24 value of Vietnam is other than, or even Southeast Asia I guess, other than there's lots of  
25 people there and in the policy of containment then you have to contain the Communism  
26 every place it tries to expand. In the end I think Truman was probably right. I think  
27 Vietnam was successful to the extent that it helped extend the woes of the various  
28 Communist governments in trying to support worldwide revolution that they finally  
29 imploded. I think from that standpoint if you look at the big picture as a twentieth  
30 century thing Vietnam was probably part of that whole pattern. In the case of having a  
31 policy there and having a strategy on how we were going to win and how we were going

1 to succeed. I think we have a little bit of the same problem here with the war on  
2 terrorism. I don't think we understand how you succeed here. I think we're into the deal,  
3 we're looking for this guy, we're looking for that guy. We're looking for somebody.  
4 That's not probably going to get it done. We got into the body count thing. If we kill  
5 enough of them we'll win. They'll quit and movements don't work that way.

6 RV: Do you think the United States learned lessons from its experience?

7 JM: It doesn't appear that we have. I think that we may have learned that we  
8 can't prop up governments. That may be something that we may have learned. We can't  
9 send in military power and prop up governments. I think Iraq may be a good test for that.  
10 At least there it appeared that we really do intend to turn it over to them and get out at  
11 some point. Although you keep hearing that we may have to have troops there for five or  
12 six or seven years. The longer we leave troops there, I think the worse the situation will  
13 get. There's no question that we're an army of occupation and nobody loves an army of  
14 occupation except maybe the Germans for a while. Even they don't like us very much  
15 anymore I heard. I'm not sure that we won't be trying to repeat the same mistakes over  
16 in a different way. I think that we lack what's the word I'm looking for? We are so self-  
17 centered in our look that if somebody tells us they like us we think it's our duty to help  
18 them and really assessing the situation, these people aren't like us. What do we need to  
19 do in there to help them in their situation rather than help them be some place? We're a  
20 great trading nation and we're looking for trading partners all the time. That sometimes  
21 gets in our way. I still think we have a little bit of the Adam Smith idea in us. I'm not  
22 sure in the modern world, with the world having shrunk in time, the distances between  
23 places and just the way that things worked that idea that we project power will work in  
24 the modern world. I just don't know that we can project power and have it do what it's  
25 done in the nineteenth century.

26 RV: Do you think the United States has left Vietnam behind or is Vietnam still  
27 with us today? Not the country itself but the experience?

28 JM: I know what you're saying. Well obviously for a lot of the veterans it hasn't.  
29 We're still mad at Jane Fonda. I think that in the mentality of the government and  
30 especially the mentality in military they haven't completely left us behind. As a matter of  
31 fact, I don't think it's left us behind at all. I think there is a mistrust of the government

1 that occurred during that time that they've never gotten back. I don't think people  
2 viewed the government of the United States the same way they did before Vietnam. I  
3 think that cynicism and the fact that the government is not working in our best interest is  
4 a legacy that we haven't left behind. I don't know how you get rid of that.

