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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Jerry Staples
Conducted by Kelly Crager
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Transcribed by Blair Barnhill**

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.

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1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History interview with
2 Mr. Jerry Staples. Today is 13 August 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University, and Mr. Staples is joining me from Milan, Missouri. Mr. Staples,
4 to begin this interview, I would like to get some biographical information from you, if I
5 could. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

6 Jerry Staples: I was born in Marceline, Missouri, the 24th of October 1937.

7 KC: Alright. What were your parents' names?

8 JS: My mother was Beth, and my dad's name was Mitchell.

9 KC: What did your parents do for a living there?

10 JS: My mother was just a housewife. My father worked for the Santa Fe
11 Railroad.

12 KC: Okay. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

13 JS: No, I didn't. I was the only child.

14 KC: Only child, alright. What was life like growing up for you there in Missouri
15 as an only child?

16 JS: Well, I've told my three kids, "Never have one child." It's a lonely life. You
17 don't have anybody to blame anything on (chuckling). I would not recommend that for
18 anybody.

1 KC: Were you interested in sports, or any other sorts of activities growing up?
2 JS: No, I went to work at twelve years old. I didn't participate in any sports.
3 KC: What sort of work did you start out with?
4 JS: I worked in a greenhouse. I planted seeds and transplanted them into little
5 tomato plants and pepper plants. They had a lot of flowers and stuff. They let me start
6 working funerals. I was kind of a flower boy for funerals and stuff like that.
7 KC: What led you to go to work so early? Was it because of your family's
8 financial situation?
9 JS: No, no. I just—actually I didn't want to hang around home very much.
10 KC: Okay, now being born in 1937, you would have been alive, obviously,
11 before the Second World War. What sort of things do you remember about that war?
12 JS: You know, the thing I remember most was at the time, my parents lived in
13 Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My dad worked for his brother, and I remember Christmas, just
14 after Pearl Harbor. The radio station came on, and the Japs had kidnapped Santa Claus.
15 I'll never forget that. There was going to be no Christmas. That was probably one of the
16 biggest propaganda things that I remember in my life. Them Japs was dirty SOBs. They
17 took Santa Claus. We weren't going to have a Christmas.
18 KC: (Laughing) I'd never heard that, and I studied World War II for years. I have
19 never heard about that. What radio station was it? Who was providing this amusement?
20 JS: I have no idea. It was a radio station in Milwaukee.
21 KC: Huh, and they came on and said that the Japanese had kidnapped Santa
22 Claus.
23 JS: Yeah.
24 KC: That is really, really funny.
25 JS: It wasn't to us.
26 KC: Oh no, I bet it wasn't. I bet it was deadly serious business. Was there
27 anything else that you remember about the war, whether it was the scrap drives, or
28 rationing, or news—
29 JS: Oh yeah, I remember there was an old black fellow there in Milwaukee that
30 had a horse and a wagon, and he would go along and pick up anything he could find,
31 metals and stuff like that, any kind of metal, and that was his livelihood. I remember one

1 other thing. My mother and I was going to the drugstore to get some toothpaste and I had
2 this—at that time toothpaste came, probably, in a lead tube, anyways a soft metal tube,
3 and I had it. I asked mom what this—why we had to take this toothpaste tube back, and
4 she said, “Well, they build ships and stuff out of that,” whatever it was. I thought, “Well,
5 if this thing can build a ship, it ought to float.” I suppose that’s what I thought anyway,
6 and I dropped it in the storm sewer. So, I wasn’t very popular that day either.

7 KC: Yeah, I can imagine not. Growing up there—did you grow up in Milwaukee,
8 or did you move back to Missouri?

9 JS: We moved back to Marceline when I was between the first and second grade.

10 KC: How well did you do at school there in Marceline?

11 JS: Not well at all. I hated school. When I got in the Navy, I learned to study.
12 Nobody ever taught me how to study. When I got in the Navy, I was part of a captive
13 audience, I guess you could say. I just learned to study, and everything became easy for
14 me, but school was super hard. I hated school. I just didn’t like it.

15 KC: When did you graduate High School?

16 JS: 1955.

17 KC: In 1955. Now, growing up, when you did, as on only child there in Missouri,
18 for the most part, as you are working your way through school, and it sounds like you
19 really had to work your way through school in a variety of ways, what did you hope to do
20 when you finished? Did you have any idea what you wanted to do with your future?

21 JS: You mean, when I got out of high school?

22 KC: Yes sir.

23 JS: Yeah, I wanted to go into the Navy. I wanted to go to the Navy for a long,
24 long time.

25 KC: Is that right? What about the Navy caught your attention?

26 JS: It’s kind of stupid, I guess. One of the hometown guys there came home
27 driving a new Thunderbird convertible.

28 KC: And he was in the Navy?

29 JS: Yeah, and that’s what I wanted to do.

30 KC: Well, we all make these kinds of decisions. That was a pretty big one. Did
31 you know what you wanted to do in the Navy?

1 JS: No, I didn't. I had no idea. I had no idea what the Navy offered. This
2 particular guy was a machinist mate. When he got discharged from the Navy, him and I
3 worked in a grocery store there, in the meat market part, and he influenced me a great
4 deal.

5 KC: And you just decided that the Navy was going to be the place for you?

6 JS: Yep.

7 KC: Growing up there in Missouri, it was the Navy that gave you that calling.
8 Alright, when did you finally join the Navy?

9 JS: It'd been May of '55.

10 KC: So, it was just as soon as you got out of high school?

11 JS: Just as soon as I got out of high school I was gone.

12 KC: I'll be darned. Where did you go for basic training?

13 JS: Great Lakes.

14 KC: You went to Great Lakes. Tell me about naval basic training there at Great
15 Lakes.

16 JS: It was in May. We started boot camp in May. It was cool in the morning, and
17 it would get warm in the afternoon. One of the things I remember was the uniform of the
18 day. Usually, it would be whites with a wool jersey because it would be cool in the
19 morning, and about one o'clock that wool jersey would start getting hot. It was a
20 turtleneck sweater, actually. I asked one day if I could take it off, and my company
21 commander looked at me real stern like, and said, "Son, do you really want to take that
22 off?" I said, "No sir." Boot camp was interesting. I was extremely nervous. As a matter of
23 fact, my wife's mother and father said to her about me, "This is the most nervous kid I've
24 ever seen." I was called, probably during the fifth week of boot camp, I was called to the
25 psychiatrist. They were wanting to put me out because of my nerves. I pleaded with them.
26 I felt if I went home as a drop out, I don't know if I could have taken that or not. I
27 pleaded with them, and they let me stay. I was really glad about that forever.

28 KC: Did they discover that there was any sort of reason behind this nervousness,
29 or were you putting any added stress or pressure on yourself do you think?

30 JS: No, no. I was super nervous in school. I think a lot of it had to do with my
31 home life.

1 KC: What else do you remember about basic training? What was your routine,
2 for example?

3 JS: Oh, you know that has been a long time ago. Well, you know, you get up
4 early, you have your breakfast, morning meal, and you go to class. You're marching and
5 drills, and all this sort of thing, a lot of watches. Of course, that's getting you ready for
6 the fleet. In Great Lakes we had—we washed our own clothes, of course, by hand.
7 Because of the inclement weather, we had what they called a drying room. It was a real,
8 real hot, humid room, and we hung all of our clothes in this drying room to dry. Of
9 course, they had to be hung perfectly with the clothes stops and three round turns and a
10 half inch, and all this stuff. That's basically—I don't remember a whole lot about boot
11 camp other than I was glad to get out of it.

12 KC: So, do you think you did pretty well in boot camp? Did you feel like this
13 was the place for you to be?

14 JS: Yes, after graduation from boot camp, I went right back to Great Lakes to
15 Class A school. Boot camp wasn't hard for me other than the nerve thing, ya know? The
16 Company commander would show up and I would just start shaking all over, I guess. I
17 guess, I was, maybe afraid of authority, I don't know. I really don't know what it was.

18 KC: Well, when you finished with boot camp, you said you stayed there for Class
19 A School, what did you want to do when you finished with boot camp? Did you know
20 that you wanted to become a—for example, did you want to become an engineer? What
21 did you want to do?

22 JS: Well, we were assigned—during boot camp you had an interview with
23 somebody, and they designated what kind of school, or if you were going to school or
24 not. That all kind of veered on the test you took when you first went in, the GCT (General
25 Classification Test) test. I suppose my highest score was probably in engineering, so I
26 went to Class A Engineman School.

27 KC: As it was in 1955, tell me about Class A school.

28 JS: It was a good school. I learned a lot. I kind of basically knew about gasoline
29 engines, a little bit, because junk cars that I would play with, or whatever. It indoctrinated
30 me a lot to about what was going to happen in the fleet. I halfway knew what to expect

1 when I got in an engine room, rather than being dropped on a ship and say, “Go down to
2 the engine room.” I had a basic knowledge of what was going to happen anyway.

3 KC: What kind of courses were you taking there? Do you remember?

4 JS: It was just basic engineering on pumps and valves, and just the basic way a
5 diesel engine worked, and a gasoline engine worked. A lot of valves, temperature
6 regulated valves, you know, things like that.

7 KC: Did you have any preference for a larger ship, or a smaller ship once you
8 eventually got finished with your training?

9 JS: No, we just got orders, and there we went.

10 KC: What the Navy said was what you were going to do.

11 JS: Right.

12 KC: After you make it through basic, and you are there at Class A school, did
13 you ever give any thought to what you might wind up doing? Here we are in the middle
14 of the Cold War in 1955 and in 1956, and you know Cold Wars can become hot wars
15 very, very quickly, and you are part of the military. Did you ever give any thought about
16 that as a young man about what this might mean for you?

17 JS: No. It never entered my mind. It just was, to me, it was an exciting adventure.
18 I remember this fellow and I, him and I was in boot camp together, and then both went to
19 Class A school together. He was from Falls City, Nebraska. One of the chiefs there at the
20 Class A school was bald headed, and I didn’t say a word, you know, but this other
21 fellow—there was a big refrigeration evaporator hanging on the overhead, and it was
22 brass. The other fellow said something smart to the chief, I forgot what it was, and the
23 chief had a bottle of, or a can of Brasso, and he said, “Son, you know what this is for?”
24 Ramsey said, “Yes sir, chief. It’s to polish chrome domes like yours.” So, him and I,
25 being as I was an innocent bystander, got to polish that big brass evaporator up there.

26 KC: Even keeping your mouth shut didn’t do you any good in this circumstance.

27 JS: No, not a bit.

28 KC: How well did you do in Class A school?

29 JS: I’d say, probably average, middle line, average.

1 KC: You mention that you really learned how to study, I guess at this level in the
2 Navy. Alright, Class A school finishes. What was Class A school, was it maybe six
3 weeks, something like that?

4 JS: I think, maybe, six or eight weeks, yeah. They had a—if you done bad on a
5 test, they had what was called, stupid study. You didn't go anywhere. You stayed and
6 studied. It didn't take very long to learn that, hey, I don't like this stupid study. People
7 there, it was more like a one-on-one thing. When you were at the stupid study thing, that I
8 did attend a couple times, you had a guy right there with you. The Navy instructors are
9 really pretty good. They would just sit down with you and explain stuff to you, and
10 actually teach you how to learn.

11 KC: So, it sounds like you had a pretty positive experience here at A school then.

12 JS: I really did.

13 KC: Very good. Now, we are getting along toward the end of 1955, I guess, by
14 the time you finish here. Where do you go from Class A school?

15 JS: I went aboard the USS *Bamberg County* LST 209 in Charleston, South
16 Carolina.

17 KC: Okay, tell me about the LST.

18 JS: Well, the same guy, this Ramsey guy from Falls City, him and I went aboard
19 this LST together. We went aboard on a Sunday afternoon. This first class engineman
20 met us, and he asked us if we wanted to go back ashore, and we said, "Of course." So, he
21 said, "Go throw your sea bag," and he showed us where to put them. He said, "Go throw
22 your sea bag and get your locker squared away, and I'll have your liberty card." Well, we
23 came back, and this guy was in dungarees, before, he was in undress blues. We came
24 back and this guy was in dungarees, and one of us said, "Can we have our liberty cards?"
25 He said, "Liberty cards? Hell, you guys don't even know where the engine room is for
26 christ sakes. Get down in the engine room." I thought, "Boy, this guy, he's a little bit
27 different." We went down in the engine room, and we were messing around in our
28 dungarees, and here comes this guy in undress blues with our liberty cards. He said,
29 "What are you guys doing down here?" I thought, "Well, this guy is nuts." Come to find
30 out they was identical twins, Bob and Jack Childers, and they messed with people like
31 that all the time.

1 KC: They saw you guys coming from a mile away, didn't they?

2 JS: Oh, you bet. The LST (Landing Ship, Tank) was—I enjoyed it a lot. I hadn't
3 been on there very long, and we went to Halifax, Nova Scotia from Charleston, and we
4 were tied up at the pier at Halifax and they had some Canadian and I think probably
5 French UDT (Underwater Demolition Team) people and they were trying to sabotage
6 ships, drill type thing. They had some kind of a new breathing apparatus. I have no idea
7 what, but it was underwater demolition people. The water was just clear as a glass of
8 drinking water, and we all manned the reel, and watched for these guys. We never did see
9 anybody, and of course they blew us up. I remember that very well. We left Halifax and
10 came back down the east coast, and we came through the Buzzard Bay, and I thought that
11 was pretty neat, up in New England, and back to Charleston. Then from Charleston we
12 went to San Juan, Puerto Rico. We were on Operation Springboard down there. When we
13 pulled into San Juan, one of the reduction gears burnt up, so we were in San Juan a long
14 time getting parts and things, just tied up to the pier.

15 KC: What was Operation Springboard? I've not heard of that.

16 JS: Well, it's every spring. It's an amphibious operation in the Caribbean. I'm not
17 sure it happens anymore. It was minesweepers, the amphibians, and the mine land would all
18 go down there and do an operation in the springtime. Then after Springboard we went to
19 Green Cove Springs, Florida and decommissioned her.

20 KC: Decommissioned the LST?

21 JS: Mhm.

22 KC: While we are here on the subject of the LST, can you describe for me what
23 the LST looked like, and what its purpose was?

24 JS: Well, an LST was about 300 foot long and had big open doors. The bow
25 doors swung open, and a ramp laid down that carried tanks, jeeps, artillery pieces, troops,
26 and things of this nature. It would go up on the beach, open the doors, drop the ramp.
27 They had ballast tanks all around the side. They'd fill the ballast tanks on the way in, then
28 once they were on the beach it would shift. Instead of having engine cooling water
29 coming from the outside, it would come through the ballast tanks because the sand and
30 stuff wouldn't get in the coolers. If you were on the beach very long, it got extremely hot
31 in the compartments because the hot water would be circulating all around the sides of

1 the ship and the ballast tanks. That's basically what it was, a troop and tank carrier was
2 actually what they were. It had—the bottom of it was just as flat as a basketball court
3 deck.

4 KC: Okay, so you are in Florida, and you are decommissioning this particular
5 LST. What is your next duty assignment?

6 JS: I went aboard the USS *Parrot*, coastal minesweeper 197 out of Charleston,
7 also.

8 KC: So, you are on a minesweeper now? You're getting a pretty good
9 introduction to a variety of different ships here early in your career. Tell me about your
10 time aboard the minesweeper.

11 JS: Well, the MSC was a very, very small ship. It was a Coastal Minesweeper. I
12 think there is probably only about twenty eight people on it, officers and all. We went to
13 the Caribbean in it. We went up to a lot of the small islands in the Caribbean. We took it
14 up—as a matter of fact, we took it all the way up in—all the way up to Newfoundland,
15 and being sometimes stupid, like the Navy is, they done a mine test on it with a depth
16 charge and blew all the caulking out of it. They were trying to do a cold water test and a
17 depth charge went off a little quick, or whatever anyway. It was quite an experience. We
18 took on a lot of water. Anyway, we got back to Charleston.

19 KC: Do you remember any of the specifics about this particular incident? I think
20 it would have been a little scary, I think.

21 JS: Well, yeah it was. I don't know, it's just one of those things that happen. You
22 just go on with it. We come back to Charleston. Well, we went from Charleston back
23 down to Gitmo (Guantanamo Bay) and went through underway training in Gitmo.

24 KC: What kind of training?

25 JS: Just underway. You all kinds of drills and inspections. It's just underway
26 training they call it. People come—people are assigned these jobs just as underway
27 training inspectors. You do your drills, and they grade you on how you do on your drills
28 and this sort of thing. We left Gitmo, and when we got back from Gitmo, I took leave
29 from Charleston and went back to Marceline and married my high school sweetheart.

30 KC: Is that right?

31 JS: Yes.

1 KC: How long have you two been—how long had you been dating?

2 JS: Oh since, probably the first part of our senior year of high school.

3 KC: And so, you kept this relationship going even though you were in the Navy
4 and out to sea quite a bit then?

5 JS: Yeah. She went back to Charleston with me. I had rented an apartment and
6 her and I cleaned it up all weekend long and I went back to the ship on Monday morning,
7 and I had orders for a net tender in Key West. So, here we went.

8 KC: Well, tell me about your time down there.

9 JS: There is kind of a funny little story about this net tender also. When I first got
10 to Charleston, I was waiting on the pier for the boat to take us out to the LST, and
11 alongside the LST was two ugly ships tied up smaller than the LST, and they had great
12 big horns on the front of it. It was built something like a fleet tug, but it didn't have the
13 bow of the fleet tug, it had big horns on the front. I asked this guy what it was, and he
14 said—of course, he was a seaman. He had already been in six months and knew
15 everything there was to know about the fleet. He told me it was a laundry ship. He said,
16 "Those things are extremely fast." There was a recompression chamber on the stern of it
17 for divers, and he told me that was a washing machine and he said they washed clothes
18 back there and then they hang them on them horns up there and they go fast and dry
19 them. Well, I didn't know. I was a kid. So, a couple years later I got aboard one, so that
20 was my net tender. It was the AN-91, the USS *Waxsaw*.

21 KC: I guess you learned what that ship was about properly.

22 JS: Yeah, I learned it was not extremely fast, and I learned that wasn't a washing
23 machine. We were assigned to mine land—the net tender was assigned to mine land
24 down in the Gulf, down in Key West. One of the—probably the biggest job we'd done—
25 there was still World War Two mines in the Gulf down there in 1957. As a matter of fact,
26 every once in a while, a shrimp boat would come in with a mine in their net, which was
27 not good. So, the minesweepers were doing the sweeping and we was picking up and
28 disarming, is what we were doing. It was our main job. We also were attached to the
29 mine evaluation department down there. We'd take a mine out and drop it, then we would
30 guard it for, like, two weeks to make sure the shrimp boats or nobody bothered it, then we

1 would raise it back up, and then they would bring it in and evaluate what the salt water
2 had done to it, ya know, corrosion and whatever, whatever they do with mines.

3 KC: Did you ever consider this to be dangerous, because obviously it could have
4 been very dangerous.

5 JS: Uhm, one of my jobs on the net tender was I, during the general quarters,
6 which we always went to when we picked up a mine, was I run the boom and the crane
7 that picked it up. We had an EOD (Explosive Ordinance Disposal) team aboard and they
8 took the cap off of one of them one time to disarm it and it started ticking, and shit got by
9 then pretty quick.

10 KC: So, what was the next step? What did you do?

11 JS: They took the little canister off and just dropped it over the side. It didn't take
12 a period of probably ten seconds to do all that, but it was pretty harrowing in the
13 meantime.

14 KC: I would guess so. Alright, so here you are in Key West. You are newly
15 married on this Net Tender. Did your wife come with you to Key West?

