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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Clovis Jones
Conducted by Dr. Richard Verrone
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Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

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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 Major Clovis Jones. We are in the Crystal City Hilton in Washington,
3 D.C. It's Veteran's Day, November 11th, 2005. Major Jones and I are doing this, we are a
4 part of the 40th anniversary reunions of the battles of the Ia Drang Valley, back in
5 November of 1965. Major Jones, if we could, tell me about what your specific duties
6 were there—you were with the 1st of the 8th?

7 Clovis Jones: Yes.

8 RV: Tell me a little bit about what you did, what your duties were.

9 CJ: Well, I started out in Charlie Company 1st of the 8th Cav back in Fort Benning
10 and was still in that unit when I got to Vietnam. I was a point man. However, I didn't go
11 to battle as a point man, I was called up to the headquarters by Sergeant Major Herbert P.
12 McCullough. He felt that I would do a good job as his "Field Mail Clerk", no such
13 official position but he understood that the mail was extremely important and that food
14 was important for morale. I'd worked with him at Fort Campbell. He'd been my sergeant
15 major and really a mentor and kind of a second father to me.

16 RV: How did you feel about that request to do that?

17 CJ: I didn't want to do it.

18 RV: Why not?

1 CJ: As an infantryman with your buddies, going to a headquarters was like
2 wimping out. (Laughs) You know, shirking your duties and that sort of thing. I wanted to
3 be down in the line where I had served in previous command with Sergeant Major
4 McCullough. Also I didn't want to seem like I was shirking away from my duties. So I
5 didn't want to go. His words to convince me to come voluntary was, "We really need you
6 to make sure that the troops get their mail and I know you'll do a good job." So I took it
7 on and would deploy forward with the command CP (Command Post) and the mail would
8 be brought in sometimes, and I'd make sure the units get it. Other times when we weren't
9 operating in the Pleiku province, I would drive a Jeep from An Khe all the way down—I
10 think it's Highway 14.

11 RV: It is.

12 CJ: From An Khe to Highway 1, north bound to wherever the CP was when they
13 were operating along the coast in Bong Son and find the units and hand the mail to them.

14 RV: Wow.

15 CJ: And drive back.

16 RV: So I imagined the—I'm glad you're here today, that was dangerous. What do
17 you remember the men's reactions when you would deliver the mail?

18 CJ: It was a morale boost. They're like, "Here's Jones!" or "Here's the Mailman!"
19 They would just brighten up. At the wall today, and I'm thinking back grieving a little bit
20 because a lot of that I suppressed and I sent an email note to Joe Galloway and General
21 Moore and thanking them for writing the book, and I'll get to that a little later. The one
22 thing is that they shared—I almost knew everybody in the battalion. Number one, from
23 looking at the records that we maintained in the mailroom, and number two from just
24 being associated with them. They were like, "Hey Jones!" Cookies, goodies, pictures of
25 home.

26 RV: It was you, you were the delivery man.

27 CJ: Yeah, I was the delivery man. So you got to know people's lives. Their hopes,
28 their aspirations, their family members, mothers, fathers, sisters, girlfriends, wives,
29 children, uncle, and aunts. You know, "Hey, I got this from home, have some of this." It
30 was a shared experience. It was like the unit was my family!

31 RV: That's a very special relationship you had with these—very unique.

1 CJ: Yes, yes. Then, the sad part about that, the downside to that was when we had
2 any KIAs (Killed In Action). In the field, it was my duty to go before they went to the
3 morgue to identify them. Match the social security number up and identify them. That
4 was hard because when you lost anyone, at that time, we didn't really know how to
5 grieve, at least I didn't. We would say, "Don't mean nothing" Well, it meant the world to
6 us! We just lost one of your best friends and there's a special bond between members of
7 combat. When you're in a combat situation, members of your unit—there's a special
8 bond because you would literally give your life to save your buddy. That's just how tight
9 we were. You don't find those kinds of relationship hardly ever outside of that military
10 environment, that combat environment. So especially when you lost someone, flashbacks
11 about what they shared with you, what they wanted to do. One of our troopers from
12 Detroit, he was engaged and I don't recall his name, but he was a black trooper. I
13 remember that he got shot through the head and the bullet was still penetrating out. But
14 he got a silver star for his actions, but just thinking about that life lost and remembering
15 him telling me what he wanted to do when he got back was to get married and go to
16 college and several others. It was that when you had that loss, it was a flashback to what
17 they shared with you. A moment you may have enjoyed at Fort Benning.

