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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with James Wollner
Conducted by Jason Stewart
Date 20 August 2010
Transcribed by Emilie Meadors**

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.

The transcription of this interview was paid for by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

1 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech
2 University conducting an Oral History Interview with Mr. James Wollner. Today is
3 August 20th, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Library on the
4 campus of Texas Tech and Mr. Wollner is joining me by phone from New Jersey. Is that
5 correct?

6 James Wollner: That's correct.

7 JS: All right, well why don't we begin with a little bit of biographical information.
8 First of all, when and where were you born?

9 JW: Where was I born or when was I born?

10 JS: When and where.

11 JW: Okay, I was born in 1946, February 6th in Montclair, New Jersey.

12 JS: All right, could you tell me a little bit about your parents? What were their
13 names?

14 JW: You know, I should say Glenn Ridge because the hospital I was born in, the
15 obstetrics part was in Glenn Ridge and that's what my birth certificate says.

16 JS: Yes sir, well could you tell me a little bit about your parents? What were their
17 names and what did they do for a living?

18 JW: My mother, her name was Helen Wollner. Excuse me a second.

1 JS: Sure.

2 JW: Okay, and my father's name was Carl Wollner. He was an immigrant to this
3 country, and I guess he came in 1924 from Germany. He was a technician at Bell
4 Telephone laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey. And my mother was a housewife, but
5 she was also disabled.

6 JS: Okay.

7 JW: She was also one of the first—well, not one of the first, but one of the few
8 college graduates at the time. You know, women just didn't go to college that much.

9 JS: Yes sir, all right. Well, did you grow up there in New Jersey?

10 JW: I grew up in Bloomfield. I've lived all my life here with the exception of my
11 vacation in Southeast Asia.

12 JS: All right, is Bloomfield pretty close to the city?

13 JW: Well, we border on Newark which is the largest city in New Jersey. It's not
14 the capital, but it's large. As the crow flies we are thirteen miles from the Empire State
15 Building directly west.

16 JS: Okay, yes, sir. Well, could you talk a little bit about growing up and what that
17 was like for you?

18 JW: Well, as I said I grew up in Bloomfield. I attended Bloomfield public schools
19 all through from kindergarten through high school. I don't know, you know. I hung out
20 with a bunch of guys, and we did the normal things that teenagers do. In fact, we just had
21 a reunion with those people, and we hadn't seen each other, I guess, in fifty years so it
22 was quite an experience.

23 JS: Yes, sir.

24 JW: One of my friends is an actor and he's semi-famous, I guess. Have you ever
25 seen *Deadwood* on HBO?

26 JS: Right, yes, sir.

27 JW: Do you remember a man named Charlie Utter?

28 JS: Sounds familiar.

29 JW: Wild Bill Hickock's friend? He wore a bowler hat and stuff.

30 JS: Okay, yes, sir.

1 JW: Well Dayton Callie is his name and that's who was one of the boys that hung
2 on the corner.

3 JS: All right, how about that.

4 JW: He was in a couple of other things, too. John from Cincinnati who's currently
5 in *Sons of Anarchy* on FX. He plays the sheriff.

6 JS: All right.

7 JW: I'm an only child, by the way. I have no brothers and sisters and I kind of
8 liked it that way, I guess. No competition.

9 JS: Right. Well, as a kid growing up, did you have any interest in the military at
10 all? Had you had any relatives who had served in the military in World War II or
11 anything like that?

12 JW: Well, I did. My uncle was in the Navy. He was on a destroyer that was sunk
13 off of the Guadalcanal.

14 JS: Yes, sir.

15 JW: 5 or 6 Kamikaze attacks, Kamikaze attacks, and he and about five or six
16 other people were the only survivors.

17 JS: Oh wow.

18 JW: I've always been interested in the history of World War II and I'm a history
19 major and a political science major and yeah, as I said, World War II always interested
20 me and I always, you know, I guess had an affinity for the military.

21 JS: All right, well as you were growing up and as the Cold War began to heat up,
22 did you pay much attention to it and what was going on in the world as far as U.S foreign
23 policy was concerned?