16 JS: Yes. Yeah, here she was, a little farm girl that had never seen anything bigger
17 than the farm pond and she was in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, ya know?

18 KC: That's not a bad place to be, I would say?

19 JS: No, Key West then was physically smaller than it is now, a lot smaller.
20 They've dredged up and made covered swamp and make shopping centers. We go down
21 there quite frequently. It's a lot bigger place. We rented an apartment on Caroline Street
22 in '57. It was a studio apartment. We had a kitchen and a living room that turned into a
23 bedroom and a bathroom. We paid sixty five dollars a month for it. Right now, that
24 apartment goes for 350 dollars a night. It's still there. 613 Caroline Street.

25 KC: So, you are, here you are in Key West, Florida, newly married. Do you feel
26 pretty good about the way things are working out for you? Here you are in your new
27 career with the Navy and starting a family and all that. Do you feel pretty good about it?

28 JS: Yeah, I do. We had an experience there, too. We went to get underway one
29 Monday morning, of course I was in the engine room, and the *Waxsaw* was diesel
30 electric. They had two, big, six cylinders diesel engines that drove two generators which
31 drove one motor. You are dealing with a lot of electricity there, a lot of amperage, and we

1 closed the contacts and the whole back of the contact board flashed like a flash bulb. I
2 went back there, and somebody had stuck a two and three quarter inch wrench between
3 the two main contacts and when we closed it, it just melted it, ya know? So, it wasn't
4 very long, and NIS (Naval Investigative Service) started calling everybody up, ya know,
5 and they got me in the wardroom, and they said, "How long have you been married?"
6 "About three weeks." They said, "You didn't want to get away very much, did you? I
7 said, "Wait, wait, wait a minute now. It wasn't me."

8 KC: So, do you think they were actually blaming you, or were just trying to find
9 out some information?

10 JS: They was questioning, ya know? Naturally, a newlywed, you don't want to
11 go to sea, but they were fishing.

12 KC: Did they ever find out who was responsible for it?

13 JS: Yeah, they did. It was an electrician.

14 KC: I assume it was just an accident?

15 JS: No, no.

16 KC: On purpose?

17 JS: Yeah, it was on purpose. It was a sabotage deal.

18 KC: Whatever happened to this guy?

19 JS: He disappeared. I don't know. He left the ship, and I don't know where he
20 went.

21 KC: Interesting, very interesting. So, this is in 1957. How long were you going to
22 be stationed down there in Key West?

23 JS: Uhm, well, let me see. We had been there '57 and '58. I reenlisted and I
24 reenlisted for class C Engineman School, and they sent me to Great Lakes again for class
25 C school. My wife Phyllis came back to Marceline and stayed there while I went to
26 school at Great Lakes, and I ended up being up in Great Lakes for about six months and
27 then went back to the *Waxsaw* and her and I and our baby went back to the *Waxsaw*.
28 Then, I think it was in December of '59, I'm guessing, I think that's probably right, we
29 went to Philadelphia and decommissioned her.

1 KC: Alright, so you are moving right along here in your career. You are
2 advancing as a mechanic, as an engineman. Do you ever give any thought to leaving the
3 Navy, moving on to anything else?

4 JS: No. When I joined, I was seventeen, so I went in on what they called a kiddie
5 cruise, or a minority cruise. I got discharged the day before I was twenty one. The day
6 before I was twenty one our little girl was twenty two days old. I didn't have a job,
7 nowhere to go, so I just reenlisted. That was the decision we both—her and I discussed,
8 and we were both happy with it. Like I say, she was a farm girl without a steady income.
9 Her parents never had a steady income. You know how farmers don't have a steady
10 income, and she enjoyed and appreciated a steady income.

11 KC: Sure, that check coming in every month is a pretty good thing.

12 JS: Like I say, we had a very, very young baby and nowhere to go. My decision
13 was obvious.

14 KC: Now, in 1960 President Kennedy is elected. John Kennedy is elected
15 President. What do you remember? What were your impressions about Kennedy?

16 JS: In 1960 I was already in San Diego on a Destroyer. The wife is a strong
17 Catholic, and of course, that swayed her on Kennedy. Really, I don't remember a whole
18 lot about that until his assassination. I remember that vividly. Of course, that's another
19 story, but I don't remember too much about outside of his being the first Catholic to run
20 for president and that was quite a controversial thing, ya know, to the public, it seemed to
21 me like, more-so than what it should have been, maybe, I don't know.

22 KC: Okay, so 1960 you find yourself out in San Diego on a destroyer. What was
23 the destroyer?

24 JS: The USS *Buck* DD-761.

25 KC: Okay, you are on the *Buck*. What was going to be your role on the *Buck*?

26 JS: I was 2nd class by then. I was attached to the A gang, which was auxiliary.
27 We had the emergency diesel generator. We had the steering gear. We had the motor
28 wheel boat, all the galley equipment, the scullery machines, that sort of things,
29 temperature regulators in the turbine rooms. I stood turbine watches in the forward engine
30 room.

1 KC: Now, out there in California—first off, did your wife come with you out to
2 California?

3 JS: Yes.

4 KC: Okay, so she is getting to see quite a bit of the world, and you still just have
5 the one girl by this time?

6 JS: Yes.

7 KC: Okay, so it looks like it's a good thing for your family with all the travel,
8 and the steady income, and you are doing very well in the Navy, and you are aboard the
9 *Buck*. How long were you aboard the *Buck*?

10 JS: I went aboard in '60, and in '62 I got transferred to the Recruitment center in
11 San Diego and I started pushing boots there.

12 KC: Okay, well some people would think this would be somewhat mundane, not
13 terribly adventurous, but tell me about your time trying to bring in recruits.

14 JS: Well, I started—I picked up my first company almost five years to the day
15 from when I went to boot camp. I made 1st class on the *Buck* just a little over five years,
16 and then I transferred over there. I had recruits older than I was, which made it a little bit
17 difficult sometimes. They didn't give me any trouble. I suppose it was difficult for me.
18 Training recruits is, I would say, almost a person who would deserve a degree in
19 psychology because you learn an awful lot about people. You meet with every type of
20 person in the world, I suppose. Different livelihoods, different cultures, different
21 everything. It was very interesting. I enjoyed it. My first company—after my first
22 company graduated, I got called, but I was too picky, I guess, on who I wanted to
23 graduate. I probably called some people that I shouldn't have. I expected too much, I
24 think, of what they should do, but I enjoyed it. I pushed a total of four companies. In
25 between companies I worked in the atomic nuclear and biological warfare class as the
26 classroom instructor.

27 KC: Oh wow. I want to talk about that, but before we get there, tell me about the
28 process. You are bringing in these new recruits, you are bringing in a new company. Take
29 me through the process of your training these recruits, from the time they show up to the
30 time you graduate them. What is the process? What are the procedures and how do you
31 approach them?

1 JS: Well, they get off the bus usually in the middle of the night and you meet
2 them. They're all in civilian clothes, of course. They've got long hair, they've got short
3 hair, some of them are dirty, some is clean, and the first thing that they do is get their hair
4 cut. They are still in civilian clothes. They get their hair cut, and then they are basically
5 all the same because everybody doesn't have any hair. That's a big shock thing, to lose
6 your hair. I don't know why, but it is. Maybe that goes all the way back to when
7 Cleopatra scalped that guy, or whatever. Anyway, they get their haircut, and then they get
8 their uniforms issued and that's actually quite a process, just issuing uniforms for them.
9 They get this sea bag full of clothes and everybody is standing out on this ground, eighty
10 kids standing on this ground, and they are told to dump their sea bag, and the guy up on
11 the podium says, "Okay, you guys got five skivvy shirts. I want to see one in each hand,
12 one over each shoulder and one in your mouth. Then he knows that everybody's got five
13 skivvy shirts. The same with skivvy shorts, and it goes on like this. Then these kids have
14 got their sea bag, then you take them to their barracks, then you go through the process
15 of—they have to wash their clothes, they have to hang their clothes out to dry, and they
16 have to be hung in a specific way, their locker has to be stored in a specific way, their
17 bunk has to be made in a specific way. By the time they are there three days, the
18 company commander can barely talk. He's so hoarse from—we didn't have a
19 loudspeaker system or anything, you just get up on the quarter deck table and you talk
20 loud. You'd actually holler. These kids are learning and it's just a basic learning thing.
21 Once they get straightened out, squared away with their locker and everything, they start
22 their classroom thing. Basically, boot camp is, I'd say, seventy five to eighty percent
23 classroom. You've got your physical fitness drills, and your military coat of arms and this
24 sort of thing, but it's a lot of classroom. It's really quite a learning experience.

25 KC: What sort of things were the most challenging for you taking the company
26 through?

27 JS: That's quite a question. What was challenging for me? Ya know, I really
28 don't know. I can't say.

29 KC: I didn't know if there were issues of discipline, or issues of leadership, or the
30 psychology aspect of it, or anything like that was something that you noticed above any
31 of the others.

1 JS: Uhm, after three or four days you picked out a guy that was supposed to be
2 your RCP, or your recruit chief petty officer, and then you picked guys right on down the
3 line that where he was in charge when you were gone. You had a second guy in charge
4 and so on down the line. If you picked a good one, they took a lot of the responsibility.
5 When you were gone, they took the responsibility on their self. Basically, they had done a
6 good job of it. I guess I recruited some—you would tell the recruit, “I’m your mother and
7 your father now,” and they kind of believed that. They didn’t believe that, but they took
8 you for your word. You were the only one they had. If they had a problem, they came to
9 you. If they gave you a problem, you went to them. That’s just the way it was.

10 KC: What kinds of problems would they come to you with?

11 JS: Oh, sometimes being picked on. I don’t know, just different things. They
12 came to me one time and said that the guy that was pushing us, the sister company was
13 giving the recruits a bad time. Come to find out, he was taking the kids in the shower and
14 doing his thing with them, and he got kicked out for it. If they had a personal problem,
15 they’d come to me with it and things of that nature.

16 KC: What sort of things would you go to them for? What sort of problems would
17 they potentially give you?

18 JS: Oh, they weren’t supposed to have a radio, and of course you knew they had
19 a radio, he’d send them over. Smoking problem, if the smoking lamp was out, they
20 couldn’t smoke. If somebody in the company was messing up, they’d come to me and
21 say, “This guy is screwing up, you need to talk to him,” or something of this nature.
22 When you’re gone—when the cat’s away the mice will play. So, things like this.

23 KC: You mentioned a moment ago that there was, in your sister company, that
24 there was a problem with the leadership and the guy got kicked out. You said something
25 about going to the shower. Was this a homosexual activity?

26 JS: Yeah, it was. He was company commander, and he was doing his thing with
27 the recruits.

28 KC: Now, was this something that was forced upon the recruits, or something
29 that was mutual?

1 JS: Yeah, it was forced on them. Yeah, it was a bad deal. I had no idea what was
2 going on. He had a family and was not too far from retirement. He really shocked me, but
3 anyway, that's the way it went.

4 KC: It does sound like, other than these incidents, these unfortunate incidents,
5 that you enjoyed yourself. You said you pushed, what, four companies through?

6 JS: Yes.

7 KC: Alright, what was the most rewarding thing? When you were done with a
8 company, what did you look back on with the most pride?

9 JS: The thing—the graduation, you just can't believe in nine weeks—you get this
10 bunch of ragtag kids and in nine weeks you've got a well-oiled machine in full dressed
11 uniform. The pride is unbelievable.

12 KC: Alright, you also said that you were working on, what was it, atomic—?

13 JS: Yes, atomic nuclear and biological warfare.

14 KC: Okay, tell me about that. Were you taking classes in this or were you
15 teaching classes in this?

16 JS: I was teaching classes. We had a lesson plan. We just taught by—one of our
17 big things was the gas chamber. We had a tear gas chamber that we'd take the kids in
18 without a gas mask, have them put their gas mask on, and then clear the gas mask. It was
19 a big learning experience for them. As a matter of fact, I got to take a bunch of fleet
20 marines through one time, and I got an accommodation letter from the commandant of
21 the Marine Corps for taking his Fleet Marines through.

22 KC: What was it that you did special for the Fleet Marines, anything?

23 JS: Yeah, gave them a little bit of gas. It was the same deal. You take them in
24 there—they were all standing around laughing like this was going to be funny, and you
25 take them in the gas chamber with their gas mask on and say, "Okay, you've got to take it
26 off," then it's a different story. They're not laughing anymore. If you don't listen to what
27 you are being told, you put your gas mask back on, you don't know how to clear it,
28 you've got a gas mask full of slobber, ya know? It was interesting.

29 KC: How long were you here in San Diego doing this?

30 JS: I started in '62, I'm pretty sure, and then October of—it would have
31 September of '64 I had orders to Vietnam, and I didn't even know where Vietnam was.

1 KC: Alright, before we get you there, let's focus on one thing that you mentioned
2 earlier. We talked about the, very briefly, the assassination of Kennedy. Where were you?
3 What were you doing, Mr. Staples?

4 JS: I was in class, probably the gas warfare class. The senior instructor came in
5 and said, "The President has just been assassinated." The class just got deadly quiet. I
6 will never forget that. It's a very vivid memory.

7 KC: What kind of effect did this have on you personally as you look back on it?
8 What did the Kennedy assassination mean?

9 JS: It really hit me pretty hard. I don't know, maybe I just felt devastated that
10 somebody could do this to our President. It was really quite a blow to me.

11 KC: And what about your wife? You mentioned she was very pro Kennedy
12 because of her Catholicism.

13 JS: Yeah, it affected both of us. It was a mental thing, or an emotional thing,
14 both. For some strange reason, I felt super bad for Jackie. I don't know why. More than
15 probably, I should have, I don't know.

16 KC: Interesting. Alright, now you said it was in '64. You said August of '64 I
17 believe you said?

18 JS: September when I got the orders.

19 KC: September of 1964 you get orders for Vietnam, and you said you didn't even
20 know where Vietnam was.

21 JS: No, as a matter of fact, my mother and daddy came to San Diego and I just
22 dropped a company, and after you drop a company, they give you four days leave and
23 don't charge you for it. My dad and I had gone to the Colorado River at Lake Martinez,
24 and we were fishing, and came back to San Diego and my wife said, "The base has been
25 trying to get a hold of you. You've got orders." I said, "I'm not even supposed to have
26 orders yet.

27 KC: I was going to ask you about that. You weren't up for anything, they just
28 decided then and there that you were the guy?

29 JS: Yeah, there was three, there was a chief engineman and two of us first class
30 engineman and I think four boatswain mates all pushing boots, and we all got our tours
31 cut short and there we went. Nobody ever knew why. Nobody told us why. We had no

1 prior training, no indoctrination, or nothing. My orders said, "Take seven sets of whites.
2 No dungarees required," and here we went, after twenty one shots, I think.

3 KC: Shots, of course you are talking about the inoculations for service in tropical
4 regions.

5 JS: Yeah.

6 KC: Now, when you get the orders for Vietnam, obviously one of the things you
7 are going to do is look it up, find out where it is, and then what the hell is going on there.

8 JS: Yeah, we didn't know. Nobody heard of Vietnam in '64. Matter of fact I was
9 getting ready to leave and they said, "Do you want to take your fishing pole?" and I said,
10 "I don't think so. Maybe I can get one there." We didn't know what was going on.

11 KC: What was your family's reaction to this?

12 JS: Nobody knew. There were still dependents in Vietnam. We discussed, maybe
13 later I can send for you. I don't know. We had no idea what it was. The orders read like it
14 was going to be like out of state duty. There we went.

15 KC: I'll be darned. Now this is going to be an extended stay outside of the waters
16 of the United States. What was it like for you and your wife and you still just had the one
17 girl at this time?

18 JS: No, we had—a matter of fact we had another girl, and we had a little boy that
19 was born in June of that year.

20 KC: Oh wow.

21 JS: Yeah, the orders read for a year, and we had no idea. It was tough leaving, but
22 you got orders, you did what you were told, you know?

23 KC: Okay, so here you are, you are leaving your young family, a brand new baby
24 boy, did your wife move back to Missouri, or did she stay there in California?

25 JS: No, no. We had a house rented in San Diego. We had a wonderful landlord
26 and land lady. They were almost like family to us. A matter of fact, we went back to visit
27 their mausoleum a couple of years ago, and the guy that was kind of the guide for the
28 mausoleum, he asked us if they were family, and I said, "No, they just became very good
29 friends." He said, "A lot of times close friends are closer than family," and that's true.
30 These guys, they just fell in place like family, and took care of Phyllis and the kids for
31 me. So, we were very fortunate in that manner.

1 KC: So, September 1964, despite not knowing very much about what Vietnam is
2 and despite having this young family, you are going to make the trip across the Pacific.
3 Tell me about the trip across.

4 JS: Well, I got orders in September. I actually left in October. We left Travis Air
5 Force Base. There was only two of us, two sailors, engineman 1st class Davis and myself,
6 we were sitting in next to the last seat on a Boeing 707 with the seats backwards, a Mets
7 flight. The flight engineer was in the seat behind us. We left Travis Air Force Base, and
8 the guy hit the throttles on that thing and the oxygen bottle flew off the bulkhead and hit
9 the flight engineer on the head and knocked him out. I thought, "Man, this is going to be
10 one hell of a flight." We landed in Pearl, they told everybody to get off the plane, there is
11 something wrong with this thing. They said, "Go to the club or whatever you want to do,
12 and we will come and get you." I thought it was probably eight or ten hours later, they
13 came and got us, and they said they had it fixed so we left there, and this plane is full of
14 Army officers. Davis and I was, I think, probably the only two enlisted on it. We got to
15 Clarke Air Force Base in Manila, and it touched down and they told us to go over to this
16 barracks and they had to work on the plane again. This guy, this Air Force guy that I met,
17 Davis and I at the barracks complex, and he gave us a sheet and a pillow and a blanket,
18 and told us, "You guys go in this room here," and he said, "I'm going to send you a house
19 boy in a little bit," and he said, "Do not come out." This was about eleven o'clock at
20 night. He said, "Whatever you guys do, don't come outside." So we go in his room and
21 there is a couple of beds in there, and this little Filipino fellow come in and asked if we
22 wanted a beer or whatever we wanted, I said, "Yeah, go get us a Sam Magill, so he left,
23 so we was in there drinking, had four or five beers, kind of enjoying ourselves, and I kept
24 wondering, how come this guy told us not to go outside. Anyway, I stuck my head out the
25 door and all these Army officers are laying out there in cots with mosquito nets over
26 them. I think this Air Force sergeant only had one bed in a room and he didn't want a big
27 fight with senior officers, (laughing) so he told us to get in there and don't look out. I
28 closed the door really quick and that was the end of that. I never did know the reason for
29 that, but anyways we were there all night and left the next day about noon for Tan Son
30 Nhut.

1 KC: Now, many of the people who served in the Navy, as you know well,
2 underwent SERE training before going to Vietnam, but this wasn't the case for you?

3 JS: No, we had no training whatsoever.

4 KC: It was just, get on the plane, and we will wake you up when you get into
5 Saigon?

6 JS: Right.

7 KC: Okay, so you fly into Tan Son Nhut, as you said. Describe your first arrival
8 and your first impressions of Tan Son Nhut in Saigon in Vietnam.