18 RV: Sure.

19 CJ: In training or going in the town or wherever we went to have fun, or just
20 joking with people. So that was the downside of it.

21 RV: What did you do in 1965, in November, how were you associated with
22 Moore's group at Pleiku?

23 CJ: Well, not so much directly associated. The 1st of the 8th had been in the Ia
24 Drang prior to the 7th coming in. In fact, the 1st of the 9th and 1st of the 8th had been
25 operating in the Valley and I think he's retired, Colonel Danielson, Ted Danielson was
26 the captain of A Company. They'd made the first hell of a night insertion in combat. I
27 was deployed up at the tea plantation, I can't remember the name of it right now. We
28 were headquartered there, at least the command CP was. Was there, had the action, we
29 were pulled back to An Khe, I think because there we were across the—we did
30 something, I think we went across the border chasing the bad guys, and that was a no-no.

31 RV: Of course.

1 CJ: There was some controversy about it, we weren't sure what was happening,
2 but anyway, we had been up there operating, came back to An Khe. It was a Sunday
3 afternoon, I was in the command CP and heard the distress call. I went down to my old
4 unit, Charlie Company, and said, "Guys, pack your bags, we're going back out." So we
5 went back to Plei Me. I think the next day or sometime. Anyway, as soon as we deployed
6 back, we went into Plei Me. It was an old special forces camp and I remember what had
7 been used as a runway. There were bodies from the 7th Cav and those who'd been in X-
8 Ray, stacked along that runway.

9 RV: Did you know any of these troopers?

10 CJ: Didn't know that I knew them. But you know, many of us had socialized or
11 seen each other and just said hi and that sort of thing. But with the bodies being there, I
12 didn't take the time to go and try to see if I knew anyone. But you know, it was just the
13 sadness and the sorrow to hear lives lost and guys who really had a fight.

14 RV: When did it hit you that how important this action was? What was happening
15 in the Valley. This is so early on in the war—I mean to the American public and to the
16 world 1965 marks that first ground troop action, we had many people there before. When
17 did it hit you about the importance of what you were involved there in the Ia Drang
18 Valley?

19 CJ: Not so much about the importance of it, it's just about doing your duty but
20 you knew something was special about the operation. Basically when they did that night
21 insertions, they said, "Guys, we're in a fight. This is not just Viet Cong."

22 RV: It's the night of the 14th?

23 CJ: Yeah. Something else is going on here. Also operating there, we had a
24 Frenchman who—well, he was born in France, he was in our unit. He knew one of the
25 men at the plantation and the report that we got was that—in fact I was there when the
26 guy was telling him. He said, "Look, we have these regular North Vietnamese forces
27 passing through the plantation." I don't think people really wanted to believe that, and
28 when I say people, the higher commands didn't want to believe that, but he was saying
29 you know, battalion sized forces passing through at night. So we knew from that
30 intelligence, from that information at least, you knew something was going on and we
31 had a sense when we were headquartered at the tea plantation that there was going to be a

1 major fight at some point and I'm thinking it was the 1st of the 8th that said it. Of course
2 when they had the night insertion and all of that sort of thing, it's like, "Hmm something
3 is going on." And when they pulled us back it's like, "Well, I don't know what's this is
4 all about." There was rumors of people losing commands and all that kind of stuff. I said,
5 "How do you do that for coming over here to do what we did?" Taking that fight to them.