5 RV: Tell me about your experience in Vietnam. How do you feel about it today?

6 JM: I think about that a lot. I don't know if there's anybody that was in combat  
7 in Vietnam that doesn't have some degree of post-traumatic stress. I just think that things  
8 happen. Things happen and you'll be driving down the road and something pops back.  
9 The wind will be blowing funny or there will be some kind of movement. I got over  
10 diving into ditches within a month or so when I got home. That was really embarrassing.  
11 It's not a socially acceptable thing to do. I am who I am because of being in Vietnam. I  
12 can't really access. I don't know who I'd be if I hadn't been there. So from that  
13 standpoint I just see it as another experience in my life. I don't think that there are things  
14 that I see differently. There are attitudes I have that in some respects it's kind of a central  
15 or a turning point in my life. A lot of what I look for in people, a lot of what I expect  
16 from my superiors, a lot of things that I do, the way that I work have to do with my year  
17 in Vietnam. I do think it affects. I had two things. I grew up on military bases and  
18 moved every two and a half years. Then I went to Vietnam and I'm very—I don't know  
19 if I have made a really good friend since I came home from Vietnam. I think that the  
20 reason for that is that between the two experiences, growing up on military bases and  
21 always moving, then what happened in Vietnam, I just don't trust somebody to be there.  
22 So as a consequence I have a lot of good acquaintances and very few if any really good  
23 friends that I've made since I've come home from there. I think from that standpoint it  
24 affects you. It really does affect the way I manage people, the way I expect to be  
25 managed and my mistrust of upper management. I keep turning down jobs because I  
26 don't want to be part of that. It goes back to I had the last good job in a corporation  
27 because I'm still dealing with people. You aren't dealing with just other corporate  
28 managers. I saw that in Vietnam after I got out of the field and went up to brigade  
29 headquarters. I was just amazed at the thought process there compared to the reality of  
30 what went on in the field. I think that's the case, the further away you get from people  
31 that are doing the job, the less understanding you have of what the costs are.

1           RV: So in a sense today you're still staying in the field?

2           JM: I guess in a sense I am. I set up this attitude and I still have it. Most of life I  
3 think has proved to be true. I think the people at the top have a completely different  
4 outlook on things and what they see a plant as a profit center for instance. If you need to  
5 get rid of fifty people, that's okay if the profit gets better. That's kind of like the body  
6 count mentality, or the kill ratio mentality. I guess it'd be closer to a kill ratio mentality.  
7 They don't look for other ways to do it because they don't see the impact of the decisions  
8 they make. I guess the decision don't personally impact them other than if the stock goes  
9 up that's a good thing. In Vietnam you saw that same kind of mentality. I remember  
10 doing the nightly briefings. I'd say, 'Here's B Company of the 4/21 infantry is located  
11 here tonight.' They'd have given them a sector that a hundred and fifty-six men are  
12 supposed to cover. B Company 4/21 might have only had fifty men left in it. To them it  
13 was still B Company 4/21. That's all they worried about. I've got a company out there,  
14 here's a company-sized mission. You go out and do a company sized mission. The  
15 reality was even when you get down to a small enough group they give you a company  
16 sized mission and you start finding the way to honor the letter of what they did, but not  
17 the spirit. You really don't want a company-sized contact if you're down to a platoon. I  
18 think that's been the case in every war. But I think in Vietnam the problem was because  
19 you operated separately for so much there wasn't any support on your right or your left.  
20 You operated independently. It gave you a chance to make decisions maybe in Korea or  
21 World War II a company commander couldn't have made or a platoon leader because  
22 you had people on your right and people on your left and people behind you. In Vietnam  
23 you never did. I remember they told us to go into a gorge one day out in the mountains in  
24 the triple canopy. When we got there this thing looked like the box canyon that the Lone  
25 Ranger ran into when they get wiped out in the movies and the television. It's straight up  
26 like ninety feet on both sides with a little stream going and somebody thinks there's a  
27 cave in there. We're looking down there and we got seventy-some guys in the company.  
28 There's no way to go in there. If there's somebody up on top it's all over for you.  
29 There's no cover, there's nothing. There's just this stream and this thing was probably a  
30 half a mile or close to a mile long. You could see it going down this hill and these cliffs  
31 never let up. So what we did is we went up on one side and walked down at the edge

1 looking down into it. When they'd tell us to pop smoke we'd throw the smoke down into  
2 the canyon. We'd walk from one end to the other but never actually check the stream out  
3 because it was just an asinine order. There was no helicopter landing areas nearby. The  
4 closest company was like seven or eight clicks away through the jungle. They were two  
5 days away from us. They had to cut their way in. So we sort of did what they told us but  
6 we didn't do what they wanted. I think there may have been more of that in Vietnam. As  
7 I talk to other veterans you hear the same kind of stories. I think to some extent putting  
8 the leaders in helicopters caused some of that by the battalion commanders and the  
9 brigade commanders all of a sudden having this God-like overview. They lose contact  
10 with the ground and I don't think that's necessarily a good thing.