24 JW: Well, when you're fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen you know, you really don't
25 care much about those things.

26 JS: Sure.

27 JW: I didn't become interested, really, in all that stuff until I was around
28 seventeen or eighteen and Vietnam recently started and that started oh, my interest, I
29 guess. It sort of peaked my interest. You know, I sort of was always involved in politics,
30 but it was really by osmosis. My parents were really much involved in political parties

1 politics here in the state and here in town. Although they were never in public office, they
2 were behind the scenes kind of people.

3 JS: Okay.

4 JW: As a result, you know, I became somewhat interested in politics even though
5 I never ran for public office until this year. I'm currently running for town council.

6 JS: Okay, yes, sir. Well, what year did you graduate from high school?

7 JW: I graduated high school in 1964.

8 JS: 1964, all right. And upon graduation, what did you do at that point? Was it
9 onto college or?

10 JW: No, I attended night school for a while because my parents made me, but I
11 had various jobs. I was a grounds keeper on a golf course, I was a truck driver, and then I
12 got drafted when I was twenty-one years old in 1966, it was January of '66. I'm sorry,
13 December of '66.

14 JS: December of '66, okay. Could you talk I guess about that experience? What
15 was your reaction to getting the draft notice and what was your family's reaction to that?

16 JW: Well, being that my mother was severely disabled, and my father was retired,
17 well, almost retired. I figured that I wouldn't go. So, I really didn't think about going to
18 Vietnam, but then after my basic training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, they
19 immediately sent us down to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. At the time, Fort Jackson was
20 the training base. It was there and Fort Polk were both the Vietnam training bases. I still
21 didn't really think that I could go to Vietnam, but I was wrong. I tried to get out of going,
22 I was put on congressional hold I went through my congressman at the time to see if he
23 could help me. A week later I was on an Air Force jet to Sunny South Vietnam.

24 JS: All right, well before getting into Vietnam, once you received your draft
25 notice, how long did you have before you had to report for induction?

26 JW: I believe it was about three months.

27 JS: Okay.

28 JW: Two and a half months, three months.

29 JS: Okay, could you talk a little bit about the day you were inducted into the
30 military and what that was like and what memories you have of that?

1 JW: Well, it was very interesting. The most interesting part was that after some
2 initial testing, we were all told to line up and count off by fours. You know, I was number
3 three and, you know, my buddy was number four. When we all got done counting off, I
4 guess someone said, “Well, the number fours please step forward.” And they did and
5 said, “Form a line, go down the stairs, and get on the bus outside. You’re now going to be
6 members of the Marine Corps.”

7 JS: Wow.

8 JW: I just missed that. I was a number three. That was the most memorable part,
9 but other than that, you know, you’re scared, you have trepidations on what’s going to
10 happen and somewhat and so forth. But then we got on the bus and they drove that bus
11 down to Fort Dix. So, when we arrived at Fort Dix, the whole place was filled up with
12 National Guard people. So, there was no room in the basic training unit.

13 JS: Right.

14 JW: So, then he told us to get on another bus. He didn’t tell us where we were
15 going, but to just get on a bus. So, we got on a bus and drove, you know, that afternoon
16 and through the night and ended up in Fort Bragg in North Carolina. And that’s where we
17 did our basic training. Some of our training people were airborne and I don’t know
18 whether being a marine would have been better or not, but needless to say it was an
19 experience. I think I was 220 pounds when I went to basic. When I got out of basic, I was
20 180 pounds.

21 JS: Oh wow, wow.

22 JW: I lost a few.

23 JS: Yes, sir. Well, before getting in a little bit more of the training aspect of it, had
24 you followed—you mentioned a little bit of it, but had you followed the developments in
25 Vietnam pretty closely at that point and if so, had you formed an opinion on the War?

26 JW: No, not really. Because don’t forget the War was really in its infancy. It
27 didn’t really didn’t bother anybody until it was split with the—I forget what that unit was
28 and then suffered mass casualties and the La Drang Valley. We were soldiers once and
29 young, in that group.