6 RV: Right. Is that how you saw it? Did you all want to take the fight to the
7 enemy?

8 CJ: Of course. Of course. I mean, I had been in the 101st and the great history of
9 that unit and jumping out of airplanes, but then when I got to Fort Benning, I was still the
10 11th Air Assault. Going through all the training there, they had not only jumping, but you
11 were rappelling, doing the ladders, you were doing all that kind of stuff. This is a special
12 kind of combat unit. I'd done a term paper in high school on Vietnam, so I was—

13 RV: Really? Interesting.

14 CJ: Yeah. The title was, "Is War Inevitable in Vietnam?" and my conclusion was
15 yes, the way we were headed. I had a wonderful French teacher by the name of Mr.
16 Harrison, who taught us French. So I was fairly decent at the language, so that helped.

17 RV: So you had some historical background and when you're actually there and
18 you're doing this, what do you remember from the 14th, 15th, 16th of November? And as
19 that battle progressed and you found out news of what happened and how large the force
20 was that attacked the 7th, what was your reaction?

21 CJ: The first thing when I knew it was the 7th, I thought about General Custard.
22 Just close your eyes and say a prayer. I was telling someone today, "Thank God for Hal
23 Moore." People say, "Well Custard, and you know about the 7th." I said, "Yeah, but Hal
24 Moore redeemed them." When I realized that they came out of the battle, it was basically
25 through his preparation, his wit, the warrior in him that saved the day.

26 RV: What was his reputation amongst you all in the 8th? Did you know much
27 about him?

28 CJ: Yeah, a little bit in training at Benning. But you have this guy over in the 7th
29 Cav that was doing all kinds of crazy training. They even worked on weekends. So that's
30 the reputation they had. You got this guy over in the 7th Cav, that commander over in the
31 7th Cav and he is really training those guys and in the Garryowen shout, it was—those

1 guys were as proud of that as we paratroopers were of airborne and all the way. It's like,
2 "There's something different about those guys."

3 RV: After the battle at X-Ray, then Albany happens, what was your reaction to
4 that second action when you heard about what had happen there.

5 CJ: You know, how could that happen in Air Cav Division? Guys walking in
6 enemy territory.

7 RV: Strung out, so long.

8 CJ: Yeah. It was just incredible. It was just unbelievable.

9 RV: Was it demoralizing to you all? Or did you want revenge?

10 CJ: It was—who among the leaders decided to do that? That was the thought in
11 my mind. How do you make that decision? Why not hold the ground you had at X-Ray
12 until you got the support, you got all the artillery coordinates you need, you have
13 everything in place? Why not wait until you could extract them? That was the thought
14 through my mind. How do you make that decision? But then, you look at what happened
15 and the heroism and you know just the fact the guys put up. Again, phenomenal.

16 RV: Yeah. Does the phrase, "Don't mean nothing." Heard that a lot from Vietnam
17 veterans. Inside though, what did you do? Your position here of identifying bodies. What
18 did you do with that? Were you able to really suppress that while you were there?

19 CJ: I did, and that's why I sent the note because I promised last year a thank you
20 letter to General Moore and Mr. Galloway. When I saw—I thought I had handled it well
21 and a book that was really relevant to read was the *Thirteenth Valley* by John Del
22 Vecchio. Also, while I was in Vietnam on my second tour, I read an analysis, a
23 *Psychoanalysis* by A.A. Brill. It was one of those things that kind of helped you to put
24 things in perspective and how things affect you, you think you got a handle. I've seen *We*
25 *Were Soldiers* upwards of twenty times.