11 RV: What was the most important thing you learned there do you think?

12 JM: The most important thing I learned was to do your homework and be ready  
13 and to have contingency plans when things don't go right. That served me in good stead  
14 all my life. I never got ambushed when I was running the company or the platoon. I  
15 haven't really snapped I don't think. I think that the fact that you have a plan, you've got  
16 to be able to articulate the plan to the people. If you can do that, you can make it work.  
17 You can take ordinary people and do extraordinary things. If you can get them to  
18 understand what it is you're trying to do. I believe that.

19 RV: Is there anything that you would change about your Vietnam experience if  
20 you could?

21 JM: I don't know how to answer that. I can't imagine what I could have done to  
22 change it. Maybe that's a lack of imagination on my part. I just think that one good  
23 decision I made was when I first got there they asked me whether I wanted to go into the  
24 field or take a rear job first. I had a choice. I said, 'I want to go gin to he field first.  
25 That's why I'm over here. I want to be a platoon leader.' I think that was a good  
26 decision. I think if I had been in the rear for six months and started learning what I  
27 learned out there I might not have been quite so anxious to find a way, wouldn't have  
28 been as thrilled to go to the field. I always felt sorry for Doug Faulk who had been our  
29 third platoon leader. They moved him back to be executive officer. Every time we had  
30 some platoon leader hit they had him back out in the field again. I was glad that once I  
31 got out, I didn't have to go back in. I don't think I would have looked forward to that. I

1 do think that the Army made a horrible mistake though in that officer rotation policy.  
2 That was really, really bad. We had very few senior NCOs there. Most of the NCOs that  
3 we had in the field were either shake-n-bakes, go through the NCO, OCS schools at  
4 Benning, fairly young guys. The older non-commissioned officers mostly found away to  
5 keep from going into the field. At least that was my experience. That may not have been  
6 the experience in every unit. So you didn't have much back up to your officer corps in  
7 some respects. I think that was a huge mistake. They did it partially as a management  
8 tool to get more officers more command time and more combat experience. Not good for  
9 morale of the troops. It wasn't necessarily good for the effort because about the time you  
10 learned what you were doing you were rotating out. That doesn't necessarily mean—and  
11 I certainly didn't turn down my chance to get out of the field when I came. Although  
12 when I left I didn't think I was getting out. I thought I was taking over another company.  
13 Once I got out I really didn't have a desire to go back in although I had a little survivor  
14 guilt. You don't like leaving your people out there.

15 RV: Did you suffer any disabilities over the years from your service in Vietnam,  
16 to include PTSD?

17 JM: Not to a great extent. Not to the extent that I've gone down and sought  
18 counseling or done anything else. I do believe in talking to other Vietnam vets. Over the  
19 years I think everybody that was in combat has some PTSD to various extents. Some  
20 people it gets to the point they can't operate. I've noticed over the years that I get a little  
21 depressed it seems like every September. I used to think that's kind of weird, September  
22 is a nice time of year. I finally think it goes back as September rolls around I think about  
23 going out to Ha Than. That was certainly the most traumatic week of my entire life. We  
24 lost a lot of people out there. Every September when those days roll around I know what  
25 days they are. So you have some of that. I think of other people that lose people whether  
26 it's their mother of whoever it is. Some people have that thing. I have a lot as I know  
27 I've gotten in contact with more and more people we have quite a few people in the  
28 company that I think have some severe problems. They've been in counseling they've  
29 had drug problems, alcohol problems and some of it relates back to Vietnam I think.  
30 Then I go to the Americal division and they're all getting disability and stuff for that.  
31 You think what's the deal there? That's the best deal you ever had. So I do sometimes