9 JS: Well, they opened the door of that airplane, and it was like someone opened
10 the door to a furnace. They took us out on the tarmac and the Air Force, of course they
11 were running the whole show. They took us out on the tarmac and led us into a building,
12 terminal, I suppose you would call it. It was extremely hot. It stunk really bad. I don't
13 know if you have been to Vietnam or not, but there is just a stench in the air that is
14 different from probably anywhere else in the world. They told us don't drink any of the
15 water, don't eat any of the food and they were going to take us to a hotel billet there in
16 Saigon, itself. We were probably there in the terminal building, I would say, forty five
17 minutes to an hour getting our gear together and everything like that, and they took us to
18 a hotel. On the way to the hotel—we got on an Air Force bus, and they had the heavy
19 screen wire on the windows so nobody could throw a grenade in or whatever. We didn't
20 even know what was going on at all. They took us by the presidential palace, which was
21 just—there had been a coup about a week before when—I forgot even who it was.
22 Somebody had a military coup and overthrew the president, and the presidential palace
23 was bombed out. I thought, “Jesus, what the hell did I get into here?” Anyway, we got to
24 the hotel, and I was assigned to the Vietnamese Sea Force for a little while that was right
25 there in Saigon. We traveled by bus from the—my hotel was the plaza, and it was about
26 twenty blocks to where the Sea Force was. We would get on the bus in the morning and
27 go to the Sea Force, and I worked there at the Sea Force until December, I guess. Then in
28 December I went to Phu Quoc Island with the Vietnamese Junk Force, but while I was
29 with the Sea Force, I had a couple of interesting things happen. The U.S. government
30 gave the Vietnamese Navy some PGMs, Patrol Gun Medium. They had them built. I
31 don't know where they were built. It was a brand new vessel. It had radio tracking

1 devices on them. It had beautiful V8, big Mercedes diesels on them to run them,
2 refrigeration spaces and everything. They trashed them things in a month.

3 KC: The Vietnamese did?

4 JS: Oh yeah. The refrigerators had live chickens in them, ya know. It was a mess.
5 One of the LSMs, the Vietnamese had landing ship medium. One of the LSMs was off
6 the tip of Ca Mau the Southern Vietnam peninsula, and the guy wouldn't patrol, so by
7 radio somebody contacted him and asked why he wouldn't patrol, and he said he didn't
8 have any steering engine. So, they flew me down there and I checked everything out and
9 he had steering. So, I talked to the captain, and I said, "You have steering, how come you
10 don't patrol?" He said, "I don't have any pressure," and I said, "Your pressure gauge
11 doesn't work. Do you have a pressure gauge in your supply?" "Yeah." I said, "Let's get it
12 and put it on, then you will have pressure and you can steer, and you can go on patrol."
13 "No," he said, "I can't do that." He said, "I have to have 100% spare parts on board at all
14 time," and he said, "If I don't have 100% spare parts I go to jail." That's the way it was,
15 ya know? So, I go back to Saigon. I get him a pressure gauge and take it back down there
16 and put it on, and he's happy. He goes on patrol, but a lot of these officers in the Vietnam
17 Navy, especially the Junk Force, they spent a good part of their career in jail. They got
18 out of jail, and they would send them on patrol, and when they got off patrol they'd go
19 back and do their jail time. It was just a crazy place to be, but that's the way it was. Like I
20 say, I stayed there—I was still in Saigon when the, I think it was the Ambassador hotel.
21 Somebody drove a car under it and blew it up on, maybe Christmas of '64. That was the
22 officer's hotel. I was still there then. I was up on the second floor of the plaza hotel when
23 they were bringing the Navy vehicles with their white seat covers with blood all over
24 them. I'll never forget that and the ambulances and stuff. It wasn't very long after that
25 that I went down to the island with the Junk Force.

26 KC: Now, here you are, newly arrived in Vietnam. You are in Saigon. You are
27 stationed at the Sea Force. At any time did anyone say, "Look, here is what we are doing
28 here? We are here to help the Vietnamese, to help build up the Vietnamese Navy," all of
29 these different things that the U.S. was there as advisors, et cetera. Did anyone ever
30 explain this to you?

1 JS: No, not really. There was an American Navy Lieutenant that was assigned to
2 the Sea Force too. He had done the best he could, but none of us knew exactly what we
3 were doing there. We knew after we got there that we were supposed to be advisors, but
4 just for an example, like that pressure gauge, how to you advise people if they already
5 know if they do what you want them to do, they are going to go to jail. It's pretty hard to
6 convince somebody to do that, ya know?

7 KC: At these early stages of your time there, what was your impression of the
8 Vietnamese, in particular, the South Vietnamese naval forces?

9 JS: It seemed like they tried. They tried to do but they lacked motivation, maybe.
10 They were afraid to do anything, afraid to be in trouble. At that time, like I said before,
11 they had just had an overthrow of the government. You didn't know day to day who was
12 going to be in charge tomorrow. The only thing we could do was listen to the radio for
13 patriotic music. If patriotic music was on the radio, they just had an overthrow of the
14 government.

15 KC: They were turning them over pretty quickly about that time, obviously.
16 What was your role going to be there with the Sea Force? What was your defined role?

17 JS: You mean, did anybody actually tell me what I was supposed to do?

18 KC: Yeah, did they say, "Okay, Staples here is where you are going to be, here is
19 what you are going to do."

20 JS: No.

21 KC: It was just wait for somebody to call and tell you to do something?

22 JS: Yeah. I just went to the Sea Force and started wondering around. I wasn't
23 assigned to do anything.

24 KC: It doesn't sound like there is much organization as for as you are concerned.

25 JS: No, no.

26 KC: Very, very interesting. How long were you stationed there in Saigon with the
27 Sea Force?

28 JS: From October till the last part of December.

29 KC: So, the last part of 1964 you were involved there. What sort of things were
30 you doing when you weren't on duty in Saigon?

1 JS: Just go to the hotel, go to the bar, whatever. As a matter of fact, the first night
2 in Saigon, like I say, this 1st class engineman and I, Davis, we met a chief engineman
3 there that had been there, I guess he got there the day before, maybe a few hours before.
4 Anyway, him and I pushed boots together around Shipman and he said, “Hey Staples,
5 let’s go get something to eat down at Cheap Charlie’s,” and I said, “The Shipman at Tan
6 Son Nhut told us don’t eat none of this stuff.” He said, “Ah hell, I know how to do this.
7 Just take a shot of whiskey after three or four bites and it will kill all of them germs.
8 Well, Shipman and I was in the same hotel room, so anyway we went down to Cheap
9 Charlie’s, or whoever it was and ate and the next morning Shipman and I wake up. He is
10 in one bed, and I am in the other, and Shipman is about 6’6” and probably weighs 250
11 pounds. He is a big man. He’s got sheets over him in his skivvy shorts, and he lifted his
12 leg to pass gas and squirted through both sheets (laughing). I said, “Shipman, that didn’t
13 work, did it?” “No.” That was about the first thing that happened to a person, is you got
14 bad, bad diarrhea.

15 KC: Did you suffer this as well? (Laughing)

16 JS: You bet.

17 KC: What was your impression of the Vietnamese people you encountered there?
18 The civilians.

19 JS: The civilians? They seemed like nice people. Friendly. They were always in a
20 hurry it seemed like, to do whatever they were going to do. I don’t know what they were
21 in a hurry to do, but they were always—horns honking, get out of my way and this sort of
22 thing. I supposed that’s part of being in Asia. The people were very friendly. I ended up
23 with a counterpart. Him and I became very good friends. As a matter of fact, he came to
24 San Diego to see me. Yeah, I liked the Vietnamese people. Of course, I would get
25 extremely disgusted with them sometimes, but—

26 KC: Why so? Why do you say that?

27 JS: Well, for not doing what I thought they should be doing.

28 KC: Can you give me an example of that?

29 JS: Well, they always had to have their siesta. Being in the middle of a job and it
30 come siesta time, whether the job was done or not we are going to take a siesta. We’ll be
31 back later. We are going to take our siesta. I guess I would probably be called maybe a

1 halfway heart charger. Ya know, I want to get something done, and when I don't get it
2 done, then I get irritated. That was the hard part, but ya know, that's their custom. If its
3 siesta time, they were going to take a siesta. That's all there is to it.

4 KC: At the end of the year, at the end of 1964, you go from Saigon with the Sea
5 Force out to the Junk Force, is that correct?

6 JS: Mhm.

7 KC: What did you know about the Vietnamese Junk Force?

8 JS: Nothing. Not a thing.

9 KC: Describe for me, you're coming into contact with and taking over in your
10 role with the Junk Force.

11 JS: Well, I flew from Saigon to Phu Quoc Island, which is about forty or fifty
12 miles off the west coast of Vietnam and probably ten or twelve miles south of Cambodia,
13 maybe twenty miles south of Cambodia. I don't know, anyway, it's an island out there.
14 The air strip was more or less the north end of the island, and the Junk Base was at the
15 south end of the island. A C-47 flew me down there. There was a Navy Commander,
16 Bagly, flew a black nose C-47, the only one in Vietnam. It had a black nose on it. Why, I
17 don't know. Anyway, he flew me down there and by this time I had been issued an M-1
18 Carbine and some greens. We landed at Duong Dong, that's where this place was. There
19 was a Junk Force overhaul place where they overhaul the junks there, and one of the Junk
20 Force people met me. Matter of fact, it was my counterpart that met me there and put me
21 in a hotel there that night. So, I was in this hotel on this island, this guy from nowhere
22 and I didn't know anybody, and put me in this hotel. I was in the upstairs room of this
23 hotel by myself, and so I stayed there that night. I was awakened that morning by a sound
24 that I had never heard before, and probably have never heard since. It was the local
25 restaurant down there. This guy was—had a piece of beef and had two knives and he was
26 tenderizing this piece of meat with his two knives in kind of a drum beat rhythm. I don't
27 know if you understand what I am talking about, but anyway that's what awakened me,
28 and it startled me. Anyway, my counterpart, Chong Cee Long came to the room, and we
29 went down to the same little restaurant and had breakfast, then a junk boat arrived from
30 An Thoi, where we lived. That was the south tip of the island, and Chong Cee Long and I
31 rode the junk boat down to An Thoi. I don't know if you are familiar with Nuoc Mam or

1 not, but our little hooch at An Thoi was about 100 yards from the Nuoc Mam factory at
2 the end of Phu Quoc Island.

3 KC: That would have been fragrant, I guess?

4 JS: Yes. Phu Quoc Nuoc Mam is a prized possession in Saigon. Anyway, there I
5 was. There was a Navy Lieutenant, Rodney Lovdall, a Navy Lieutenant, Bob Empson,
6 and a Chief Gunners Mate, Henry Quintell, and I. We were there at An Thoi, Phu Quoc. I
7 neglected to say at Duong Dong, where the aircraft landed, there was a special forces A-
8 team there that I didn't get to meet that day. The aircraft came in, like I say, I was taken
9 to this hotel, and I stayed there and the next morning we left. So, there I was with my M-
10 1 Carbine greens and three people I had never seen before, and that was my assignment.

11 KC: And now you are an advisor to the Vietnamese Junk Force all of a sudden.

12 JS: Right.

13 KC: Tell me, for those who aren't familiar with what the Junk Force was, the
14 Vietnamese Junk Force was, what was its role? What was its makeup? How was it
15 organized as you saw it, and what was its purpose?

16 JS: Well, it was mainly coastal patrol. There was one Lieutenant and myself. We
17 would ride a, what they called a Command Junk. It was a little bigger Junk than—there
18 was three Junks on a patrol. There was two King Jangs. A King Jang had a—if you could
19 picture a Junk that had a house on a stern that set up kind of high, that was a King Jang.
20 The Command Junk was more or less a low slung. The King Jang Junks had a .30 caliber
21 machine gun, and the Command Junks had a .30 caliber and a .50 caliber. We'd mainly
22 just patrol the coast from the west coast of Vietnam up to Cambodia. There was another
23 Special Forces base at Ha Tien. We would go in there once in a while. We visited all the
24 outlying islands down off the Ca Mau Peninsula there was several islands down there that
25 was populated. We'd visit those. We did a lot psy-ops (Psychological Operations) stuff.
26 We'd take clothes, take toothpaste, candy. We even done doctoring. We'd take first aid
27 kits, and it was more or less a people to people thing. We tried to make it that way
28 anyway. An old man would have a sore on his leg and we'd doctor it for him, and it
29 would just tickle him to death. I got kind of a funny little story about clothes, if you
30 would like to hear it.

31 KC: I would love to.

1 JS: Puolo Panjang was one of the islands we visited, and we had a big bale of
2 clothes we got from the Catholic Relief Society, and we were passing these clothes out.
3 Ya know, Vietnamese people are relatively small and a lot of these clothes we were
4 passing out was relatively big. Anyway, this young Vietnamese girl was probably twenty-
5 twenty-one-years old and I came across this garment I pulled out, and it was like a forty-
6 eight triple D cup brassiere, and she wanted it. I am wondering, what is this little girl,
7 with little lemon sized breast going to do with this brassiere. Anyway, she took it, and I
8 wondered about that until my next patrol, we went back down to Puolo Panjang, and this
9 young lady had little twin girls with sun bonnets made out of those cups. I always thought
10 that was really pretty ingenious of her. We basically just patrolled the coastline and went
11 to these bases. We just mingled with the people. We lived with people on these islands
12 for three or four days at a time, this Lt. Bob Empson and I. We'd just visit with them, a
13 people to people thing, I guess, is more or less what it was.

14 KC: So, what you were doing wasn't a matter of running interdiction or security
15 up and down the coast, it was more of a trying to get to know the people a little bit to let
16 the people to know that the Americans were there, and the Americans are friendly and
17 these kinds of things?

18 JS: Yeah.

19 KC: Did you ever get involved in any of the cruises up and down the coast to do
20 those types of things, security interdiction?

21 JS: No. We went to—there was a small island that had a pagoda on it somewhere
22 up between Rach Cheo and Ha Tien on the west coast of Vietnam there. It was a real
23 small island and had a pagoda on it and every time we would go by that island, we would
24 get a couple of shots at us. We went to—Ha Tien had Special Forces A-team there and I
25 was telling this sergeant about these guys shooting at us, but we were always out of
26 range. I would just, more or less a thing to keep away from here, ya know? Anyway, he
27 said, “Why don't you take this .57 recoilless and go down there with a magazine and get
28 whatever kind of shells you want, and you can put a stop to that.” Well, I went down
29 there with a magazine—like I said before, I didn't have any prior training or nothing. I
30 didn't know what I was doing. I went down there, I seen this box, and it said .57
31 recoilless HEAT, H-E-A-T. I thought, “Well, that ought to do it.” So, I got a box of them

1 and on the way back we fired a couple of them over toward this pagoda and it didn't
2 seem like anything happened except when it got to the back side of the rock over there it
3 would hit something a blew up. The next time around I found this sergeant up there and I
4 said, "Hey, these heat rounds, they didn't do much good on that little pagoda over there,"
5 and he said, "HEAT rounds?" I said, "Yeah, I got them HEAT rounds." He said, "You
6 know what that is?" I said, "I've got no idea." He said, "Its high-explosive anti-tank."
7 That's what happens when you have no prior training, ya know? (Both laughing)

8 KC: Funny how that passed through that thin walled pagoda, huh?

9 JS: Anyway, that's part of not having training, I guess.

10 KC: What did you think about your time here? Here you are dealing with the
11 Vietnamese people more than anything else, by the sounds of it. Did you feel that what
12 you and the United States Navy were doing there was worthwhile? Did you feel good
13 about what you were doing?

14 JS: Yeah, I did. I thought we had real good relationships with the people. The
15 kids on these little islands that we would visit, they were just wonderful little kinds.
16 They'd come up, and of course, ya know, Americans have body hair, Vietnamese don't.
17 They would come up and they would play with the hair on my arms or come up and play
18 with the hair on my chest, or whatever. They just thought that was great. Just little things
19 like that. They would come up and sit on your lap and teach you how to count, and they
20 would teach me little Vietnamese verses and stuff. It was basically just a people to people
21 thing.

22 KC: What were you learning about the war that was going on, insurgency at this
23 stage, I guess? What did you know about what was taking place there politically and
24 militarily in Vietnam?

25 JS: We had—as a matter of fact, on Phu Quoc Island we had no radio contact
26 with anybody. We didn't even have radio contact with the Special Forces eighteen miles
27 away from us. We had—what the Vietnamese told us, that's the only thing we knew. We
28 ate in a Vietnamese Mess; we ate Vietnamese food. We didn't have any American food.
29 We didn't have nothing. We were just there. We had no contact with the outside world
30 whatsoever. Every once in a while, we'd get mail, but that was about it. I got a letter from
31 the wife just after January the first of '65, and she had taken our little boy to the Balboa

1 Hospital in San Diego with doubled pneumonia, and I didn't get another letter for forty-
2 five days. When I got a letter, I got a whole bunch at one time, but we just didn't get
3 mail.

4 KC: What was it like to hear that about your son with double pneumonia?

5 JS: It was a bummer, you know, and not to hear for that long was really bad. It
6 works on you.

7 KC: At that point did you and your wife decide that, look, we are not going to—
8 don't send me any letters about the kids being sick until they are okay, then you can tell
9 me about their being sick?

10 JS: Yeah, I'm not sure that was ever discussed or not, but it's one of them things.

11 KC: Yeah, it would have had to have been difficult I would think.

12 JS: Yeah, it was.

13 KC: Especially visiting with these other children, the Vietnamese children. I
14 would think that would make you think of your own children quite a bit.

15 JS: Bob Empson and I was on the command junk one time, and we were up off
16 the north end of Phu Quoc Island and there was a Cambodian PC that was given to them
17 by the United States at one point in time, and Cambodia was not friendly with Vietnam at
18 the time, and they took us under tow, and Bob Empson and I had no idea what the hell
19 was going on and they were taking us to Cambodia. I don't know why. I suppose actually
20 you could say we was a POW (Prisoner of War) for a couple hours; I don't know.
21 Anyway, finally they cut us loose and we never got an explanation from the Vietnamese
22 or anything. There was always a young officer, either an ensign or a JG on the junk
23 boat—a Vietnamese officer and whether he knew or not, I don't know. He never
24 explained to us why we were taken undertow. We were just there.

25 KC: Interesting. What was your impression of the Vietnamese Navy?

26 JS: The Navy as a whole?

27 KC: Yes, as you were witnessing it, as you were seeing it.

28 JS: They was, I would say, unorganized, non-motivated. Like I said earlier, they
29 were probably non-motivated because if they did a little bit something wrong, they were
30 going to jail. You got to be sure where you step, or you are going to jail.

1 KC: When you did have down time there, what sort of things would you do for
2 recreation?

3 JS: You mean on the island?

4 KC: Yes.

5 JS: We had a couple of monkeys and that was about it.

6 KC: Monkeys, tell me about the monkeys.

7 JS: Sam and Suzie. I'm not sure you want to hear about them.

8 KC: I want to hear about anything that you are willing to talk about.

9 JS: Okay, Sam and Suzie—of course Sam was a little boy and Suzie was a little
10 girl and she was extremely horny, and he wasn't, and she hated him. She would do
11 everything in the world to hurt him. You would give him a banana, well she would take it
12 away from it and eat it, then stick the rest of it in the sand. She just hated Sam. They had
13 a little chicken wire cage, and they would spend hours unwinding that chicken wire so
14 they could get out. They would go down in the village. Of course, in the village—we
15 have a Buddhist village. The east side of our little hooch was a Buddhist village and on
16 the west side was a catholic village. They would go down in the Buddhist village where
17 there was fruit. They would put out fruit donations for Buddha offerings and, of course
18 they monkeys would go down there and tear up the offerings and then there would be gun
19 shots all over the village. They were trying to kill our monkeys. When they would get
20 out, I would put them on my shoulders, and I'd start walking out in the ocean. The ocean
21 wasn't any more than thirty yards from our hooch. I just started walking out in the ocean
22 and they'd end up on top of my head and I would keep walking and then I would finally
23 get them under the water, and they would be good for a couple or three weeks. They
24 didn't like that a bit.