30 JS: Yes sir, the 1st Cavalry?

1 JW: Yeah, yeah. That was the original—I guess the starting point of where I said,
2 “Well, maybe I don’t want to go to Vietnam. I don’t want to go in the Army.”

3 JS: Right, okay. Well, could you talk a little bit more about basic training and
4 what it was like for you? I don’t know, just something about your daily routine of basic if
5 you don’t mind.

6 JW: Now you’re really pulling back some memories here. Basic training was—I
7 don’t know whether it was interesting or—I don’t know the best way to describe it, but
8 what I did like about it was it really made my opinion of the Army better off. The reason
9 was that the Special Forces—that was the home of the Special Forces training unit and in
10 the Special Forces, everybody was treated equally. I remember going by on a truck going
11 to a firing range one day and people on policing up the area, sergeants, majors, captains,
12 lieutenants, privates, you know, they were all out there doing policing up. Police call I
13 mean by picking up cigarette butts and cleaning the area. It was all run by a sergeant at
14 the time and that was interesting.

15 JS: To see the officers out there, too?

16 JW: Correct. It was nothing like regular Army, it was totally—and that sort of
17 boosted my opinion, you know, a little bit of the Special Forces and I was even thinking
18 it one time of joining them. The thing you had to go to, you know, airborne school and do
19 that sort of thing. You know the old saying, “There’s two things coming out of the sky.
20 That’s bird crap and paratroopers.” But basic training was—you’re totally programmed
21 into a way of life and a way of doing things that you’ve never done before. Like you
22 couldn’t throw your underwear around or, you know, you had to regularly shower, and
23 you had to eat three times a day and you were regimented, I guess. I don’t want to say
24 programmed because well, maybe that was a little bit regimented was a better term.

25 JS: All right.

26 JW: And then really after basic training I thought we would be allowed to go
27 home on a two week leave, but instead they told us to get on a bus. And that other bus
28 ended up in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. All the way from basic to advanced infantry
29 training.

30 JS: Right.

1 JW: And went through the whole Vietnam training facility. I was assigned to
2 heavy weapons infantry which is 11C-10 which is the MOS trained in mortars.

3 JS: Do you have many memories of the drill instructors there? And if so, what
4 was your impressions of those guys?

5 JW: Well, they did. We all were really scared of our drill instructors when we first
6 went in because, you know, they were nothing you see on TV today, you know? They tell
7 you what to do, what not to do and whatever, but at the end of the training period, they
8 were like our fathers. They were super guys, every one of them.

9 JS: Had most of them—

10 JW: In basic training and advanced infantry training.

11 JS: Okay, yes, sir. Were they all Vietnam veterans themselves?

12 JW: As a matter of fact, no. Most of them were, but others were Korean War
13 veterans.

14 JS: Yes, sir.

15 JW: Most of the people that did it—in fact, all the people in advanced infantry
16 training in Fort Jackson were Vietnam Veterans.

17 JS: Okay, was that training—was it focused primarily on Vietnam?

18 JW: Yes, it was.

19 JS: All right.

20 JW: Totally focused on Vietnam.

21 JS: Okay. Well, did you feel overall that the training was good as far as preparing
22 you for Vietnam? I guess as best as it could?”

23 JW: Yes, I thought it was adequate. My main concern was operation of weapons
24 because I wanted to be able to protect myself and that was some of the things we learned.
25 We even learned how to operate some of the other weapons that they had.

26 JS: Was this mostly field training or was there classroom training as well?

27 JW: Mostly infantry training. There was classroom training, too, but they’d
28 always give you classroom training initially and would go out and experience what you
29 would learn in the classroom. Or at least they tried to—how could they make South
30 Carolina look like Vietnam? That was the most difficult part, but other than that it was
31 basically classroom training followed up by actual, you know, live training, I guess.

1 JS: Well, going through basic and through AIT, did you feel that you were
2 adjusting pretty well to the military lifestyle?

3 JW: Yeah, I think so. This was in 1967, you know, early 1967. The height of the
4 protests didn't really occur at that time, although there was some, but not as much as
5 what happened later on.

6 JS: Yes, sir. Well, before moving on from training, are there any particularly
7 memorable moments or funny moments or anything like that from your training that
8 sticks out in your mind that you could possibly mention?