1 resent the fact that the VA in places don't differentiate between combat veterans and  
2 other people. I do think the people that actually saw action certainly have a claim to  
3 possibly having more problems than other veterans. I don't think we've recognized that  
4 to the extent that we should. We have a lot of fellows that I think have some physical  
5 problems because of their service. Not only people that were severely wounded but we  
6 seem to have more and more guys that are in their fifties getting strange types of cancers  
7 and who knows. I know we've had several guys die from really rapidly progressing bone  
8 cancers that are strange cancers. I mean we had two from my platoon and you think that  
9 doesn't seem that would normally occur in that small of a population. In both cases they  
10 finally admitted it was Agent Orange. They were trying to deny it because we'd never  
11 been in a defoliated area. They used defoliants every place. I think they finally backed  
12 off on that and said anybody in Vietnam could have been exposed. It only took them  
13 twenty-five or thirty years to do that. I don't think that I've ever been in a place where I  
14 thought Vietnam really negatively affected either my health or my overall mental  
15 attitude. The only thing I found out I can't have an MRI because I've got shrapnel in my  
16 sinus. They told me not to have an MRI so I never thought about that. They wanted to  
17 go in and get it and I said, 'No it's been there all this time. Just leave it alone, I'm fine.'

18       RV: John if you had to address a group of young people about the Vietnam War,  
19 I'm talking high school students, college students—

20       JM: I do that. I teach a high school Sunday School class. It comes up  
21 occasionally or in the relation to the war in Iraq.

22       RV: What do you tell them?

23       JM: I tell them number one that the Army is not a college scholarship program.  
24 They can't buy into that. It's serious business and it's not glorious business. It's  
25 probably the finest thing you can do. The thing you have to understand is it is dangerous.  
26 If you go into the Marine Corps, the Army and end up being a soldier in the infantry,  
27 you're going to be dirty. Sometimes you don't eat, sometimes you don't get water. In  
28 the end, it is the best job and you meet the best people you'll ever meet. I said you have  
29 to understand that it's not like television. It's not like the movies. When watching  
30 television of the Gulf War, most wars haven't been like that, the Iraqi campaign. It's not

1 a very glorious thing to do. It's good thing to do and a right thing to do if that's what you  
2 want. But don't go in there with your eyes shut.

3 RV: What about Vietnam?

4 JM: I tell them that Vietnam we tried to do the right thing and it didn't work out  
5 and we didn't have a plan. The best people I ever knew were the people that I served  
6 with in Vietnam. It's not an experience I would have wished on anybody else or ever  
7 told anybody else they should go do. I said combat is not an experience you wish on  
8 somebody else after you've been there. That's pretty much all I tell them. If somebody  
9 asked me about some other things I might give them my political opinion.

10 RV: What do you think about the books and movies that have come out on the  
11 Vietnam War?

12 JM: I've read quite a few of them. I think in some ways the best book I ever read  
13 about Vietnam was, what's his name Heinemann? It was a science-fiction book called  
14 *The Forever War*.

15 RV: Hinein?

16 JM: I think it's Joseph H-i-n-n-e-m-a-n, maybe. It's called *The Forever War*.  
17 It's a science-fiction book. He was a grunt in Vietnam and he wrote a really wonderful  
18 science-fiction book. It's really about going back over and over and over again. Good  
19 book in some respects. *We Were Soldiers* is a good read I think. The movie was okay. I  
20 liked Sam Elliot as the sergeant major. He reminded me of my platoon sergeant. I  
21 thought that Mel Gibson was too good a shot. There were some things in it that I didn't  
22 particularly like. I thought that *Hamburger Hill*, there were some scenes in *Hamburger*  
23 *Hill* I thought were really good. I really thought there were some scenes in there that  
24 looked like combat in Vietnam whereas most of the things I've seen I haven't. There's  
25 bits and pieces. I kind of hated *Apocalypse Now*. It may be a great movie, but it's a great  
26 move for somebody who wasn't there in some respects. That was part of his vision. He  
27 had a different vision of what he was trying to explain and that part was okay. If you're  
28 looking for realism, it was a little strange. Then in some ways this is kind of funny. In  
29 some ways I think the best movie about Vietnam I ever saw wasn't necessarily *MASH*,  
30 although that was pretty good, was *Black Hawk Down*. Just from the standpoint of I  
31 don't care where you were or what you do I thought it looked like combat to me. It was