25 KC: It sounds like it was a beautiful, almost idealic setting there.

26 JS: Oh, it was. We'd get up in the morning and all the village people would be
27 out on the beach with their pants down, bent down doing their morning thing, and a tide
28 would come in and wash that all out, you know, and it would be gone. Us dumb
29 Americans, we said, "We're not going to do that," so we built an outhouse and put a
30 couple of barrels together and within three weeks you couldn't get close to that outhouse,
31 so we were up there on the beach with them.

1 KC: Funny the things you can learn, huh?

2 JS: Oh yeah. I built a shower there in the outhouse. I put a fifty-five gallon
3 trashcan, a big, galvanized trashcan up on the roof, and our houseboy would fill it full of
4 water, and we had a shower. I thought, I'm going to put another trashcan up there and
5 paint it black and we will have hot and cold water, and I did, and the hot water one got
6 actually hot enough to where you couldn't take a hot water shower by itself. You had to
7 mix cold water with it.

8 KC: Huh, I'll be darned.

9 JS: It would really heat up.

10 JS: We had a house boy, and then we had an old river pirate was our cook. Ha
11 Cee Boom they called him. I've got a picture of him somewhere, but there was no such
12 thing as washing dishes. You just threw them out in the yard and the dogs would clean
13 them up. It was very, very primitive.

14 KC: What kind of supervision did you have here?

15 JS: Uh, the two Lieutenants, the chief gunner's mate, and me. That was it.

16 KC: Were the—what was the relationship like among all of you? Was it pretty
17 laid back?

18 JS: Oh yeah, it was good. Rodney Lovdall and the chief gunner's mate would go
19 out on patrol and then Bob Empson and I would be there at the base, then they would
20 come back, then Bob and I would go out, and back and forth. That's the way it went. I
21 went to—at Duong Dong where they had the junk repair place, they were using all hand
22 tools. They had like, a bow saw, and they would stand on 6x8 or whatever, and they
23 would stand on it and actually saw in between their feet, up and down to rip a board to
24 make a plank for the junk. They would have a fire and they would have a rod in it and of
25 course, the rod would get hot, and they would burn holes in the wood instead of drilling a
26 hole. I thought, "This is super primitive," so I told my counterpart, I said, "I'm going to
27 go to Saigon, and I am going to get a generator and some skill saws and drills and stuff
28 for these guys so they can have something to work with. I flew into Saigon and went to
29 the CB base, and I got some portable generators, and I got some skill saws and a table
30 saw and electric drills, all the stuff I thought they might need, and flew it back down
31 there. I told, Chong Cee Long, my counterpart what it was and how to use everything and

1 so we went back down to An Thoi and when I came back up here a couple, three weeks
2 later and all this stuff is laying in a pile. I asked him, “How come they aren’t using that?”
3 He said, “They are afraid of it. It doesn’t work very good, and they are afraid of it.”
4 Come to find out they was standing in the water trying to drill holes with this electric
5 drill, and plus the skill saw would not cut whatever kind of wood it was they made those
6 junk boats out of. It just binds up. Then they took me to one of their sawmills and the
7 sawmill had a, like the old two man, cross-cut saw, they would set them up in rows and
8 they would run a log threw and the saw blades actually reciprocated up and down, instead
9 of having a circle saw or a band saw. I guess the grain of the wood was wet, or fibrous, or
10 whatever. Anyway, a circle saw would just bind up in it and not cut it. The main trouble
11 they had with the wood was worms. Worms would get in the wood and then eat it up.
12 Eventually they—and I never knew who started this somewhere else in Vietnam, but
13 somebody started, an American advisor started building concrete junk boats and that
14 eventually came down to Phu Quoc. They started building them down there too. They’d
15 use chicken wire and then put concrete in a mold around the chicken wire to hold it
16 together. Basically, like I say, our job was mainly people to people at that time.

17 KC: How long were you going to be here at Phu Quoc Island?

18 JS: I was supposed to be there until October. I think maybe the last of August we
19 came off the patrol and they asked me if I wanted to come back to the states and be an
20 instructor at the counterinsurgency school in Coronado. Of course, I already had my
21 instructor license or billet you know, and I said, “Sure.” So, I got to come home at least a
22 month early.

23 KC: They are asking you if you want to teach counterinsurgency. What did you
24 know about counter insurgency?

25 JS: Other than have been in Vietnam, very little.

26 KC: That’s very interesting that they chose you for this.

27 JS: Well, I guess we was kind of grabbing at straws because nobody had any
28 counterinsurgency experience in ‘65, other than have been in country. Some of the rag
29 people in the river salt groups, their advisors, some of them had been in pretty heavy
30 contact, enemy contact. As a matter of fact, Dale Marcort was killed. He was a Navy
31 Lieutenant, was killed in a rag boat. There was one Junk Force advisor that had been

1 killed. His name was Terry Stiles, and he was—I'm not even sure what base he was at,
2 but the junk base was overrun by the VC (Viet Cong), and he was killed. He was a chief
3 boatsman. We had very little counterinsurgency experience. Nobody did.

4 KC: Well, I guess counterinsurgency is something that can be very broadly
5 defined, and part of what you were doing, working with the Vietnamese populous, would
6 be considered part of the counterinsurgency program, I guess.

7 JS: Well, yeah, the psychological warfare part of it was, yeah.

8 KC: And the hearts and minds, and those kinds of things. Okay, so you leave
9 Vietnam in 1965. August of '65, you said?

10 JS: August or September. I don't remember. Anyway, I got to come home, I'd
11 say, at least a month early. Just prior to me leaving An Thoi on Phu Quoc Island, they
12 started a buildup that was going to be the swift boat base. As a matter of fact, John Kerry
13 was stationed at An Thoi after I left. Thank god I wasn't there. I don't know what you
14 think about John Kerry, anyway, that's another story, but that's where the big swift boat
15 base was, at An Thoi. They had started to build that up before I left. They brought a
16 bunch of food down there, they brought a bunch of generators and stuff, and we had no
17 place to put it. Ya know, the Armed Forces does stuff in a big way that they sometimes,
18 the wagon gets before the horse, I think. Anyway, all that stuff started coming in and
19 nobody, well somebody did, but we didn't really know why. Our MK was a construction
20 company, Richard Morrison Kanootz, I think was the name of it. They were building
21 offshore piers and stuff like that down there. Anyway, I left there and came back to
22 Coronado.

23 KC: What was it like to come back home and see your wife and kids?

24 JS: It was great. We had quite a homecoming. Well, I say that, but my little boy,
25 when I left—he was born in June and I left in October, and here I come back a year later
26 and he has no idea who I am, and he is scared to death of me. That was kind of a trying
27 experience. Here you want to hold and love your little boy, and he doesn't know who you
28 are and is afraid of you. That is a little different.

29 KC: That would be tough.

30 JS: Yeah, and here again, you had to get used to the food again. I was used to
31 eating Vietnamese food and I come home and I'm on an extremely different diet. Here

1 you go through the diarrhea thing again. I have always wondered about, we should have
2 had some kind of, I would think, compensation, or something for living the way we did,
3 but it never happened, so whatever.

4 KC: Why don't we stop there for today, Mr. Staples?

Interview with Jerry Staples

Session [2] of [3]

Date: 20 August 2010

1 KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History interview with Mr. Jerry
2 Staples. Today is 20 August 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech
3 University, and Mr. Staples is joining me by telephone from his home in Milan, Missouri.
4 Mr. Staples, before we turn the recorder on, you were relaying a story to me about your
5 time there with the Junk Force, kind of, somewhat of a disturbing story, I guess. Would
6 you mind retelling that for me please?

7 JS: Alright, my counterpart and I, we left An Thoi at the South tip of Phu Quoc
8 Island, and we were at the village of Duong Dong where just north of the village was our
9 airstrip where we got our mail. The counterpart and I was on our way to the airstrip and
10 there was an Army 6x (6x6) with ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) troops in it
11 ahead of us and we were in the jeep behind them. We were going down this old road and
12 there was an older woman walking on the passenger side of the road and the 6x, the right
13 front wheel of the 6x hit a rigged mortar road that was in the road, and it blew the tire of
14 it and part of the drive gear off the front of it, and the passenger of the 6x got a piece of
15 shrapnel through his right foot and a piece through his ear. The older woman took a, she
16 had a piece of the drive train, I suppose, hit her in the face, and it blew her face and hair
17 up in the air, and she was still walking towards us, in that manner, with no face. Of
18 course, she was dead, and she fell over just in a step or two, but it left quite an
19 impression.

20 KC: I could imagine so. What was the reaction of both, you and your counterpart,
21 as well as the Vietnamese who were on the truck? What took place after they hit that
22 booby trap?

23 JS: They were concerned about the ARVN troop that had the slight shrapnel
24 wounds. They weren't concerned about the old lady at all. A matter of fact, one of the
25 guys had a stick and was fumbling around there with her brain like it was a toy or
26 something. I don't know, they seemed very cold about the whole thing.

27 KC: What about you and your counterpart? Were you able to stop him and render
28 any sort of aid or anything?

1 JS: No. We went on around. My counterpart was driving, and he went right on
2 around the scene, and we went to the airport and came back and they were still milling
3 around at the scene. We went ahead and done our business. We didn't interfere with what
4 they were doing.

5 KC: That's quite a descriptive scene that you have offered there. Do you think
6 about this particular episode very often?

7 JS: No, no I don't. Not anymore. I did for a great while after that. I would wake
8 up in the night, and I would see that old woman. No, it's kind of a thing of the past now.

9 KC: Right, something you thought about as we were going through the interview,
10 I guess.

11 JS: Yeah, yeah.

12 KC: Interesting, very interesting. Alright, you'd mentioned that you were ready
13 to get back to the United States here, back to, I believe you said it was Coronado. You are
14 going to go through counterinsurgency school, there in 1965, is that right?

15 JS: I was going to be an instructor there at the school.

16 KC: An instructor, right, right, right. Well, tell me about that. Coming into
17 Coronado, what was the set up there? What did the place look like? What was your role
18 going to be?

19 JS: The building where the counterinsurgency school was, it was called CI. There
20 was a three week class, and there was, I think a twelve week class, I think. The building
21 was new. We had all kinds of good training aids. There was a commander that was RCO
22 (Regional Communications Officer) that was in charge of the school. Lieutenant
23 Commander Roy Boan, who was, I have always been told, the first seal, he was more or
24 less our XO (Executive Officer) there. He was a great guy. My specific job was, at first, I
25 was a PT (Physical Training) instructor, and I was also a basic diesel engine instructor
26 for, just to familiarizer young naval officers and enlisted men, just to familiarize them
27 with a smaller diesel engine. At that time practically everybody was still advisors, and
28 just to give them a basic knowledge of what they were getting into when they got there.
29 We had—there was an EOD (Explosive Ordinance Disposal) fellow there. He coached us
30 along, and we give, actually in the field we give landmine and booby trap classes. We
31 had a one week course in Camp Pendleton that was more or less a practice to war game

1 shoot 'em up thing, the ambush thing, the whole deal there just to familiarize the students
2 with gun fire and that sort of thing. It's kind of strange, you take a guy off a ship and tell
3 them he's going to go—like I was when I first went over to Vietnam, you know, I had no
4 idea about what was going on, and it was just more or less the familiarization about
5 where you were going and what could possibly happen.

6 KC: Why do you think you were chosen for this school, because you had spent
7 time in Vietnam as an advisor? Although, your advisory capacity, you said, was
8 somewhat of limited value there. Do you think that was why it was, or because of your
9 diesel experience, or was it both?

10 JS: It was both of that, plus I already had an instructor billet. I was an instructor
11 when I was training recruits, so I already had the billet. There weren't too many sailors
12 that had been to Vietnam in August of '65.

13 KC: In addition to the PT and the diesel engine training that you are offering these
14 young naval officers, were you able to get across your other experiences in terms of the
15 people and the lay of the land, and how to approach the Vietnamese and what it would be
16 like?

17 JS: Yeah, that was part of the classes, just basic indoctrination about what
18 Vietnam was like. The social and political aspect of it, their customs, just a basic
19 indoctrination of what Vietnam would be like when they got there. You try to describe
20 the heat, you try to describe the smells, everything.

21 KC: Right. What kind of cultural issues would you bring up, for example, how
22 you would greet with someone, or how you have a meal with someone. What sort of
23 cultural issues would you bring up?

24 JS: We are talking about a long time back.

25 KC: Sure, sure.

26 JS: Well, we would give examples, like, my patrol partner was Lt Bob Empson,
27 and he and I would go to villages with the Junk Force people. Well, we were always,
28 more or less, the guest of honor. We would supposedly get the better part of the meal.
29 Like, Bob Empson, one time he got the chicken head with the little eyebrows still on it.
30 That's what the guest of honor gets. You relate stuff like that to them. I think it takes the
31 initial shock out of when you get off the airplane, maybe.

1 KC: What did you find to be the most rewarding part of being an instructor there
2 at the CI school?

3 JS: Well, with the end result, I think the people were better—they were just more
4 qualified to be going where they were going. They had a better working knowledge of
5 what they were supposed to do. Like I mentioned before, I had no idea what I was
6 supposed to do when I got there. That's what we tried to relay to these guys, just what
7 they were supposed to do, why they were going. Of course, we thought that was the right
8 thing to do. When we tried to relate that to them it was a good thing. I'm not too sure that
9 was right, but we just tried to make it the best we could for them. We had a course in
10 Camp Pendleton that lasted a week, and it was all outside. They stayed outside all night
11 long. Just an example of what sailors don't really know, in a box of C-rations, there is a
12 small roll of toilet paper, and I heard some of these officers say, "Oh, we've got napkins."
13 They just didn't know, and we didn't either when we got there. We just didn't know, so
14 we just tried to give them a working knowledge about what was going on.

15 KC: What did you find to be the most challenging thing about being in this
16 instructor billet again?

17 JS: Probably me being enlisted, and I was—a lot of my students were senior to
18 me. There were some animosities there, but you get over it.

19 KC: Were there any specific instances that you remember?

20 JS: Well, yeah, there was one. We were at the booby trap range, and a
21 commander tripped a booby trap and, you know, when that happens, you are supposed to
22 give ten pushups or whatever, some little dinky thing that was just a recognition that you
23 had screwed up, and he wouldn't do it. Of course, it is my job to turn him in, and I did, so
24 he got a verbal reprimand, you know, it's just a—you feel out of place doing something
25 like that.

26 KC: Right, but then again that's, like you say, that's your responsibility. That's
27 what you're supposed to be doing.

28 JS: Yeah, the bad part of it was, when I reported to River Division 593, well, he
29 was the squadron commander.

30 KC: Oh no! (Laughing) Now this is a little bit out of sequence here, but was there
31 any sort of repercussions for this?

1 JS: No, he never said a word, and I didn't either.

2 KC: Best to just leave it alone, I guess.

3 JS: Yes, let a sleeping dog lie.

4 KC: Right, well how long did you stay here at CI school?

5 JS: Three years.

6 KC: Three years? If you had to estimate, how many officers do you think you
7 pushed through CI school?

8 JS: Oh my gosh, I have no idea, because, like I say, there was a three week
9 course, and there was a twelve or thirteen week course, and the three week course was
10 part of the swift boat people and the PBR (Patrol Boat Riverine) people too. Everybody
11 that was going, all the Navy people that was going came through either one or two of
12 those courses, so there was a bunch. I went to, while I was there, I went to Ft. Gordon,
13 Georgia. I took a course in physical security, which was about security systems, and this
14 sort of thing. I gave a class to people—after I got back to Coronado, I gave a class to
15 people going to Da Nang for just port security people, about lighting, about setting up the
16 concertina wire, all sorts of things like that, and I also went to school on a starlight scope
17 in Ft. Benning, Georgia.

18 KC: On the Starlight Scope, too?

19 JS: Right, and I gave a class on that. So, as my time at the school advanced, you
20 know I became more knowledgeable on subjects by going to these different schools.

21 KS: Well, let me ask you this, obviously you are keeping up to date with the
22 changing interest of the navy there, and security, and all of these kinds of things, did you
23 continue to follow the war in Vietnam as it evolved just to help keep yourself abreast of
24 the events and how things were changing, and how you might bring that into your class?

25 JS: Oh yeah, very much so.

26 KC: What did you see in the evolution of the U.S. effort in Vietnam from '65 to
27 '68, those three years you were there?

28 JS: I guess I personally thought we was doing good. I thought it was a good
29 effort. I knew we was losing a lot of people. I'd figured we was doing a good thing.

30 KC: What did you think about the continuing effort? It seemed that the U.S.
31 during this didn't seem—obviously the U.S. at this time was getting more and more

1 heavily involved, which meant more numbers of troops and sailors were there, as well as
2 more casualties, wounded and killed, what was your impression of that?

3 JS: I guess I probably figured it was just a part of war. If you are going to be at
4 war, people are going to get killed. I don't know. It's a hard thing to answer.

5 KC: Right, right.

6 JS: They—while I was at the school, one of my other collateral jobs was the first
7 PBR that the Navy ever had, they brought to Coronado. There was myself and three other
8 enlisted sailors put the first thousand hours on that PBR.

9 KC: Is that right?

10 JS: Yeah.

11 KC: Tell me about that. This PBR has been designed specifically for a purpose.
12 Tell me about the PBR. Tell me about how it operated, engines, Jacuzzi pumps, and the
13 whole thing. Tell me about this first PBR.

14 JS: When we got it there, there was the 1st class boatswain mate and myself. We
15 would run it twelve hours, and then there was another 1st class engineman and 1st class
16 boatswain mate. They would run it twelve hours. We kept it running continuous, except
17 we would stop it for oil changes. It had two general motors V653 diesel engines on it and
18 had the Jacuzzi water jets. We actually had a ball running that thing in San Diego harbor,
19 there in the bay. It was a lot of fun for us, but we run it hard for a thousand hours. We'd
20 done the evaluation on it, and of course the Navy accepted it, and the rest of that is
21 basically history. It was—I was very impressed with it.

22 JS: What were the strengths and weaknesses of the early one? I guess we are
23 looking at the mark one level. What were the strengths and weaknesses of it?

24 JS: The main weakness was the gunnels. they didn't have any support in the
25 gunnels, and they would go along side one another, they were going alongside a junk
26 boat, and it want very long at all, and the gunnels would be broken up and just kind of
27 flopping around, actually. Strength wise, I think, maybe, they were actually a little bit
28 faster because they were lighter.

29 KC: Now, faster, of course, you are talking in relation to the mark two, which
30 would come along a little later?

31 JS: Right, right.

1 KC: Alright, now here you are, tooling around on the first PBR that they've got
2 there in San Diego harbor, and this must have been a blast, I would think. Did this plant
3 any sort of seen in your mind that this might be something that you want to do in
4 Vietnam, was to be on these PBRs, or is that out of your mind at this point?

5 JS: No, I didn't want to go back to Vietnam. I mean, I had a wife and three kids
6 and owned a house in San Diego—I didn't own a house, I was paying for a house and
7 that was the last place I wanted to go back to. But when I got the orders, it didn't surprise
8 me.

9 KC: You have mentioned your wife and children. What is life like back for you
10 in California after you have spent this tour in Vietnam? Here you are back in California,
11 the war is getting bigger and bigger, you are helping to train people to be prepared for
12 war, but you are also a family man with a wife and kids. How did you arrange that? How
13 did that work?

14 JS: It was very good. I had every week—basically every weekend off. I worked
15 about twelve to thirteen hours a day at the base, but after that it was my time, you know.
16 Unlike a ship ward, two days off and one day on the ship, you know? It was actually a
17 good duty station. I had quality time with the family. We had our leave time, our vacation
18 time, and it was good. Also, I got to know my family in those three years.