26 RV: What do you think of it?

27 CJ: I'll tell you my experience. The first eight times that I saw it, I cried through
28 the whole movie. Just scenes from Fort Benning and bringing it back and realizing that
29 when you lose, talking about identifying bodies. It's people that you knew. Back in the
30 days and kind of the track on setting of Fort Benning hard training and going out to
31 Columbus and down to Albany, Georgia. My hometown is Dawson, Georgia so I would

1 take troops down to my home, my parents would cook meals no matter what time of day
2 we get in. My foxhole buddy was a fellow by the name of James Hutchinson from
3 Chicago. So sometimes we'd get into my home at two o'clock in the morning and my
4 mother would get up and she'd always cook fried chicken, she cooked for us. So no
5 matter who I brought home, what time of day she'd get up and cooked. So those kind of
6 experiences of sharing and caring just brought flashbacks of that. Then people that I
7 knew and people that I lost like Sam Bess. Sam had a new car, I think it was a Buick.
8 Some kind of new Buick and he was proud of his car, he was a Sergeant. You know, the
9 rank and how we respected that. He was a sergeant and I was a PFC (Private First Class)
10 at the time, I hadn't made spec 4. He said, "While I'm going over here, guys get in."
11 Riding in his new car you know. He's giving us a lift and he's a sergeant and was a PFC.
12 I'm thinking, "Aw man, this is a great guy." Then you realizing he was among the first to
13 get killed, he wasn't the first get killed, but among the first. You think about that, you
14 think about other moments. You know, personal experiences that you had with people. It
15 really brought back a lot of those memories and I just couldn't stop crying. I saw it eight
16 times by myself. I saw it the first time and I cried and said, "I needed to see this again."
17 Because the music, you get the—the movie was so true to life, in terms of just the sounds
18 of the weapons and the whole piece of it, all of that was just very authentic. Then, when I
19 saw Chu Pong Massif, I got chills. Every time I say that word, I get chills. I don't know
20 why, but that's my reaction.

21 RV: Stays with you.

22 CJ: Yeah, stays with you.

23 RV: You remember back then, when you saw it in the valley?

24 CJ: I remember that and you know, just the mountain. For some reason that—and
25 I don't know how I saw it or where I saw it but just hearing the words and seeing that it's
26 like, "Oh, yeah."

27 RV: What about the book? What happened when the book came out? I mean, it
28 got a lot of press. It's been very widely read and then the movie of course, but before the
29 movie, here's Galloway and Moore walking the American public and you all through that
30 battle step-by-step, literally minute-by-minute. How did you handle it all?

31 CJ: I didn't read the book until after I saw the movie.

1 RV: Really?

2 CJ: Because a lot of things—I guess that’s my way of coping. A lot of my
3 experiences in Vietnam was either not realizing how much my psyche was suppressing
4 all of this. When I saw the movie, I said, “I better read this book.” So I read the book
5 twice and it brought back a lot of memories, you know. Roger Bean was my ops officer. I
6 left Vietnam as a spec 4. Had applied to flight school. Colonel Mortel and my sergeant
7 major helped me a number of times with a number of absences, somehow they got lost. I
8 didn’t know I had been accepted to flight school, but I wanted to fly since I was four
9 years old. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, I kind of walked away from a
10 scholarship at Morehouse College. I went back later once I got out of Vietnam. I said,
11 “Okay, I spent three years trying to get to flight school and it didn’t happen. I guess it’s
12 not for me. I guess I’ll try premed at Morehouse.” So I went to Morehouse and about
13 three months into my time at Morehouse I got a call from Department of Army, they
14 tracked me down there. “Are you still interested in going to flight school?” I said, “You
15 bet.” So I finished a semester and in February of ’67—I got out in June of ’66 and in
16 February of ’67, I reenlisted at Fort Campbell. I still had contact with Sergeant Major
17 McCullough. I said “Hey, I got accepted to flight school, what do I need to do? I have to
18 reenlist.” He said, “Well, reenlist for Fort Campbell. No school, no nothing. They’re
19 going to offer you all kinds of stuff, but just reenlist for Fort Campbell. Let me know
20 when you’re coming.” And I did. I called him and told him when I was coming. I got
21 there and he says, “Well, we’re right in the middle of an IG (Inspector General)
22 inspection, but come down to the unit.” So I did. They introduced me to the IG and his
23 commanders and he said, “Just wait here until we finish this inspection.” From there he
24 took me to a replacement unit at the division headquarters. He’d managed to get me
25 assigned to his unit. I had been an infantryman, a mail clerk, and a clerk typist for him
26 before and I was assigned to the headquarters S1 section and they were about six months
27 behind in paperwork, so I caught them up before I went off to flight school. So I owe a
28 lot to him and Colonel Mortel and a lot of other folk that helped me along the way.