1 probably as close to that small unit combat action as I've ever seen in a movie where the  
2 people are getting isolated and they're having to try to work their way back. There were  
3 just some parts about that, even though it wasn't about Vietnam they had the feel of what  
4 combat of Vietnam was like in a way there. Even though it was totally different situation  
5 and things. I'm trying to think. It's been a long time since I've read too many. I liked  
6 the Tim O'Brien stuff certainly. *Going After Casito* is a trip. There's some truth in that  
7 and the things we carry. Some of that stuff is very good. Of course he's got a good  
8 writing style himself.

9 RV: What do you think about Vietnam today and would you want to go back?

10 JM: I think about that and I've talked to people that have gone back. We talk  
11 about it. If I went back, the only thing I would care about is going back and walking over  
12 the ground I walked on. I need it for me, not to go back and see how they are. So taking  
13 a bus tour through Saigon, I was never in Saigon. I was only in Da Nang for about two  
14 days before I went on R&R. I didn't go to on the economy much there. By that time I  
15 had been in the field ten months. I just didn't trust those people. I didn't want to go out  
16 there and I didn't have a gun. When I went to R&R they flew me into a big helicopter  
17 base. I caught a ride someplace and I said, 'How do I get to Freedom Hill to the R&R  
18 center?' They said, 'You just go out and hitch a ride.' I said, 'What?' I didn't have my  
19 rifle; they'd made me turn my rifle in. So I went out and I said, 'That can't be right.'  
20 They said yes. So I went out and started walking down the street. It took me a while  
21 before I caught a ride. I was the most nervous I think I was in my whole tour over there.  
22 There's all these Vietnamese around everyplace and no Americans. I'm walking down  
23 the street and I don't have a rifle which felt strange because that's the first time in ten and  
24 a half months I hadn't had a rifle in my hand when I was walking someplace. So I  
25 thought that was just a strange experience. So going back to Da Nang or Saigon  
26 wouldn't mean anything to me. I'd like to go back to the rural areas and see how the  
27 people are there. I'd like to go out to Ha Than and just walk over the ground and just see  
28 what it's like. I understand a lot of times they won't even let you go out into where the  
29 old Special Forces camps were. It would almost be like a religious pilgrimage in a  
30 fashion. Then they tell me everything is changing. So who knows whether it would be a  
31 good experience or not? I went back to see where my grandparents lived when I was

1 growing up and my dad was in Korea. They've moved the roads and they tore down the  
2 place that they lived. I couldn't find it and that was more traumatic than if I'd left it  
3 alone. So I don't know. I think about it every once in a while. I've got a couple of guys  
4 that say we ought to put a trip together. I just want to go back and spend a few days in  
5 the area I was in and come home. That's what I'd want to do.

6 RV: What do you think are or were the myths of the Vietnam soldier, the  
7 American soldier in Vietnam?

8 JM: The what?

9 RV: The myths and misperceptions.

10 JM: I think one of the misperceptions was they were all nineteen years old. I was  
11 twenty-four but I had several people in my platoon that were twenty-two or twenty-three.  
12 A couple of them were older than I was and got drafted. I don't know if later on it was  
13 different or what. We had people that had been to college and dropped out and got  
14 drafted or done different things here. I was probably one of the older people. A lot of  
15 them were close to my age, so I think that's one myth that they were all nineteen years  
16 old. I suspect that we had more of them that were twenty-one or twenty-two than we had  
17 that were nineteen that was in my platoon. I don't know if that's a myth for the whole  
18 Army or not. The number of black troops in the field I think is a myth. There seems to  
19 be some myth that over half the Army in the field, we were putting blacks in the field.  
20 We probably had maybe a quarter maybe less of the platoon was black. We had several  
21 Puerto Ricans. We had some Hawaiians. We had certainly a mix of people. It wasn't  
22 predominantly a black group. I don't know if that's really a myth. I've heard that over  
23 the years. 'They kept sending all the black people into the field.' That wasn't the case.  
24 After that, the myth that we were over there and we were all abusing people and things. I  
25 think there probably as much of that going on I don't think there was as much as the  
26 perception was. There was probably more of it going on there than there had been in  
27 some other places. I would think they'd have a danger of that starting to happen in Iraq if  
28 we leave people there long enough. When you're in a totally alien environment and  
29 you're operating and you're not safe you have guns and things. Eventually I think bad  
30 things can happen to you mentally about the way you treat people around you. I think the  
31 fact that everybody came home and there was all this drug use and people. I think that's