19 KC: While this is taking place there, in California, at Coronado, the anti-war
20 movement in the country is growing stronger, is growing more noisy, a little more
21 vociferous, a little more vocal. What do you remember about the antiwar movement from
22 what you saw there in California?

23 JS: I had a bumper sticker on my little Toyota pickup that had the peace symbol
24 on it, and the bumper sticker read beside it, "The footprint of the American chicken." I
25 had a guy follow me one day, probably thirty miles from Coronado to where our house
26 was, he followed me right up in the driveway and I figured we was going to have a little
27 confrontation, and he got out and stuck his hand out to shake my hand and wanted to
28 know where I got it (chuckling). Yeah, there was a lot of—there was people even coming
29 to the gate, demonstrators coming to the gate there at Coronado and they were wanting to
30 demonstrate. They had, like a water cannon there. They would dye them pink or purple or

1 whatever. It was on television, demonstrating, but I really didn't pay that much attention
2 to them. I figured they was stupid.

3 KC: Right. Did you ever give any thought to why they were protesting?

4 JS: Yeah, I did, and I've got my own ideas about that, I suppose. Sometimes I
5 think there are professional protestors. I think they do that for a living, I don't know.

6 KC: You'd been in Vietnam. You spent your tour there and you know what you
7 are training these other men for. Was there any sort of animosity? Were you angry at
8 these guys? I mean, you had been there, you've seen what you are trying to do. Maybe
9 they didn't understand fully, or did you just not pay any attention to them at all really?

10 JS: You mean the demonstrators?

11 KC: Yes.

12 JS: No, I just didn't pay any attention to them. It didn't bother me any.

13 KC: Hmm, very interesting. 1968 you are still there at Coronado for how long?
14 When do you leave Coronado?

15 JS: I left there in October of '68.

16 KC: In October of '68. Alright, so you are in there for the majority of the year.
17 '68, of course, is a pretty tumultuous year in the country's history with the Tet Offensive
18 in 1968, for example, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby
19 Kennedy, and the protests and riots, and of course, you've got the democratic national
20 convention in Chicago. All of this is going on. What did the United States look like to
21 you in 1968 with all of this taking place?

22 JS: You know, it was a very, very—I would say, probably in the United States
23 history, it is probably one of the most confused times, public wise. The public, I guess
24 they just didn't know. The people that were very much opposed to everything, they
25 seemed like they actually were. They were just opposed to everything. Whatever it was.
26 Some people were opposed to having a haircut, some people were not. Some people—a
27 lot of the younger generation, the flower people, or whatever, they were opposed to us,
28 we were opposed to them. It just seemed like the country, more or less, was in an
29 upheaval.

30 KC: What did you think about the Tet Offensive? Again, you'd been to Vietnam,
31 been training these guys, then something like this happens, what did you think about this?

1 JS: You know, I thought at the time that probably they'd broke North Vietnam's
2 back. Basically, I think it probably did. I think they took a beating that they probably
3 never fully recovered from, but I think Mr. McNamara stopped a bunch of the air
4 operations and they came back around. I've got my opinions about that fellow too.

5 KC: Please feel free to share them, if you'd like.

6 JS: Well, I don't think that we lost—we didn't lose an engagement that I know
7 of, but we lost the war. We didn't lose the war; I think McNamara lost the war. I mean,
8 that's my opinion.

9 KC: Why do you believe this? What do you base that opinion on?

10 JS: Well, he would stop the air strikes and when things would get going good, it
11 seemed like every time they would get to be backing down, well, all of the sudden we'd
12 have to slack off. You can't do that.

13 KC: Alright, now '68, you say in October of '68 you are going to leave. When do
14 you get your orders for Vietnam?

15 JS: I'm not sure. It was September, October that I got the orders, then I went to
16 SERE. Like I told you last week, I didn't go to SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance,
17 Escape) the first time. I went to SERE in Whidbey Island. I even went back—I went to
18 language school, too. After already living there and being with them a year, I pretty much
19 knew the basic language. Anyway, I went to language school, then I went to PBR training
20 up to Vallejo, north of San Francisco. I'm not sure when all of this took place. I might
21 have gotten orders in August, and then in September and October I went to these schools.
22 I'm not sure.

23 KC: What was your reaction? I mean, did you know that this was going to be
24 coming? Did you have any idea that it could be coming, or was it a total surprise?

25 JS: I probably knew it in the back of my mind. I didn't relish going, but I figured
26 I probably would. I was right for the picking, I guess you could say.

27 KC: What was your wife's and family's reaction?

28 JS: They didn't like it. They didn't like it a bit. The morning I left the house I
29 couldn't let my wife take me to the airport. I had a friend take me, and I didn't even turn
30 around. I just walked down the driveway. I didn't turn around or nothing. I just walked
31 down the driveway, got in his car, and left. I told my dad. My dad—my mother and dad

1 had come out before I left and I told my dad, I said, “If I come back in a box, don’t open
2 it.” I pretty much knew what was going on. It was very dramatic, I tell you, walking
3 down that driveway.

4 KC: Do you remember that scene?

5 JS: Oh yes, I do.

6 KC: Tell me about that. Was it, I assume the morning?

7 JS: Yes, it was.

8 KC: Tell me about that morning.

9 JS: Well, I just got up. I couldn’t eat breakfast. I just got up; I got my stuff on. I
10 don’t suppose the wife and I said a half a dozen words the whole morning. I just got
11 dressed and got my gear. As a matter of fact, the guy that took me to the airport was a
12 civilian friend. Norm came by and picked me up, and I gave them all a hug and a kiss and
13 said goodbye and turned around and walked down the driveway, and that was it.

14 KC: That had to have been pretty tough.

15 JS: It was, it was damn tough.

16 KC: Well, let me back up here just a little bit. I want to ask you about some of
17 this training before you get this point where you leave. Where did you go to language
18 school?

19 JS: Coronado.

20 KC: There in Coronado. Okay, like you said, limited value because you’ve been
21 there and learned a lot of the language.

22 JS: Right. The language school was in the same building as CI school was.

23 KC: Okay, very good, very good. What about SERE training? Tell me about
24 SERE. You escaped it the first time around. You are not going to escape it this time. Tell
25 me about your SERE training. Where was it? Take me through the entire process.

26 JS: It was in—they had two places, Whidbey Island and the other was Warner
27 Springs up in the mountains east of San Diego, and I went to Warner Springs up there. It
28 was impressive. They took us out in the desert area and turned us loose and you are
29 supposed to hide, but there is no place to hide in the desert, so of course everybody was
30 captured. Then you went through the isolation part. They put us in a box we wouldn’t fit
31 in, and they had a, kind of a man-made cave, I’m not sure, anyway it was dark in there.

1 There were cages with rattlesnakes in it. They stuff you in a box and put the lid down—
2 like I say the box, you were bigger than the box was, but you fit anyway. Then they
3 maybe drag a wet rope across you with these rattlesnakes rattling just to terrorize you.
4 Then there was the interrogation thing. You know, your name, rank, and service number,
5 and date of birth, and they would ask you questions about the family. Of course, you
6 aren't going to tell them that, so you get slapped around a little bit. It's just a—if you, I
7 suppose, if you thought deep enough into it, you could probably panic, but I had been an
8 instructor there for three years, kind of in the same situation. I basically knew what was
9 going on, I just kind of went along with the flow. It wasn't a big—outside of being
10 hungry, it wasn't any big deal.

11 KC: Right. I've heard people say that they knew that during SERE training that
12 these were Americans, they're not going to do any damage, it's all about training, so I
13 can just suck it up and move through this. I've heard other people say that it was damned
14 realistic and that it was very, very difficult. Where would you fit in that spectrum?

15 JS: Oh, I'd say it was realistic enough, but I'm like you mentioned first. I knew it
16 was a training situation, and it was just something you needed to do. That's really about
17 all there was to it. It's just an uncomfortable time.

18 KC: When you walked out of SERE training, did you feel that you were
19 prepared, perhaps, for something like that in Vietnam?

20 JS: I don't think a person could ever be prepared to be a POW. I don't think no
21 amount of training could prepare you for that.

22 KC: Right, right. So, from here, I believe you said you went to PBR training, is
23 that correct?

24 JS: Right.

25 KC: Alright, now you've got some time on the PBR already, the original PBR, as
26 you said. Tell me about PBR training. What were they trying to get into your head? What
27 kind of classes were you going through? Tell me about the PBR training?

28 JS: We had first aid classes. Well, first thing in the morning you had PT, and of
29 course, I had been a PT instructor for three years, so that was a piece of cake. We had
30 first aid classes. We had gunnery classes. We had map reading, which was a good thing
31 for everybody, actually. That was one of the things I did teach back in Coronado, too,

1 was map reading. That was a thing that everybody needed to know on the boats, you
2 know, is where you were all the time. It was a good course. It was a strenuous course. I
3 thought it was very well presented, and very well, the whole thing was very well
4 executed. It had good training aids and good instructors. I was pleased with it.

5 KC: You talked about gunnery school. What kind of weapons were you working
6 with?

7 JS: Uh, the .50 caliber machine gun, the M-60, the M-79 grenade launcher. Then
8 they had a course there that, I think probably, well I mentioned Commander Boan was
9 the XO at the CI school, and then when I got to Vallejo he was the, I think he was the CO
10 up there. Anyway, I think he introduced this course called "quick kill" and it was with a
11 BB gun, but you tossed up a metal disk, an aluminum disk, and you'd, just by instinct
12 you'd pull up and shoot the disk. The first disk was smaller than a pie plate, but not too
13 much, you know, and when you got to where you could hit it you went on down until you
14 got to something the size of, maybe a tennis ball. It was just instinct. You would just pull
15 up and shoot, and pretty much, hit it. Matter of fact, I still shoot clay pigeons and it
16 comes in real handy.

17 KC: I'm sure that it does. So, it sounds like you are pretty satisfied with the
18 training you are receiving here from the Navy. I mean, from the CI school from which
19 you were an instructor, all the way through SERE and the PBR training, it sounds like
20 you are pretty satisfied with what you've got.

21 JS: Yeah, it was good training. I was well satisfied with it. At the end of the PBR
22 school, there was a war game thing on the slew up there, and of course the instructors had
23 a base camp, and they would set up ambushes and ambush the boats and stuff. Well, I'd
24 mentioned before when I was an instructor, one of the classes we taught was land mines
25 and booby traps. I went to town, and I got me some flashlight batteries and some, of
26 course we had wire all over the place, and I got me some of the old Kodak flash bulbs
27 and I rigged our camp. I booby trapped our camp with flash bulbs. So, anyway they took
28 me into their camp, and I was part of the instructor force during that time rather than on
29 the boats because they couldn't understand where I'd came from. You know, I booby
30 trapped their camp and everything. I guess it must have impressed them some. Surprised
31 them, maybe is the word.

1 KC: Alright, so you've got all your training. You know you are headed to
2 Vietnam. You know you are going to be part of the PBR force over there. What was it
3 like to go back to Vietnam the second time? You have been there once before. You have
4 an idea of what's going on, a good idea of what's going on. What was it like to go back
5 the second time? The trip over, what are you thinking about?

6 JS: Oh, getting it over with, I guess. Like I said, I wasn't looking forward to it at
7 all. I didn't want to go because of the family, but I was obligated and there I went. On the
8 trip over, I don't remember much about it at all. It's just kind of a dead area, I suppose.
9 Something you want to forget, maybe. I don't know. I don't remember much about even
10 landing that second time. I remember whenever we got to Nga Bay, I don't remember
11 much before that. It's just kind of a vague area in my mind at that time.

12 KC: Did you come in at Tan Son Nhut the second time?

13 JS: Yes.

14 KC: You remember that much, I guess. Alright, so there you are in Tan Son
15 Nhut. You landed in Tan Son Nhut the first time as well, is that correct?

16 JS: Right.

17 KC: Had Tan Son Nhut changed, or Saigon changed from the last time you were
18 there?

19 JS: Uh, Tan Son Nhut was a whole lot busier the second time. There was aircraft
20 coming and going all over the place. The pilot that was flying the plane we went—I think
21 we went over on, I think they call it a flying tiger. It had been probably a cargo plane that
22 opened in the middle. Kind of a radio airplane, but anyway, when he, he was still
23 probably right at peak elevation, and came straight down, and when they left, they'd done
24 the same thing. They hit the end of the runway and they went straight up. They didn't
25 want to coast over that jungle any.

26 KC: Right, right. For being shot at, of course. Whatever may have been out there,
27 Viet Cong, or whatever? So, there you in Saigon, again. Where do you go from here?

28 JS: To Nga Bay.

29 KC: You go out to Nga Bay. Alright, so you get your assignment there in
30 Saigon?

1 JS: You know, I'm not sure. I'm not sure if we got off the plane and went to—I
2 don't remember. I really don't. I remember I ended up in Nga Bay and I can't tell you
3 what happened in between times.

4 KC: Okay, now were you familiar with the way the PBR task force 116 was set
5 up in terms of the river divisions and the tactics and how they were going to go out and
6 how they were going to pursue their mission?

7 JS: No, other than what we were learning in the PBR training, you know, but
8 how the divisions was set up and stuff like that, no I didn't know.

9 KC: Alright, you arrive in Nga Bay. Take me through the next step. What
10 happens next?

11 JS: Well, I got just a basic indoctrination. I was—at first, I was assigned to just
12 pure maintenance. You know, the boats would come in with problems and I would work
13 up the work orders and then take it to the support activity, then they would do the repair
14 work, and we were still actually setting up the new boats, getting the guns set up and this
15 sort of thing. That was my first job, was just a pure maintenance type thing. It wasn't
16 long we all started going out on day patrols for break ins, and I made three or four of
17 those, and then I would alternate between working on the pier and taking my own patrols,
18 my own boat out. Probably depending on where I was needed most at the time.

19 KC: Now that you are over there, did you hope that you would just stay at Nga
20 Bay, or on an LST working on the boats, on the PBRs as they came in, or were you
21 wanting to go out?

22 JS: No, I was wanting to go out.

23 KC: You were wanting to go out. You had all the training—

24 JS: I was there. I just as well do it.

25 KC: Right, right. Now, are you originally assigned to River Division 593?

26 JS: Yes.

27 KC: Okay. Tell me about River Division 593. Tell me about the CO of the
28 division. Tell me about the men. Tell me about the rivers and canals that 593 was going
29 to be responsible for.

30 JS: The CO was Bill Strait. I didn't care for him a whole lot. He was, I don't
31 know, to my opinion he was a little too cocky. I don't know. He was a decent guy. We

1 get along fine now. I see him at reunions. You probably know him. Him and I just—you
2 know, you just don't hit it off with somebody right away, and he was one of them, but
3 anyway, we got along alright. The guys in the division were great. I got along real well
4 with everybody. No problems whatsoever. We had—one of the fellows, he was with Ted
5 Smith, I guess. Yeah, he was with Ted Smith when Ted Smith got killed, and he kind of
6 went off the deep end. I kind of—well, I did. I turned him in. he was playing with an AK-
7 47 in a bottom bunk, and I was in the top bunk. So, I went over to Bill Strait, and I just
8 told him, I said, "This ain't gonna work." Anyway, they—and the guy just had a break
9 down, and of course, he had to leave. I felt bad about doing it, but I also felt bad about
10 laying there with somebody jacking around with an AK in the bottom bunk when I'm in
11 the top one.

12 KC: Well, I can certainly understand that.

13 JS: But, you know, that's part of war. People—there is things that people can't
14 handle, and that was one of them. We got along good. The crews got along real well. A
15 great bunch of guys, that's about all I can say.

16 KC: Tell me about the mission of the PBR in Vietnam. What was its purpose?
17 What were these river divisions going to be doing?

18 JS: Well, in the daytime our basic job was just checking the river traffic,
19 checking ID cards, and checking papers, woodcutter's papers, fisherman's paper, or
20 whatever, and searching sampans. If somebody looks suspicious, you know, you searched
21 it. At nighttime, our basic job was just to set an ambush and actually control the curfew.
22 Speaking of searching, one day there was two sampans come down, they were coming
23 down one of the rivers and each of them was towing a casket, and their caskets are long
24 and cylindrical. The people in the lead sampan that was towing the back one, they were
25 wailing and doing their thing, and both of the caskets supposedly had a body in them, a
26 cremated body. We had a metal probe that looked like a—it basically resembled a sword,
27 except it was round, but it was long and shiny, and you stick it down in the ice in the
28 fishing boat or something or whatever, and if there was metal, it would detect it. To this
29 day I would swear that that back sampan probably didn't have a body in it, in that casket,
30 it probably had something else, but in a case like that, I personally am not going to raise
31 the lid on it and stick a metal probe in somebody's remains, you know. I suppose some

1 people would have done that, but I think, at points, sometimes discretion is a better part
2 of valor, you know. Like I said, I still think to this day there was probably not a body.
3 There was probably something else in that back sampan, but who knows, and one AK is
4 not going to win or lose the war anyway.

5 KC: Whereas you could've lost an awful lot of people's hearts and minds, so to
6 speak, if you had done that very thing.

7 JS: You bet, you bet.

8 KC: Tell me about the way the PBRs went out on a mission. I know that these are
9 two boat patrols, but I want you to tell me, from your perspective, what was the patrol,
10 how many boats were on patrol, how many men per ship, what are the men doing? Tell
11 me about getting ready for and going out on a patrol.

12 JS: Well, we'd go to—in the morning we would have a good breakfast. That was
13 one of the things, we had excellent food. We'd get up and have our meal. The boat
14 captains and patrol officers would go over to the TOC (Tactical Operations Center), we'd
15 get our indoctrination, our briefing, the crews would go down, and of course, the
16 incoming crew would have the boat fueled. The oncoming crew would check everything
17 out and make sure it was fueled. They'd bring the ammunition down, check the guns,
18 make sure everything was in working order, and just get everything in shape. The
19 relieving crew would make sure the boat was clean, and ready to go, check the oil, check
20 fuel, check the ammunition, and check electronics, everything, make sure it was ready to
21 go. The patrol officer and boat captains would come back down to the pier and here we
22 would go two boats at a time. Usually we'd run, like, from six to six, 1800-0600, and
23 then occasionally we would change because you would set a pattern. That's one of the
24 main things—Americans do that, we all set a pattern. So, we'd break out pattern and
25 maybe go from eight to eight, or nine to nine, or noon to midnight, or whatever. Just try
26 to break up the pattern. My patrol partner was a first class boatswain mate named Bailey,
27 and the boat I had was probably a little bit faster than his boat, and we would try—if you
28 go the same direction every day, you set a pattern on doing this. Well, Beetle and I tried
29 not to do that. I'd take the long bank, and he'd take the short bank because I could, you
30 know, and we would keep up with one another, or I would pick him up on my way and

1 carry him. We just tried to break—every day we just tried to do something a little bit
2 different.

3 KC: What about the PBR itself? What about its armament? What about its
4 electronics? Tell me about that stuff.

5 JS: Well, we had twin 50s on the bow and a single 50 on the stern. We had a
6 40mm grenade launcher, the Honeywell. It would put out forty-eight rounds before the
7 first one hit the ground, actually. It had the M-79. It had small arms. It had an M-60
8 machine gun at mid ship, and then later on a PBR I had, it was, 761 was the number, we
9 put an 81 mm mortar with a piggyback .50 caliber on the stern, and the mortar could be
10 fired point blank. You could trigger fire it. So, like, if there was a bunker, you could, point
11 blank, just trigger fire right into the bunker. Pretty impressive.

12 KC: That's an awful lot of fire power for a small fiberglass boat.

13 JS: Yeah, it was. It really was.

14 KC: Do you think the PBR handled that kind of armament well?

15 JS: Yeah, I think so, yeah. I had an occasion one time, I only had one engine, and
16 we kind of got in a little bit of trouble and the 450s was actually turning the boat around.
17 Yeah, they handled it pretty well.