29 RV: So the book was cathartic in a way? And the movie too?

30 CJ: Yes, it was. It helped me to walk through like nothing else had because the
31 one thing that—well, you didn’t have—who could you talk to about that? Who could you

1 tell these stories to? The one thing that was so—still resonates with me is when Joe in the
2 movie, the character who was playing Joe is trying to write the story. How do you tell
3 that story? And Pleiku just being red—you know, your clothes red with that clay and the
4 movie depicted how our eyes looked because I remember seeing others eyes, you know
5 our eyes are red. We're tired, we're dirty, we're smelly. He's trying to write the story, it's
6 like how do you tell that story? That's what helped me to begin to release about this. It's
7 like, "Well, these guys have told it." The, I started to write a little bit, hooked up with my
8 guys from my flight unit and then there was *In the Shadow of the Blade*, you know.
9 Matter of fact, sergeant from Charlie Company, 1st of the 8th, he says, "Come on up, you
10 got to be here." Guys you haven't seen—I think it was thirty-three, thirty-six years you
11 got to come up to see them. I said I was sick, I was wearing a mask and that movie is not
12 released—I'm sitting there, actually in this jacket and all that.

13 RV: I've seen it.

14 CJ: It's like—I said, "Look, I got a respiratory injury." He says, "Take your
15 medicine, get somebody to drive you up here, but be here." I had four guys—three guys
16 that I had served with and it was a wonderful experience, all of us sitting on the side of
17 this helicopter. Earl Waters, Villagomez, and Perry Tillman. I said, "Man, this is great!"

18 RV: May I ask you a question? 1965 when you're in the 2nd of the 8th, how long
19 had you been in the army at that point?

20 CJ: 1st of the 8th.

21 RV: 1st of the 8th, sorry.

22 CJ: I'd been in the army two years.

23 RV: What was it like as an African American in the US Army in the 1960s, when
24 outside of that the United States is in chaos with the civil rights movement and the things
25 that are going on? Harry Truman said, you know he's the one who desegregated the
26 armed forces and he said and others after him, Colin Powell said, "The US Military,
27 especially the US Army is the one place where everybody could be equal." Could you
28 make some comments on that?

29 CJ: Well, that's nice of them to say and you could be more equal there, but I found
30 discrimination in the army. I'd been a part of the civil rights movement. In fact in my
31 hometown I wrote a letter to the superintendent demanding equal education for African

1 Americans and got me almost kicked out of school and life threaten and all that. I'd go
2 down to listen to Dr. King in Albany, Georgia for the Albany Movement and all that sort
3 of thing. So I was deeply involved in that because as an American, you want rights for
4 everybody. That's what separates up from every other country in the world. It's something
5 we need to be proud of. Not to aggravate our differences, but the commonality that we all
6 hold and be respectful of others views, you know that's something that's important and
7 having an understanding. My great-grandmother was a slave. Understanding after slavery,
8 this lady accumulated properties in Georgia and South Carolina. Had people employed for
9 her. She had lost her arm in a cotton gin, so she had one arm.

10 RV: Wow, what an example.

11 CJ: Yeah. If she could do this, I know that I could do whatever I want to now. The
12 first time that I told someone that I wanted to be a pilot—was playing with some kids in a
13 little sandy spot where everybody liked to play in the sand because if you fell, it didn't hurt
14 you as bad, was Richard Harris. He was an older guy in the community. Let me just tell
15 this story. As a kid, you'd go to Sunday School. You're raised as a Christian, belonged to
16 a Baptist church. I was preschooler actually. We had these little Sunday School carts. The
17 Sunday prior to this epiphany, the card had Christ standing with his staff on a side of
18 mountain with sheep at his feet. The little caption there for us little kids who were barley
19 learning to read was, "The Lord is my shepherd." Later that week by mid-week I'm looking
20 up at the clouds and the clouds look like a bunch of little sheep. I said, "Wow!" Reminded
21 me of the Sunday School card. I said, "I want to be a pilot!" I don't know where I got the
22 word from but I was four years old.