1 a huge myth. Most of the people in my platoon came home and were productive citizens  
2 and went on with their lives. We've had a couple that have had problems, but for the  
3 majority—one guy was head of a design team at Ford Motor Company. Another guy is  
4 the head of a nuclear power plant. People that were just grunts came back and went to  
5 school. We've got another one that owns an art studio. He's an artist and machine  
6 gunner down in Phoenix now. Another one of my machine gunners is an electrician and  
7 a minister in a church. So I mean I think there's lot of myths about the Vietnam vet. I  
8 think there's lot of people out there that perpetuate that myth that may or may not have  
9 been in Vietnam. They may have been some rear area person, I don't know what they're  
10 doing. But most of the grunts that I know, the field soldiers, aren't going around there  
11 with their fatigues on and their hair long and stuff. So I don't know. That's my whole  
12 answer to that.

13 RV: You mentioned that you had been to the Wall in Washington D.C. Can you  
14 tell me about your experiences there?

15 JM: Yes. The first time I went there was probably—when did they open it,  
16 November of '81 or '82? It was the next summer. I was there on business and I took the  
17 afternoon off and took the subway over to the Wall. I got there and it was overwhelming.  
18 Excuse me. When I think about it, it's still overwhelming. I got there and I just couldn't  
19 touch it. I could not touch the names.

20 RV: Why not?

21 JM: I guess it's painful. It just is such a waste of humanity, war is. I just see  
22 people. They're just snuffed out and it's just a hard thing. A nun was nice enough to do  
23 some rubbings for me. Then as I've gone back since then it's still a powerful experience.  
24 But certainly not like the first time I was down there. I kept looking and it was real  
25 confusing. I think at that time there wasn't a good way to find somebody. And the Army  
26 or whoever it is still has not done a good job I think of helping people find people that  
27 they knew, veterans because they don't have their smaller units identified any place.  
28 There's no place you can go and find somebody who was in Alpha Company 1/20  
29 infantry. They can tell you maybe if they were 11<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade or if they were  
30 Americal division. You may not know somebody's name. You may not know exactly  
31 when they were killed. I think that makes it really difficult. I remember the first time I

1 got down there. It took me a long time to start finding the people that I served with.  
2 Then there were people I was looking for that I knew that were killed later on and it was  
3 really difficult to find the names. Now they've got little people down there with  
4 computer data bases and little things. It's much more helpful. I know I must have spent  
5 two or three hours down there just searching for names. After a while, you sort of felt  
6 like a failure. You were down there looking for these people and you couldn't find them  
7 and it was tough. It was very tough.

8           RV: Well, John, is there anything else that you'd like to talk about that we  
9 haven't touched upon?

10           JM: I think that's a lot more than I expected to have come out. You've been  
11 very, very good with this. It's been fun thinking about some of those things, the things  
12 that you just don't spend much time dwelling on about. What did you have in your  
13 pockets? I mean that was kind of a fun exercise. You go back and you can actually  
14 almost sometimes feel it because for so long you had the same thing in every pocket.  
15 You can just visualize yourself reaching down in there. After a while it starts coming  
16 back to you more and more about those little things. The little things are kind of fun to  
17 remember.

18           RV: Good.

19           JM: It's been a good experience and I appreciate it.

20           RV: Well we thank you very, very much for your time and for doing this with us.  
21 We'll go ahead and end the interview now with Mr. John McNown Jr. Thank you, sir.