18 KC: What about the electronics on the ship?

19 JS: We had some problems with the radar, quite a bit of radar problems. Some
20 radio problems, basically the biggest, I think, electronic problems were probably the
21 radar.

22 KC: What was the problem?

23 JS: They just didn't work. A lot of times they didn't work.

24 KC: What was the reason for this? Was it too wet, too humid?

25 JS: Probably humidity. Then—I've had this happen. They have a—the Air Force
26 had a photo recon plane that would fly over and take pictures at night, and they would
27 drop photo flash bombs, and every time a photo flash went off, well I suppose a shutter
28 made a picture, I suppose, but they probably had this device onboard for North Vietnam,
29 I don't know, but it would blow the crystals out of your radar. I had been a long way
30 from home and came back in the dark with no radar, and that's not a very good deal.

1 KC: Wow that would've been difficult, trying to navigate those rivers and canals
2 with no radar.

3 JS: They was a good boat, but you know, the humidity and I suppose the
4 vibration had a lot to do with the sensitive electronic equipment also. In the mid '60s, we
5 were still in the Stone Age, for crying out loud as far as electronics goes, compared to
6 now.

7 KC: I've had other guys who were on PBRs tell me that all the training at San
8 Diego was great, it was wide open, they could really get the engines moving, they could
9 get the pumps doing what they were supposed to do, but in the murky, often dirty waters
10 of South Vietnam, down there in the Delta, that they had troubles with the pumps, the
11 Jacuzzi pumps getting clogged up. Did you encounter this as well?

12 JS: No, no I did not. I've heard people say that straw or—as a matter of fact, I
13 have even read in one of the river books, maybe blackberry brown water, or whatever, I
14 think somebody mentioned in there that sometimes they would plug up with straw or
15 some kind of debris, but no, I never encountered that problem. The only problem I ever
16 encountered was the bearings on the pumps would freeze up sometimes. Then you were
17 in big trouble, but anything that moves is going to break. They were treated rough. The
18 engines heated up quite a bit a lot of times, and the guys on the pier maintenance, which I
19 was sometimes, but some of the guys would complain that we were putting river water in
20 the cooling systems, and we weren't. come to find out, what it was doing was general
21 motors was getting in such a hurry to get these engines out that they were neglecting to
22 pour all the casting sand out of the cooling systems and water jackets. So, that wasn't a
23 crew's fault. That was something that they manufacturers was neglecting to do. I suppose
24 they was getting in too big of a hurry or whatever, I don't know.

25 KC: Right. They are making an awful lot of money producing those engines, I
26 guess. It was a problem long before it even made it to Vietnam.

27 JS: Yeah. We were on the Huyen Ben county in Ben Luc and the Huyen Ben
28 county took, I think it was a 106mm rocket in the wardroom that night, and when I'd
29 came in, I had some kind of trouble with my starboard engine, and I told my maintenance
30 crew there's something wrong with the starboard engine. So anyways when I set general
31 quarters when the Huyen Ben county got hit, well we all scrambled and jumped on the

1 boat, and the standard operating procedure was you just push the throttles all the way
2 forward and hit the start buttons and that's what I did. They had one of the heads off of
3 my starboard engine, and it started on the other bank, so they didn't have to worry about
4 fixing that engine.

5 KC: (Laughing) No, I would guess not.

6 JS: Instant deconstruct.

7 KC: Yeah, don't have to worry about that engine for a while, I would say. You
8 talked about Huyen Ben county here, what was the role of the LSTs as far as task force
9 116 was concerned?

10 JS: They was our mother ship. They would pick us up and put us on board, repair
11 whatever we had wrong. If we had a hole to patch, they would put it in a well deck and
12 patch the hole to get you going. They would—they guys went down on the boat, and
13 they were over all the engines on the boat. We slept aboard it. As a matter of fact, we had
14 air conditioned quarters. They fed us, and the ship crew and the PBR crew got along
15 great. We had a real thing going. Had a beer barge along the side that was great.

16 KC: So, you looked forward to cozying up to those LSTs when you finished.

17 JS: Yeah, right.

18 KC: Alright, we will get into some of the things you would do when you weren't
19 on duty here in a little while but let me ask you about going out on a patrol. You said
20 your first ones were day patrols just so you could get kind of familiar with the area, with
21 the rivers and canals, with the boats, with how things were going to work. Take me out
22 on some of those early day patrols.

23 JS: Well, you just, like I say, you just check traffic going alongside the sampans,
24 check their paperwork. If you thought something was suspicious, you'd go aboard—like
25 a bigger junk, you'd go aboard and mill around, look for things, look for people being
26 extremely nervous, jittery, or whatever. Suspicious looking characters, I guess you could
27 say. You know, we would get information sometimes if it was a sampan and the guy
28 would tell us somebody else was doing something they shouldn't be doing, or this guy
29 was a tax collector, or whatever. There was a, on a couple of occasions, there were some
30 young girls, they'd be wood cutters. They had wood cutter papers, and they would go in
31 the jungle to defoliate it. They would get the wood and take it to the village and make

1 charcoal out of it. Well, we'd get them alongside and tell them we wanted to see their
2 papers and they didn't have any papers so we'd tow them into the village where they
3 lived, of course, then they would come up with their papers. All they were wanting was a
4 free ride. But you know, it was—and here we go again with another people to people
5 thing, getting a lot with the people. Most of the people on the river during the day, they
6 appreciated what we were doing. We were kind to them, we tried to be, and they were
7 more or less, they were kind to us. You are going to find people who aren't both ways,
8 but the daytime, it was just a hot stinky job. More pleasant then at night, but you just
9 done your checking thing and that was about it.

10 KC: You said that, generally, the Vietnamese were good to you, you were good
11 to the Vietnamese. Were there any cases where you saw resentment on behalf of the
12 Vietnamese who were just innocent Vietnamese who were applying their trade, trying to
13 get through their daily life, and here these Americans are in their big, fast, heavily-armed
14 boats stopping us and sticking these metal rods in our rice, and that sort of thing? Did you
15 encounter anyone who was resentful?

16 JS: Yeah, yeah you do. They just wanted to go about their business, basically,
17 and want to be left alone. I can understand that. If you get stopped for an insurance check
18 on your automobile, it just interrupts your day. You understand what I'm saying?

19 KC: Right.

20 JS: It's the same with them. If you stop them—their time is important to them,
21 just like our time is important to us. It just disrupts their schedule, or their day, or
22 whatever, but it's just part of their life.

23 KC: Did you ever feel bad, or feel guilty about having to do this?

24 JS: No, I guess not. It's part of your job. Do your job.

25 KC: Take me out on your first night patrol.

26 JS: Well, I guess I would say it was pretty scary. You hear all—of course at
27 nighttime, there are all kinds of night sounds regardless of where you are. It's just hot,
28 sweaty, and you've got to be extremely quiet. You just sit there in the dark and feel the
29 sweat run down your back, and just wait. You just sit there and wait. You just look and
30 wait. You look in the dark until your eyes burn. As a matter of fact, I am sitting right
31 here, now, in my living room, looking out a picture window, and I do this at night

1 sometimes, still. I won't go to bed till maybe midnight-thirty or sometimes even two
2 o'clock just looking out the window, and I have no idea what I'm looking for, but I still
3 do.

4 KC: Do you think that's related to your time in Vietnam? Just all this intense
5 watching and waiting?

6 JS: I think so. I mean, you'd be surprised what I do see out here in the dark. I live
7 in the country. I see all kinds of things walking across my yard. I think it is, yeah. I think
8 it's just something I do. I think it is directly related to that.

9 KC: Alright, so you've got your orders for your mission, and again, this is a night
10 patrol, here, and you are going to go out with another boat. Who else do you have on
11 your boat with you? I don't necessarily mean specific names, but who is manning what
12 post, what guns, what their role is going to be, and then take me through the patrol.

13 JS: Through the what, sir?

14 KC: Through the patrol.

15 JS: Well, you've got a man in the ford 50 mount, you've got a man in the after
16 50, and you've got a guy standing on the engine covers. It's where the M-60 and the
17 Honeywell are, and then if you have a patrol officer, or if you are the patrol officer and
18 the boat captain, they are both pretty close to the coxswain flat. One of them is in it at
19 night at all times. You—the boat captain, or anyway, I did, and then the coxswain flat, I
20 had everything exactly where I knew where it was. I knew where my flashlight was. My
21 feet were on the first aid kit. My grease pencil, I knew exactly where it was. My mosquito
22 repellant, I knew exactly where it was. I had everything that I could find, in the dark,
23 without fumbling around for anything. At nighttime, everybody had their helmet and flak
24 jacket. You were just there, and you were ready for anything that might happen.

25 KC: So, you and this other boat go out together. Do you have a specific
26 destination? You are working on your maps, and okay, we've got to go up so many clicks
27 up this river, up this canal, and we are going to sit and wait, or are you going out and
28 setting an ambush? What are you doing?

29 JS: Yeah, you have a—when you leave the TLC, you have the coordinates where
30 you are going to be, so you set your ambush there, usually fairly close to the entrance of a
31 canal. Sometimes one boat will just tie up, and the other boat will just drift. Most of the

1 time both of the boats would tie up right against the riverbank, under the nec-palm, and
2 just wait. You set your ambush, and then later became a waterborne guard post. I guess
3 that sounded better. You know, the jobs the same thing, but you just—you have to know
4 where you are because of the air people at night. They know where you are and if they
5 pick up a radar detection where you aren't, that's supposed to be the bad guy, so you'd
6 better be where you are supposed to be.

7 KC: Did you have any action—when I said action I am talking about contact with
8 the enemy—during any of these ambushes?

9 JS: Yes.

10 KC: Tell me about one of those or tell me about as many of them as you can
11 remember.

12 JS: I guess one night we was tied up by some fish sticks with a village across the
13 river. About midnight we got a contact of two sampans that had twelve people in one
14 sampan, and the other sampan was loaded up with gear. We took them under fire and
15 killed all twelve of them. I got—we were pretty proud. Twelve kills were not very many
16 shots, and it wasn't very long that I got a coded message to return to the LST and we did.
17 We destroyed the sampans and stuff first and got the gear, but anyway, I went aboard,
18 and I was told I probably better stand by for a court martial because I didn't take that
19 village under fire. Well, it was my decision not to take that village under fire. You know,
20 there was women and kids in there and if I had, you know, 650s can pretty well tear up a
21 village. Nothing ever came of it, but I suppose they had second thoughts, and I did too.
22 You don't know what's right and what's wrong. I can understand their point of view. The
23 sampans were obviously going to the village, but still, I didn't want that on my mind,
24 killing a lot of people I didn't have to. So, it was just a part of it.

25 KC: So, you've got this ambush set up here. How far out do you see these guys,
26 do you see the VC (Viet Cong) and the sampans, and who opens up first, and how do you
27 coordinate all of this?

28 JS: You've got a starlight on board, and a matter of fact, we had a starlight and a
29 NOD, a night observation devise, I think that thing probably had a ten or twelve inch lens
30 on it. It works the same as a starlight, but one of the crew just seen the sampans and
31 turned around to me and whispered, "Here they are," and so I looked through it and I

1 seen them. I just popped a flare, and when everybody seen it, you don't have to say
2 anything. It's obvious what to do.

3 KC: Now, of course, the rule is that the Vietnamese are not allowed, in sampans,
4 to ply these waterways at night.

5 JS: Right. There is a curfew after dark. Nobody is on the river.

6 KC: Right, and if you are, we know what you're up to.

7 JS: Right.

8 KC: So, these two sampans come in and you begin firing. How do you control
9 what's going on here as the captain of the boat?

10 JS: When everybody was dead, everybody quit shooting.

11 KC: (Laughing) Simple enough, I guess. You successfully, let's say, disabled
12 these two sampans. Do you hook up to them? Do you tow them back to the LST?

13 JS: No, no. We drop a concussion grenade in them and destroy them right on the
14 spot. As a matter of fact, we didn't even—we just took serial numbers off the AKs and
15 dropped them in the river.

16 KC: Alright, so you don't even bother to take the weapons that you find?

17 JS: No.

18 KC: Okay, so once this has been accomplished, once these sampans have been
19 destroyed, do you go back to the LST, or do you go back to the same ambush spot? Do
20 you move to a new ambush spot? What do you do?

21 JS: No, you'd move to a different ambush spot. You clear the area and just go
22 somewhere else. Of course, you code a message and tell people where you were going for
23 your own protection.

24 KC: Right. You talked about air cover, briefly, a moment ago. What kind of air
25 cover did you have?

26 JS: We had the Navy Seawolves, the helicopters, and then we also had the, I
27 called it an OV-10, it was a fixed wing aircraft that the Navy had, Black Ponies. They
28 flew over quite a bit. They had a lot of fire power, it seemed to me like, on the small
29 airplane. I never—at our reunions I met a couple of the guys, the Black Pony people, but
30 I never met one in Vietnam, so actually, I didn't know what they did have.

31 KC: Did you ever have the occasion to call in air support?

1 JS: Yeah, I did.

2 KC: Tell me about that engagement.

3 JS: That was during the daytime. We had been to—it was on operation Giant
4 Slingshot. We went to Tra Cu. Matter of fact, we were going to Tra Cu and we were, the
5 zippo boat was kind of on its maiden voyage, I suppose, and camera crew people was
6 wanting to film it, do its burn thing.

7 KC: Tell me about the—you mentioned it, so I want to get this on the record. Tell
8 me, what was the zippo boat?

9 JS: Well, it was like an LCM (Landing Craft Mechanized). They had a flame
10 thrower on it. I think maybe it even had a 105 howitzer on it. It was just basically a flame
11 throwing boat. Very, very slow, and very, very heavy. Our job, for some reason, was to
12 escort it at four or five miles an hour, so we kind of just walking around. Anyways, we
13 were going to Tra Cu for a briefing and there was two Vietnamese standing on the
14 riverbank and they waved at us. We were, we probably weren't fifty yards from the Tra
15 Cu base, and we figured that they were the Hoi Chins, the, ya know, the guys that came
16 over on our side. You know, two guys standing out there in the open, fifty yards from
17 base wave at you, you figure these are probably the good guys, you don't know. Anyway,
18 we go into Tra Cu and get our brief and turn around and come back, and at that exact spot
19 we got hit hard, and the cover boat got sunk. I called in air support for that, and I called in
20 a medivac for that. That ended up on 16mm film. You've probably seen that little film
21 strip.

22 KC: I don't believe that I have, to be honest with you. You said that you called in
23 the air support. What kind of air support was this?

24 JS: The Seawolves.

25 KC: The Seawolves, okay, so you are bringing in the helicopters. What are the
26 helicopters do?

27 JS: They just go and make a firing round on the coordinates where the fire came
28 from. Of course, the Zippos already got this burnt to a crisp, you know. Anyway, I don't
29 know. I probably called in another one sometime or another. I got a B-52 strike. I'm not
30 sure if I got it or not, but anyway, I called for something and we got a strike close enough
31 it threw mud on us. It was a little bit too close.

1 KC: Oh wow. Yeah, I would think that would be very close. Alright, let's take
2 you back to your night patrols, here. You finish up, you've got contact, you successfully
3 dealt with that, and you are going to finish out this particular control in your ambushes,
4 so your time out there is coming to an end for that particular patrol. You are headed back
5 to the LST. Pick up the story there. What do you do when you reach the LST?

6 JS: You mean when I was called back?

7 KC: Either way. It doesn't have to be this one particular instance. Either way,
8 what do you when you come back?

9 JS: Well, when you come back, you just make your after patrol report. If you had
10 contact, how many rounds expended, how many possible KIAs, how many probable, and
11 whatever. If no contact, you make that report also. No ammo expended. You get your
12 boat cleaned up, make sure it's refueled for the oncoming crew, and you get your meal,
13 and maybe go down to the beer barge and have a beer, and then you go to bed. You are
14 pretty well strung out when you get back, physically and mentally exhausted a lot of
15 times, and just relax a little bit, get some food in your stomach, and get some sleep.

16 KC: I would think that there would be a tremendous amount of stress and strain
17 going out on these night patrols, having to look, having to be aware, all of that going on.
18 So, you are talking about, essentially, decompressing when you get back to the LST. You
19 get a little bit of food in your belly, get a beer, try to relax a little bit. What other sort of
20 things did you do to relieve the stress?

21 JS: That was it. There wasn't nothing else to do.

22 KC: I was thinking in terms of playing cards, or would somebody occasionally
23 get in a movie that you could watch, or anything like that?

24 JS: I think they had movies on board. I'm not sure because I never watched one.
25 For some reason, I don't play cards. That is basically all I would do. I'd eat, and sleep,
26 and go again. Like I say, again, during that time, sometimes I was still the maintenance
27 guy. I would stay on board. I'd miss a patrol or two. I'd meet the boats when they came
28 in, and then I would make sure all their discrepancies were taken care of before they went
29 back. As a matter of fact, I sent you the diary that I kept on the Huyen Ben county.

30 KC: I've seen that. I looked at that the other day.

1 JS: I sent that to you. As a matter of fact, I sent you that original 16mm film strip
2 of when our cover boat got sunk.

3 KC: Yes, in fact, we do have that. I wasn't able to access it the other day. I would
4 like to see that. I think that would be really cool, a really interesting piece.

5 JS: I've got that on a disk. If you like, I can send that to you.

6 KC: We've got it here. I'll just find it here. That won't be a problem. I appreciate
7 it though. Alright, you are also a married man. You've got three children at home. You
8 are in your, what, mid to late twenties? You are a little older than everybody else. You've
9 got a family at home.

10 JS: I'm thirty-one then, I think.

11 KC: Okay, so you are quite a bit older then. Alright, do you write home? Do you
12 get a chance to use the MARS system to call home, make tapes?

13 JS: No, I never called. I would write. Probably not enough, but I did write home.
14 But no, I never did call. Just write and I got a tape. My wife would send me a tape once in
15 a while of the kids playing or singing or whatever, and—actually I didn't appreciate the
16 tapes like I probably should have. I guess, maybe, they made me too much homesick. I
17 guess they bothered me emotionally.

18 KC: Just to hear their voices after being away from them.

19 JS: Yeah, yeah.

20 KC: What sort of things would you put in your letters home?

21 JS: Very, very little. I didn't describe anything that was going on. I would
22 basically ask questions about the kids and how things were going. I didn't put out any
23 information at all. I didn't figure she needed to be worrying any more than what she'd
24 seen on television. That was probably enough.

25 KC: About how often would you write?

26 JS: Oh, maybe once a week. Like I say, probably not enough. I don't know. Its
27 hindsight.

28 KC: Did she or the kids write back pretty regularly?

29 JS: Yeah, I'd get, close to everyday I would get a letter, yeah.

30 KC: Did you ever have the opportunity to go on leave? Get away, go on R&R
31 (Rest and Recuperation)?

1 JS: I had the opportunity. I didn't go.

2 KC: You didn't go on R&R the second time that you were there?

3 JS: No.

4 KC: Oh wow. That's a pretty intense tour then, isn't it?

5 JS: You know, there was kind of a superstitious thing among the PBR people. It
6 seemed like a few days before or a few days after a guy would be scheduled for R&R,
7 he'd get it. I just said, "The hell with it. I'm not going to take a chance." I didn't feel it'd
8 been fair to fly the wife to Hawaii and leave the kids in San Diego. I didn't think that
9 would be fair, and to be truthful, I couldn't afford to fly four people to Hawaii. I just
10 didn't do it. Plus, there again, having to say goodbye again, that would have been very,
11 very hard.