23 RV: You wanted to be up there in those clouds? Those sheep?

24 CJ: Yeah. I wanted to be flying. So I wanted to be a pilot. So you know how kids
25 are enthusiastic, I said, "Hey, guess what Richard! I want to be a pilot!" He looked at me
26 with both admiration and fear at the same time. I was kind of confused. There's a guy I'm
27 looking up and admiring, he's got that kind of reaction by what I just said, so I didn't tell
28 anybody else until I graduated from high school. Told my dad, I said, "Look dad, I really
29 want to be a pilot." Because he wanted me to be a doctor, I said, "I really want to be a
30 pilot." He said, "Well if that's what you want to do, you can do it." That was my pursuit. I
31 went to the army because you could go to the army as a high school graduate if you met all

1 the other criteria and go to flight school. That's what I did. I passed all the tests, everything.
2 But I wound up in the Airborne Infantry first and that's another story. (Laughs)

3 RV: How has it been for the reunion this year, the 40th anniversary of the
4 deployment over there in '65. What's it been like for you?

5 CJ: It's been good. Last year I came because Ted Danielson presented and sent an
6 email out that he wants some people from the 1st of the 8th to show up, so I showed up last
7 year. This year's really been good. Just seeing faces from last year, seeing General Moore.
8 You know, having express my thanks to him. That was kind of a burden I was carrying
9 around because really as a mail clerk, you don't feel like you did anything. I was telling a
10 gentlemen yesterday. I was a peripheral guy, I wasn't in the thick of battle. I'm just a
11 support guy and that's how I feel. And especially you said the phrase "Don't mean
12 nothing." People have given their lives, but you feel guilty about being alive because
13 they're dead and that's a guilt that I had. But now I'm realizing that you know, I haven't
14 done too badly and that really, out to their memory and to celebrate what we did as young
15 men.

16 RV: And you're here. You're here.

17 CJ: I'm celebrating them at the wall today, but a life well lived. That's what I want
18 to do, is really live a good solid life. I remember something my mother saying after I came
19 back from Vietnam because I'd changed so much. I'm a happy go lucky kid to somebody
20 who is kind of withdrawn, had very little tolerance for nonsense. Very analytical and to the
21 point. They saw that as being insensitive. I'm thinking, "Hey, I'm accustomed to moving at
22 a hundred miles an hour, over the ground you know, different place every day." To come
23 back to what people are guessing and thinking and not sure it's like, "No!" (Laughs) Give
24 me an answer, tell me the truth and I can deal with the rest. But coming back to the southern
25 environment where you know people are a little laid back and they would say, "I reckon,"
26 or, "I guess so." That wasn't good enough for me, I need an answer! I need the right answer
27 of whatever it is, just give me the correct, whatever the right information is and I'm good.
28 They saw that big change and she says, "I'll be so glad when you come out and be a good
29 citizen again." It struck me deep. It wasn't hurtful, but I was still trying to figure out what
30 she meant and today I realize what she meant. You know, yes you've gone through some
31 tough times. Yes, you have memories and things you may never be able to express, but I

1 am beginning to write some down. But you really need to stand up and be the person that
2 you truly are. So today at the wall is like, “I get it. Just stand up and be a good citizen
3 again.” So that’s what it means to me. It’s really just coming out and being a good citizen
4 again. Be involved, be active. A lot of times as young people, we gave it our all. We were
5 tight, we were buddies, we gave our all. I think I pulled back from that some. In fact, I
6 know I did. Today it’s like joining up again.

7 RV: Well, good. In interest of time, we need to stop. Major Jones, thank you so
8 much for this interview.

9 CJ: Well, thank you. Happy to be here.

10 (End of interview)