12 KC: What other sorts of patrols stand out in your mind? Are there any in
13 particular?

14 JS: Yeah, as a matter of fact I am going to see this guy in a couple of weeks, Bill
15 Meraga. I don't know if you have met him or not.

16 KC: I don't think so.

17 JS: Anyway, one day his boat wouldn't run for some reason, and he took my boat
18 out. He got in a bunch of trouble. As a matter of fact, he got his butt cheek shot off with a
19 .51 caliber. He got my boat shot up real bad. Jim Morgan, you probably know him.
20 Anyway, he was Lt Morgan. Him and I took boats up and got our boats back out. They'd
21 ended up at a fire support base barb rope, a little bitty canal no wider than a normal
22 driveway, I don't suppose. We were bringing the boats out and we took mortar rounds all
23 the way out of that canal. I remember that. It was pretty impressive. None of the rounds
24 hit a boat but dropping them alongside on the way out of the canal was pretty nervy. We
25 got back out of the canal. I was in the boat that Meraga was running, which was my boat.
26 It still had a live rocket sticking out under the ford gun tub. I ran it up in the mud and I
27 got over the side and pulled the rocket out and gently laid in the water. Then I had a
28 fellow—a matter of fact, I think it was Seaman Terry Smith, he shot four holes in the side
29 of the boat, and a piece plywood, and we stuck a flak jacket in there and bolted it up and
30 took it back to the Huyen Ben county and put it on board. That was a pretty exciting time.

1 KC: Man, I can imagine. Tell me about the people you served with, the guys who
2 were on your boat, or the guys who were on other boats. What kind of person served in
3 task force 116?

4 JS: I'd say they was physically and mentally very, very stable, ninety-nine
5 percent of them. It was just a great bunch of guys. You couldn't have asked for better
6 people to work with. We were a team, actually, a hell of a team. We were very, very
7 close. Well, you have been to our reunions. We are still very, very close.

8 KC: What had changed, in your opinion, from the time that you were in
9 Vietnam, '64- '65, to your second tour, '68- '69?

10 JS: I'd say basically hate for the VC.

11 KC: How so?

12 JS: Well, in '64- '65, not many people was getting hurt, and in '68- '69, a lot of
13 people were getting hurt. That causes hate. You just wanted to go—I mean, it's a heck of
14 a thing to say, but you just wanted to go kill somebody. Get rid of them.

15 KC: What part of the delta were you in? River Division 593, which of these
16 rivers and areas were you responsible for?

17 JS: Out of Nga Bay we were in the Long Tau and the Soai Rap mainly. The Long
18 Tau had been the main shipment channel going into Saigon and when we went to
19 Slingshot, we were on the Vam Co Tay, or the Vam Co Dong. I'm not sure which. I keep
20 getting those mixed up after all these years. We were on the, I'd say it was the Vam Co
21 Dong, I think. I don't remember. One of the two. The smaller canals. We were in canals
22 that was way too small for us to have been there, I think, but anyway. I've been in canals
23 I couldn't even turn around in. You just have to use the water jets and blast a hole and
24 come back out.

25 KS: About how often would you run into an enemy? How many times, say out of
26 ten patrols, how many times out of those ten would you have contact with the enemy?

27 JS: I think I had a total—not out of ten days, but I think I had a total of thirty-
28 eight contacts. I think that's what it was.

29 KC: So, there is a lot of time where you are not in contact with the enemy. That
30 these patrols are essentially coming up empty.

31 JS: Right.

1 KC: What do you do during those patrols to combat the inevitable boredom?

2 JS: You don't. You are just tense. You are tensed up. You just sit there and

3 sweat. There is nothing you can do. A million thoughts go through your mind, and I can't

4 tell you about what.

5 KC: A moment ago you mentioned Operation Giant Slingshot. Explain to me

6 what the purpose in scope of Operation Giant Slingshot was.

7 JS: The two rivers of Vam Co Tay and the Vam Co Dong come down and they

8 actually form what looks like the fork of a slingshot, so that's where the name Giant

9 Slingshot came from. The main objective of Operation Giant Slingshot was to stop Tet of

10 '69, which we did. We stopped the movement of contraband weapons and people and

11 food and everything else across those two rivers, which was the main artery going into

12 Saigon. It was a very costly operation, but it worked.

13 KC: Once it begins, how does it change what you're doing?

14 JS: It gets a lot more intense.

15 KC: In what ways?

16 JS: Well, enemy contact, nerve racking. It's just more intense.

17 KC: There are more of them out there, and you are running more patrols, things

18 like that?

19 JS: Well, we don't run any more patrols, but the patrols are just more intense.

20 There is a lot more enemy contact, a lot more enemy to be contacted. It's just a very, very

21 intense time.

22 KC: During all of this, going through the smaller water ways, the smaller

23 channels, do you come into contact with any of the swift boats, for example?

24 JS: No. No, we did not. I don't think the swift boats was up that far.

25 KC: Yeah, they wouldn't have gone up that far. I didn't know if you ran into

26 them with the LSTs or anything like that.

27 JS: No.

28 KC: Okay, very good. What do you think, or how do you feel about the

29 prosecution of the war by the time you leave there in October of, I guess it is October of

30 '69? How did you feel the Americans and the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, were doing

31 in this war overall?

1 JS: I thought the Americans was doing good. I hated to see, in my opinion, I
2 hated to see the turnover go to the Vietnamese because they were not aggressive. That's
3 my point of view. They just didn't have the aggressiveness or the want to do the job, I
4 didn't think.

5 KC: That brings up a good point here. Overall, you've had experience with the
6 Vietnamese civilians, and you've had some contact with the Vietnamese, in terms of the
7 ARVN and probably the Vietnamese Navy, South Vietnamese Navy. What was your
8 impression of the Vietnamese as a people?

9 JS: Well, as a—basically as a people, they just wanted to be left alone. The VC
10 and the North Vietnamese was taxing them. They didn't like that. We were bothering
11 them, and they didn't like that. They just wanted to be left alone. They were just farmers.
12 It was just common people that wanted to be left alone. That country has been in a war
13 since existence I think, and they just basically just wanted—get out of here and leave me
14 alone. Let me do my thing. If they didn't want to work, that's what they didn't want to
15 do. If they wanted to be a farmer, just leave me alone and let me be a farmer. Just let me
16 do my thing. You know, basically, that's kind of what everybody wants.

17 KC: What was your opinion of the Vietnamese military? It doesn't sound like it
18 was terribly positive.

19 JS: No, it wasn't.

20 KC: What was your opinion of them and why did you hold that opinion?

21 JS: I just didn't feel that they were aggressive. They just didn't want to do what
22 they were supposed to be doing, I guess. They could be on a patrol, or something, they'd
23 just stop and have their meal and have a siesta. We started getting them on the boats, the
24 Vietnamese sailors when the turnover started, we'd get a couple aboard a boat, they
25 might light a cigarette at midnight thirty, you know. You don't do that. They just seemed
26 to have a not care attitude I suppose you'd say. I'm sure there was some good ones, some
27 aggressive ones, and I've met some aggressive ones, but by and large they just didn't
28 want to do what they were supposed to be doing. That's my opinion.

29 KC: So, you were involved in turning over some of the equipment to the
30 Vietnamese?

31 JS: At the very, very last, yeah. Not very much at all.

1 KC: Were you involved in any sort of training of the Vietnamese?
2 JS: I think maybe only two or three times I was on patrol with one. Not very
3 much at all.
4 KC: Right, and you are just showing them the ropes of things that you've been
5 doing the entire tour, how to handle the ambush and different parts of the rivers and
6 things like that, right?
7 JS: Yeah, and like I say, I'm not even sure that—I don't think I ever made, well
8 maybe I made one night patrol with one, but not many at all.
9 KC: How well did they do? What was their performance like?
10 JS: They just didn't do nothing. They were just there. Of course, you know, I'd
11 never seen one in a fire fight either, so I can't say.
12 KC: Sure, sure. Alright, so, come October, I guess it is, of '69, you are going to
13 leave?
14 JS: Yes.
15 KC: Why don't we stop there for today, and our next session we can pick it up
16 and then bring you back home in the October of 1969?
17 JS: Okay

Interview with Jerry Staples

Session [3] of [3]

Date: 27 August 2010

1 KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History interview with Mr. Jerry
2 Staples. Today is 27 August 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech
3 University, and Mr. Staples is joining me by telephone again from his home in Milan,
4 Missouri. Mr. Staples, when we left off last time, we had just finished up most of your
5 tour there in Vietnam. We had you around October of 1969, I believe is when you come
6 home. When you were here on your second tour, were you aware of when you were
7 going to leave the country to come back to the United States? For instance, were you
8 keeping a short timer's calendar, or were you always thinking about the date? Did it work
9 that way for you?

10 JS: All of the above (both laughing). Yeah, everybody had a little short timer
11 calendar, and it was a very exciting time when it got time to come home. I came off the
12 river, oh, I guess a couple months, maybe even longer than that before I came home. We
13 went to Phu Cong, up north of Saigon. We lived at a Phu Cong bridge up there and my
14 main job then was just maintenance and commandeered stuff for the division. Someone had
15 come across a jeep, so we had a jeep, and I would go back and forth from the base to Nga
16 Bay and pick up parts and once in a while I would take a boat back and pick up parts, but
17 I was no longer on a patrol part of the river division. I was strictly maintenance or supply
18 or whatever you want to call it.

19 KC: Now, was this something that you requested? Was this something that your
20 superior said, "Look, you are almost ready to come home. We would like to put you back
21 into a safer position so you are not exposed to this so you can get home." How did that
22 work?

23 JS: My main job, anyway, was supposed to have been maintenance, and there
24 were no facilities up there, at all, so somebody had to do it, so I was picked, I guess. That
25 was my primary job anyway.

26 KC: Describe for me where you lived at this new place. You were there for a
27 couple of months, you said. What was the place like? What was life like for you there?

28 JS: Well, it was—they called it Houston porta-campers. It was just a tent set
29 plywood floor, but they were tents with mosquito net windows. We had a regular little

1 compound. That's when we first got there. Later the Seabees (CBs, Construction
2 Battalion) came in and started building bunkers and that sort of thing, but that was about
3 the time I was leaving. Kind of a funny little store about when we got there, we had a
4 chief's tent and an officer's tent and there are five or six enlisted sailor's tents. The
5 chief's tents, well we were getting everything ready. We had our gear, you know, and one
6 of the guys had his dish kit laying on his bunk and a monkey came in the tent and had got
7 his toothpaste and started squirting toothpaste all over the place, and we had no idea
8 where this monkey came from, and by the way, there was an Army base across the river
9 base from us, a little bitty old army place. Anyway, I threw the monkey outside and little
10 bitty came back in and he got somebody's shaving cream and was squirting it around and
11 so, this happened three or four times and he got to really being a pain, so I dispatched him
12 with my .12 gauge, and I just threw him outside. Anyway, we forgot all about that and a
13 couple hours later this Army Sergeant came over and introduced himself and he said,
14 "I'm the guy that's going to supply you with fuel and ammunition and your sundry packs
15 and everything else you guys need, maybe once a week you can get a hot meal," and
16 anyway he said, "I'm the guy that's going to do this." "Oh fine, fine Sarge. Sit down and
17 have a beer." So, we had a beer or two, and he said, "Oh by the way," he said, "Have you
18 guys seen a monkey?" (laughing) I said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact we did. He's laying
19 out there in the concertina wire," and I told him what happened, and he said, "Don't
20 worry about it. He was kind of a pain anyway," but that was his pet.

21 KC: Well, that could've been a lot worse.

22 JS: You bet. My heart kind of fell when he said, "I'm the guy that's going to
23 supply you with all the goodies," you know?

24 KC: And you killed his monkey. So, what was your routine there on a daily
25 basis? You are no longer going out on patrols, you're not on the river anymore, what sort
26 of things would you do during a day?

27 JS: A lot of the times I would just take the jeep and I would go from there to Nga
28 Bay and just pick up parts, or I would go to Cu Chi or—I can't remember some of the
29 Army bases, but I just kind of drove all over the place picking stuff up, making beer runs,
30 and whatever needed to be done. Sometimes Lt Morgan or Lt JG Madden would go with
31 me, sometimes I'd just go by myself. I'd take the jeep and take people to the airport for

1 their R&R trips. I just kind of the duty everybody, I guess. I kept pretty busy, which was
2 good.

3 KC: Did you miss being out on the river at all?

4 JS: Yeah, I did in a way. In other ways no. I was glad to be, maybe in a safer
5 place. Sometimes trips between Phu Cong and Nga Bay in a jeep by yourself wasn't the
6 safest either. I got put in jail one time with a jeep.

7 KC: You've got to tell me this story.

8 JS: I was going to Nga Bay, and I had a—this is another kind of funny story. I
9 had a 357 Magnum, and a sawed off 12 gauge with a double odd buck in it, and an M-16
10 with me and the MP (Military Police) stopped me between Saigon and Nga Bay and, I
11 don't know for what, probably speeding or whatever, but anyway I had a pocketknife and
12 a dollar bill that I'd carried for both tours in Vietnam for kind of just a safety thing, a
13 memento or whatever. We weren't supposed to have green money at all, so they wrote
14 me up for having a concealed weapon, which was the pocketknife and green money, and
15 took me to jail. I think it was a warrant officer McElroy had to come and bail me out. I
16 haven't had much use for MPs since.

17 KC: What in the world would have possessed them to throw you in jail for these
18 incredibly minor things?

19 JS: I don't know, stupidity maybe. (Laughing)

20 KC: Were you belligerent with them or anything?

21 JS: I got that way, yes. (Both laughing) I mean, here I am on a run by myself,
22 heavily armed, you know, and an E7, and here is a couple of E3s stop me for some minor
23 thing and for having a concealed weapon, a pocketknife, you know, get real.

24 KC: Wow, with a sawed off shotgun and a 357 in the seat beside you, probably.

25 JS: Yeah.

26 KC: Incredible.

27 JS: It was interesting.

28 KC: Let me ask you this. That brings up kind of an interesting question. When
29 you are out on the water, when you are out on patrol on the rivers and canals, it was—I
30 would assume the rules and regulations, sometimes, the minor ones just kind of
31 disappeared because you had a job to do, and you weren't worried about little things like

1 that. When you go back to the rear, as it was in this position for the last couple months
2 that you were there, you would likely have been, and this is a good example of it, faced
3 with more of the things that some veterans call, chicken shit.

4 JS: Yeah.

5 KC: The small things that matter in the rear that don't matter in combat. What
6 was it like to deal with those kinds of things?

7 JS: Well, like you say, it was just chicken shit. It was—there was no need of it. It
8 just, I don't know. There was an example. I don't even remember why, but I was with
9 part of the division, and we came back—the boats came into an Army base somewhere,
10 and I have no idea where, but at the time we were unshaven and muddy, and this is after I
11 came off the river, but for some reason—maybe I flew fuel up to them and then rode the
12 boats back, I don't remember what it was, but anyway we were dirty. We came on this
13 Army base to get an ice cream cone or whatever, and they put us all on report. Every
14 morning there at the base at the tents we lived in we burnt the poop, because you got to
15 do something with it. So, he poured diesel fuel on it and burnt the poop. Well, after we
16 got the report, lieutenant commander Bessenet took a picture of us burning the reports
17 while we were burning the poop and sent that to the commander of that Army base. It
18 was just an incredible, like you say, the stuff that happens that these people have no idea
19 what you're doing. They're in a complete different phase of the war. They're running the
20 ships, a base store, or they're cooks—they've got a job to do, of course, but their concept
21 of what you're doing is completely different than what ours are.

22 KC: Right, right, and you say this was Larry Bessenet that took the picture?

23 JS: Yeah.

24 KC: That doesn't surprise me. Alright, so you are settling in here for the last two
25 months of the tour. Obviously, like you said, you miss being on the river, but also, it's
26 safer. You can count on day to day what you are going to have. You have access to hot
27 food, to showers, to things like that that you wouldn't normally have had. What sort of
28 things are you doing to entertain yourself over these last couple of months?

29 JS: As far as entertaining myself, I don't know, we just—okay, for example, one
30 night Jim Morgan and I stood up on the bridge and threw beer bottles up in the air and
31 shot them with the riot gun. We just—like I said, I was a pretty good hand at

1 commandeering stuff. I'd go to these different Army bases to requisition fuel, to
2 requisition ammunition or whatever, and while I was there, I'd go around to some places,
3 and I'd bring back steak or I'd bring—I remember one time I brought back cans of
4 dehydrated fish and we had a fish fry in the evening. Things of that nature.

5 KC: Any movies, or were you writing letters home or anything like that?

6 JS: Oh yeah, we wrote letters home. We had a—some Filipino girls come one
7 time and give a little R&R show there at the tent city. We had a Miss America pageant
8 come there one time.

9 KC: Was that right?

10 JS: Yeah, flew in and the girls talked with the guys. As a matter of fact, I visited
11 with Miss Missouri, but it was just a—we done whatever we could for entertainment.

12 KC: Did your view of the war change from what you saw when you were in the
13 teeth of it to back when you were in the rear? Did you have any perspective or anything
14 on it?

15 JS: No. The boats would come in and it would be the same thing, you know.
16 They'd be shot up and some guys would be hurt. It was the same thing.

17 KC: As you sat there and you had your two months left, what sort of things did
18 you want to do when you came home?

19 JS: Well, I wanted to get to know my son, which was hard to do. It became very,
20 very hard to do. I wanted to get to know my family, and then, let me see, I don't
21 remember how long it was before I came home, but I got order for—you know, my
22 orders arrived. I was supposed to go aboard a destroyer out of Newport, Rhode Island,
23 which I—we owned a house in San Diego. We were making payments on a house in San
24 Diego. We were established there, and I had been off a ship since 1962, I think it was,
25 and this is the end of '69. I'd been pushing boots, I'd done a tour in Vietnam, I was at the
26 counterinsurgency school, then back to Vietnam, and I didn't really want to go—I didn't
27 feel I was much fit to go back aboard a ship. I was maybe a little bit too cocky, or
28 whatever, I don't know. Larry Bessenet and I was sitting on the dock one night having a
29 beer, and I said, "Commander," I said, "I don't want to go aboard that destroyer out of
30 Newport, Rhode Island, and he said, "Well, where would you like to go?" I said, "I don't
31 know a small boat, or anything around San Diego rather than the destroyer out of

1 Newport and move my family, sell my house, and all that.” So, we discussed that for a
2 while, and he said, “Well, I don’t know. I’ll see what I can do.” I did leave Vietnam with
3 orders for that destroyer, and it was on a Sunday morning about six o’clock our telephone
4 rang while I was on leave in San Diego, and it was a Naval communications station
5 stocked in California wanting to know if this was Chief Petty Officer Jerry Staples, and I
6 said, “Yes, it is.” She said, “You have a change of orders. You are to report to boat
7 support unit one, San Diego, Coronado, California.” I guess Larry had known a fellow
8 named Commander Mac, who was in the barrel somewhere or another, and he got the
9 orders changed for me.

10 KC: Oh, that’s cool.

11 JS: So, I thought that was wonderful, and I will always remember him for that.
12 And I never got to meet Commander Mac, although he did live in San Diego at one time.

13 KC: Let me back up here a little bit, Mr. Staples, and ask you about your leaving
14 Vietnam. Do you remember that day?

15 JS: Yes, I do.

16 KC: Tell me about that day from the second you wake up, the anticipation and
17 everything else, take me through that day, or those days when you come home.

18 JS: Well, it was a, just an exciting day, I don’t remember, actually I don’t
19 remember leaving. If I left Nga Bay, I don’t remember if I left Phu Cong. I don’t
20 remember where I left from. I came in country with a Ka-bar, and I was leaving country
21 with my same Ka-bar, the knife, you know? I had it in my luggage, and one of the MPs
22 was searching my luggage and he took my Ka-bar. I remember that. That stands out in
23 my mind, other than that, I just remember I was glad to get out of there. I was glad to get
24 on the airplane. It was a super relief when I felt that big bird thrust me back in the seat.
25 Actually, I can’t tell you where I left from, outside of Tan Son Nhut. I don’t know if I left
26 from Nga Bay. I don’t know if I left from Phu Cong, or nothing. I can’t tell you that.

27 KC: So, what was that trip home across the pacific like? Was it a straight flight?
28 Did you stop in the Philippines, or Guam, or Hawaii? What was the trip like?

29 JS: You know, I can’t even tell you that. I don’t remember. I just remember
30 leaving and I remember, I think somebody had told me, “You probably shouldn’t wear

1 your uniform in San Francisco because of the peace people,” you know? I wore my
2 uniform all the way home. Piss on them.

3 KC: So, did you come back into Travis?

4 JS: No, we flew into San Francisco international airport.

5 KC: Okay.

6 JS: Then I flew from there to San Diego.

7 KC: When you got to San Francisco, did you see anyone who was protesting the
8 war? Was there any sort of animosity shown towards you and others?

9 JS: Not to me, no. I kind of broke up from everybody else there. I got my
10 luggage, you know, and I went on my way. I had to catch another flight to San Diego. I
11 remember some hippie type people sitting around. They never bothered me any, and I
12 never bothered them any.

13 KC: Alright, you make it back to San Diego. Describe for me the reunion with
14 your family.

15 JS: It was tearful. It really was. It was very, very emotional and very tearful.
16 We—strange things you remember, but I’ve always heard that a dog would forget you
17 after a while. We had a German shepherd that I had trained to be fairly aggressive
18 because of me being gone a lot. When I got out of the car, when we got in the driveway
19 and I got out of the car, that dog just peed all over himself, he was so excited. I didn’t
20 even know that they remember.

21 KC: Right. That’s pretty cool. What was it like to see your kids?

22 JS: Great. Again, it was emotional, but my son was afraid of me.

23 KC: How old was he?

24 JS: He just started kindergarten, and he—when I was home the three years in-
25 between the two tours, when I got home, he was only a year old. So, when I left again, he
26 was four, so he didn’t know who the hell I was or what I was doing there. The wife and I
27 had, we had our problems, you know. I was a different person than I was when I left.

28 KC: Can you—I’ve heard other people say that. Could you describe that
29 difference? What was the difference as you look back on it?

30 JS: I was mean. I guess—she just finally told me one day, she said, “You got to
31 stop this.” I’d just got mad at something, and I’d say, “I’ll just kill the son of a bitch,” or

1 something like that. I was—she was afraid that I was actually going to do something like
2 that, you know. I would just go off the deep end, just in a rage. I guess all three of the
3 kids was afraid.

4 KC: What do you think explains this inner anger, this inability to control your
5 temper or to be able to kind of moderate these things?

6 JS: I don't know how a person explains that. As a matter of fact, I think I
7 mentioned before that I gave a talk up here on Memorial Day one time, and I told the
8 audience, I said, "Phyllis had to just sit me down and tell me, 'Hey, you gonna straighten
9 up or something bad is going to happen here.'" I explained to them, or I tried to explain
10 to them, if you have a loved one who is in a combat situation, in a combat zone, he is not
11 going to come home the same as he left. You're not going to do that. You are going to be
12 a different person. I don't think any of us can explain to you why.

13 KC: Do you think that it could have been different, and again, these 'could
14 haves' are kind of an exercise in futility, but it can be instructive. Do you think it could
15 have been different had it not been—you were in Vietnam, and this happened for so
16 many people, in Vietnam one minute, and then forty-eight hours later you are back at
17 home with your loved ones. Do you think that there was not enough time to kind of
18 decompress or to kind of adjust to leaving this incredibly stressful situation and
19 potentially violent situation, to come back to peace and a loving family and a much
20 calmer lifestyle? Do you think that the lack of time had something to do with that?

21 JS: It may have. We came back in a very, very unfriendly environment. We were
22 not welcomed home, at all. People didn't want us home. Our family, sure enough, wanted
23 us home, but you know, the general population, they could care less if we came home or
24 not. We didn't get a welcome of any kind outside of family. I'd say a good part of the
25 people didn't know why we was there or didn't even care. It was just an unfriendly
26 environment I suppose, I don't know. Like you just mentioned, there was no downtime in
27 between. You left a violent situation to a loving situation instantly.

28 KC: You've mentioned, off the recording when I was speaking with you earlier
29 this morning that your daughters said that they had some difficulties dealing with you're
30 coming home, you're being gone, and then you're coming home. Would you care to
31 discuss that with me?

1 JS: Well, yeah. They—my oldest daughter was, she would've been eight, I think,
2 then. She was very closed mouth when she was a child. Even, like if I would scold her,
3 she got real dark eyes and she would just glare at you, like shoot little darts back at you
4 with her eyes. She was more or less unemotional about things, but she held everything
5 inside. I found out at a later date, matter of fact at one of our game warden's reunions that
6 she was actually mad at me for being there, for being gone, and probably for being in
7 Vietnam in general. She asked one of our game wardens, Carl Fletcher, if he had children
8 when he was in Vietnam, and he told her yes, and she asked him, "Well Carl, was your
9 kids mad at you?" and he said, "Yeah they were," and she said, "Well, we were mad at
10 dad too." I never realized this until our reunion at Little Creek two years ago. Our
11 youngest daughter, Kathy, was and is still very emotional, complete opposite of her
12 sister. She still has emotional problems with this. When she was just a little girl in
13 school—kids are very, very cruel, as we all know. You know, if you are bare-footed they
14 will throw rocks at your feet if you can't afford shoes or whatever, but anyway, they
15 would tell her that her daddy wasn't coming home. That her daddy was going to get
16 killed, and this sort of thing, and I guess she was just glued to newscasts. She just told me
17 this, a matter of fact, a week ago. She would just be glued to the newscast looking for
18 faces, and the news was very explicit, I guess, about casualties and KIAs (Killed in
19 Action) in Vietnam on television, and she would just be glued to the television looking
20 for faces afraid one of them was going to be her daddy. Of course, like I said, I didn't
21 know this until just a week ago, but she is still very, very emotional about the situation
22 that occurred then.

23 KC: That must have been incredibly difficult to hear.

24 JS: It was, you know, we both had tears for crying out loud. My son, the only
25 thing—he was young enough that he didn't really realize that much about what was going
26 on outside of, like I say, he was afraid of me, but I will relate that on his—the wife told
27 me this. On his first day of kindergarten, he was all excited about going and he had his
28 little backpack and everything and was all excited about going. The school was only a
29 block from our house, so anyway, he went to meet his little friend and they went to
30 kindergarten. Well, when he came home at noon—kindergarten was only half a day.
31 When he came home at noon, the wife wasn't at the door to meet him. She was in the

1 other part of the house cleaning the closet or whatever. Anyway, he couldn't find her, and
2 he panicked. I guess he thought, "Well, dad's gone. Where did mom go," and she had a
3 terrible time getting him to go back to school. He didn't want no part of leaving mom
4 anymore.

5 KC: Like you mentioned, you say you didn't know that there was this kind of
6 emotion, the anger, resentment, or whatever that your children felt, especially your girls
7 felt towards you. As you look back on it now, all these years later, did you see anything
8 that you realize now that may have been some sort of outlet of this towards you?

9 JS: That's a toughie. I don't know. I don't know if you have any teenage girls or
10 not, but when a girl gets to be thirteen or fourteen, the parents don't know anything. It
11 seems to be the way, anyway, so I don't know if that's resentment, or if that's just the
12 way all girls are.

13 KC: I've got one that's nine that already thinks that.

14 JS: Well good luck.

15 KC: (Laughing) Thank you. How do you go about as a young man with a young
16 family? How do you go about trying to put things back together? You've got the
17 difficulties of adjustment to peacetime life, you've got children who clearly were affected
18 by this, your wife was clearly affected by your service, you've got to start a new life in
19 San Diego again as part of the Navy. How do you start to piece things back together?
20 How does that work for someone?

21 JS: I don't know. About the first things we'd done, I suppose, after we got kind
22 of settled in—well, the first thing I wanted to do, I wanted to take my son camping,
23 which was probably a big mistake because I took him way up in the mountains where he
24 couldn't see a light, and I think I mentioned he was afraid of me anyway. I had to bring
25 him back about eleven o'clock at night. He was just terrified, so that was the first
26 bummer, I guess. I don't know, just after that we just loaded up the family in the car and
27 we took off. We went up to northern California, got caught in a snowstorm up around
28 Reno, in Yosemite. We stayed in a little town called Lee Vining. I remember that. It was
29 just cold, just coming out of the tremendous heat. A nice little clean town of Lee Vining.
30 As a matter of fact, we stayed in a hotel. I don't even think they had a motel and walked
31 across the street and had hot cocoa and blackberry pie with ice cream on it. I don't know

1 why I remember that. It was cold, and just getting back with the family, I guess. It just
2 seemed—I guess that’s probably why I remember that, even the kind of pie it was. I don’t
3 know what kind of a feeling you would call that, a very loving feeling, I suppose, to be
4 able to do that again.

5 KC: It must’ve seemed bizarre to you; in some ways I would think.

6 JS: Yeah, you know, you are in such a state of change from what you have been,
7 maybe last week till now, till this week. Last week you smelt bad, and you were hot and
8 sweaty, and this week you’re eating ice cream and pie in the snow with your family.
9 It’s—talk about the other side of the world, you know.

10 KC: Right, literally, in this case as well. What did you want to do from this point
11 on? Did you want to stay in California? Did you want to stay in the Navy? What did you
12 want to do?

13 JS: Oh yeah, I wanted to stay. I wanted to stay in the Navy for sure. I was only
14 six years from retirement at that time, and yeah, we were paying for our house in San
15 Diego. It was a nice house. We lived only a block from the school. We had a yard for the
16 kids to play in. We had good neighbors. We lived in a good neighborhood. It turned out
17 not to be good years later, but you know, times change. Yeah, I was perfectly happy
18 there.

19 KC: So, did you stay there in San Diego for the next six years?

20 JS: No. That’s another story. No, when I went to boat support unit one, I was
21 assigned to the RDT&E, research, training, development, and education part of the naval
22 special warfare group, which was very exciting. I had been an instructor for years, and
23 that’s the young officers who was going in country with the SEAL support units, I was
24 basically teaching them back again about like the counterinsurgency school was. The
25 only difference was we was teaching high performance gas engines rather than the basic
26 diesels. Then I was a PT instructor there again. Well, for an example, our flak jackets on
27 the boats, on the PBRs, they were supposed to be life supporting flak jackets, which they
28 were not. If you got one wet, you went straight to the bottom. I got ahold of the company
29 and was complaining about this, so one of the company reps came and was going to show
30 me that they would float. We happened to be at the pool, and so I had me a flak jacket
31 that was good and wet and I had him put it on, and I tapped him on the shoulder and

1 pushed him in the pool and he walked across the bottom of it. I mean, he was convinced
2 that, yeah, I was right, and he was wrong, so we got something done about the flak
3 jackets. It was an interesting tour. I think I had been there maybe a year and a half or two
4 years, and the engineering officer called me in—to back up just a little bit, we worked
5 and run the nasty class torpedo boats and the PT boats and the MSSCs, the SEAL support
6 crafts, SEAL support craft, and that sort of thing. It was a lot of fun and very, very
7 interesting. We tested these, developed them, and the whole bit. The chief engineer called
8 me in his office at noon one day and he said, “Chief,” he said, “You are going to have to
9 go back in country with a SEAL Support team,” and I said, “Lieutenant, I’m not going.”
10 He said, “You do whatever you need to do.” I said, “I’m not going.” What really
11 disturbed me, there was another chief engineman there who was a Filipino. They were
12 going to send him to Pacific Bay, and he had never been in Vietnam. They were going to
13 send him to Pacific Bay, with a SEAL Support training unit, and sending me back in
14 country with the SEAL Support unit, and I said, “I’m not going.” I said, “It’s not fair to
15 send me back over there, and to send this guy back home, for Christ sakes,” and I said,
16 “I’m not going. Do whatever you need to do, but I’m not going.” So, I figured, well, I’m
17 going to make first class again. Well, I got orders to Adak, Alaska, up in the Aleutian
18 Islands. So, I figured that’s what the Navy called shit canned, from one place to another,
19 which was actually the best thing that ever happened to us.

20 KC: Why do you say that?

21 JS: Well, we sold our house in San Diego for double what we paid for it. My
22 family went to Adak. We loved it up there. We spend four years up there. There was no
23 place to spend money. The wife worked at the school. She was a superintendent
24 secretary. She made more than I did, and we saved enough money to buy our farm at
25 home when we got back, and I retired.

26 KC: What did you do up there at Adak?

27 JS: I was the—we were doing ships division, which was—there was an E9, it was
28 either a Lieutenant JG or an E9 boatswain mate, one of the two was our division officer.
29 Then there were two chief boatswain mates and myself, and we had three tugs and we
30 done all the, we brought all the ships in, supply ships tankers, supply ships coast guard

1 would capture Russian trollers for illegally fishing and bring them in and we tied them up
2 to the pier. We done this sort of thing.

3 KC: All this time, before you retire here, did you continue to keep up with the
4 war in Vietnam, or was that something you just put out of your mind for all intents and
5 purposes?

6 JS: You know, when I was in boat support unit 1, yeah, we were very close to it.
7 When we got to the Aleutians—both of the chief boatswain mates I worked with up there
8 had been in Vietnam. One was a tug operator there and the other was a river assault group
9 advisor, and we'd sit around and talk about Vietnam, but other than that, no. Our
10 concerns were up there. It was strictly family concerns and our jobs at the time. Vietnam,
11 per se, was just outside of war stories. It was, no, it was out of our minds.

12 KC: Do you remember when the United States ended its participation in the war,
13 or the peace of Paris, when the American troops were out?

14 JS: Yeah, I remember that. I remember the POWs coming home. Yeah, I
15 remember all that.

16 KC: What about the final end of the war, April 1975? What were your
17 impressions of the way the war ended?

18 JS: I say to this day that the American troops, we never lost the war. We never
19 lost an engagement. I guess I'm, would say, disappointed that it ended the way it did, not
20 a victory, per se. In my mind, yeah, it was a victory, but it wasn't. Does that make sense?

21 KC: Sure, sure. From your perspective you look at the military aspects of it in the
22 forms of the Americans, and the South Vietnamese as well, but of course we know how
23 the final story unfolded there, in 1975. What about the way the U.S. ended its
24 participation in the war? I've heard a lot of veterans express their disappointment in the
25 way the U.S. left Vietnam.

26 JS: You mean the final pull out, or the withdrawal?

27 KC: The overall American withdrawal of support for South Vietnam.

28 JS: I mentioned last week that I didn't think—I don't think the South Vietnamese
29 troops were aggressive enough to handle the situation. That's my personal opinion. My
30 idea, and I may or may not be right. My idea, if you are going to have a war, do it and get
31 it over with. Do it and do it right. Maybe General Sherman had the right idea.

1 KC: As you look back on all of this, looking back on your experience in
2 Vietnam, how do you think those experiences most affected your life?

3 JS: Hmmm, how do they most effect my life? Well, I don't think the shortened it
4 any, I don't suppose. I'm fairly healthy for my age. Emotional, yeah. It affected my like
5 emotionally and anybody that has been in combat, this is different, I think, as telling you
6 a story. I think I have repeatedly mentioned that you are never the same. I find myself
7 doing a lot of things that, I would say, normal people don't do.

8 KC: Such as what?

9 JS: Stare off into the distance for no reason at all for a long period of time. My
10 wife will be telling me something and I have no idea what she is saying. My thoughts are
11 way to hell and gone somewhere else, which is not right. I mean, I suppose all of us, our
12 wife tells us something and we don't hear what they say sometimes, maybe on purpose, I
13 don't know. I guess this is not a good thing to say either, but death doesn't seem to bother
14 me a whole lot. Both of my parents have died. I regret that they died, well know I don't
15 regret that they died because both of them was in bad shape and there comes a time you
16 need to die, but as far as actually saying, do I miss them? No. An animal, I have no
17 problem at all disposing of an animal. A lot of people say, "I couldn't shoot a dog," well,
18 it doesn't bother me. Before this all took place, yeah it did. There are just so many little
19 things that change in a person's life. I guess that's what changes it. I don't know. You ask
20 some toughies.

21 KC: That's what I get paid to do, I guess. Let me ask you this one, what did you
22 learn about yourself as a result of your experiences in Vietnam?

23 JS: That, I guess, I have never been asked to do anything that I couldn't do, or I
24 didn't accomplish maybe. I hear a lot of non-veterans say, "Oh, I can't do that," or "I
25 couldn't do that." When a person says, "I can't," they haven't tried yet. Does that make
26 sense?

27 KC: Right, absolutely. The last question I have for you, Mr. Staples, as you look
28 back on it, all these forty some odd years later, what would you say is the legacy of the
29 Vietnam war for the United States?

30 JS: The legacy?

31 KC: The legacy, what do you think its lasting impact is?

1 JS: I don't know. I think—people ask me now, “Do you think we ought to be in
2 Afghanistan, or do you think we should have got out of Iraq after Saddam was captured?”
3 and my answer to the first question, do you think we should have got out of Iraq after
4 Saddam, yeah, I do. I think that was the mission, and once a mission is accomplished, I
5 think we should have just got out. For us being in Afghanistan, I think there is probably a
6 lot of innocent guys getting killed for no reason. We can't police the world, there is no
7 way, and maybe we should've learnt that there. Does that answer that?

8 KC: Yeah, absolutely, and that is certainly something that we hear quite a bit,
9 especially from Vietnam veterans, absolutely. Well, Mr. Staples, is there anything else
10 you would like to add to this interview before we draw it to a close?

11 JS: No, it's been very interesting. I might add, yeah, I never realized until I
12 visited with you the last—this makes it the third time, but I don't know if anybody else
13 has ever mentioned this or not, and maybe it is just me personally, but when I get
14 through, I'm exhausted. Do you know a reason for that?

15 KC: Well, I could—number one, you could be talking quite a bit, I guess, and
16 that's enough to exhaust anybody, wear them out a little, and two, just from what we
17 have heard so far, in this interview, some of the things, I won't necessarily say hard, but
18 to some degree difficult to discuss. There were, clearly, emotional things that came about
19 as a result of the war with your family and things like that, and a lot of the memories, and
20 I can certainly see how that could be the case. I have had other people say similar things.
21 That's certainly not unusual.

22 JS: Yeah, well, good. It's been interesting. I am excited about you talking to the
23 girls. I think it will be good for them and I think you might gain some insight. I think it
24 will be good and it might be emotionally good for them to get it off their chest, you
25 know, to be able to tell somebody else. I'm not too sure—well, my youngest daughter,
26 just to give you a little background, she is the assistant to the dean over at the doctor's
27 hospital over at the University of Osteopathy in Kirksville, so she's been pretty
28 successful in life. Her husband is the superintendent of a school, but as far as her
29 expressing to him, her husband, her feelings, I don't know if she could do that because he
30 was raised on a farm. His dad was raised on a farm. They have never been out of the

1 county, probably, until my daughter and he was married. He wouldn't understand what
2 she's talking about.

3 KC: Well, it's certainly a very personalized experience, much like we hear from
4 combat veterans. Unless you are there, you can't truly understand the feelings and
5 emotion and things that crop up, but I certainly very much look forward to discussing
6 these things with your daughters and interviewing them here in the very near future. We
7 will put an end to the interview today, Mr. Staples.

8 JS: Okay.