9 JW: I don't think so. I'm trying to—I know in advanced infantry training we were
10 put on alert because the Newark riots were occurring, and I think that was—was that
11 Martin Luther King when he was assassinated? No, that was later. I guess it was the riots
12 in Newark and they were afraid any other cities that it would spread to the other major
13 cities and we were all put on alert to go into Columbia, South Carolina, in case it
14 happened there, but it didn't happen. And that was another interesting fact too, as far as
15 the races. There were black people in a unit, white people. The main thrust of everything
16 was there was no such thing as the color in the Army. You know, the men next to you
17 whether he was white or black was protecting you and you were protecting him. I'd like
18 to say that the color aspect of everything was really OD and not black or white.

19 JS: How about when you stepped off the base in South Carolina? Did you notice
20 much of the racism? Did you notice any there among—?

21 JW: I never noticed anything. I mean, a lot of our drill instructors, too were black
22 also. But I never really saw any racism. Except once I saw there were a couple of the
23 guys got drunk and I think he was from the hills of Tennessee and he started in with
24 another guy that was black, and they had a fight and the next day they were back to be
25 friends. No, there was no overt racism at the time.

26 JS: All right, well at the end of AIT, was it at that point that you finally received
27 the assignment and learned that you were going to be going to Vietnam?

28 JW: That's correct. And I was scheduled to go to the 1st Air Cavalry Division. I
29 said, "Oh geez, here I go. Jumping out of helicopters." I really didn't want to do that, but
30 I had to do it anyway. That's when I tried to get out of going to Vietnam. That's when it
31 hit me that I was going to Vietnam because even at that point, up until that point I didn't

1 think I was going to go because of my family situation and whatever. So, I was granted
2 leave as everybody else was for two weeks, but we'd have to report. That's when I
3 applied for my congressional hold. I was put on congressional hold because I told my
4 congressman and tried to get out of going at that point. Then I was assigned to McGuire
5 Air Force Base, you know, and Fort Dix to await the decision. Then about four days, five
6 days later the orders came through and they said, "Get on that plane over there." I ended
7 up in Vietnam. As I said, I was originally scheduled to go to the 1st Calvary. So, I really
8 didn't appreciate that. Do you want me to go into now is when I got to Vietnam?

9 JS: If we could talk first, a little bit about the trip over and what that was like for
10 you.

11 JW: Well, I was flying in a tube. No windows or anything. It was the Air Force
12 star lifter. We flew from McGuire Air Force Base to Elmendorf in Alaska, and that was
13 where we stopped for about an hour because they had to refuel. You know, and some
14 other things and that were interesting when we landed. It was around Anchorage and you
15 could see all these mountains around it. You know, I had never really seen Snowcap
16 Mountains like that before. That was interesting. And then from there we had a brief
17 stopover we flew to, I think it was Yokota in Japan.

18 JS: Okay.

19 JW: Again, we were there for a couple of hours. We ate some, you know, food
20 and we made a pit stop and got back on the plane and ended up in Ton Son Nhut and
21 Saigon.

22 JS: Okay.

23 JW: I do remember vividly when they opened the door of the plane, the heat and
24 humidity hit you right in the face. I mean, it really—I mean you really realized where you
25 were.

26 JS: All right.

27 JW: The flight over, though, was really uneventful. What we did was basically
28 sleep. That's all you could do. You couldn't walk around. You know, it was like flying in
29 a tube. You couldn't see anything; you couldn't do anything. They didn't have movies at
30 the time to show you. They didn't have stewardesses bringing you drinks or whatever.

31 JS: How long of a flight was it?

1 JW: Oh jeez, I don't know. It was a long day. I would guess probably around
2 eight or nine hours. You know, with the stops and everything it was probably longer than
3 that.

4 JS: Right, yes, sir. Well, once you finally arrived there at Ton son Nhut, what took
5 place at that point? What was the in-processing like?

6 JW: Well, once you were at the airbase and got off the plane, we were formed up
7 and again, told to get on other buses. Well, these busses had screened windows and you
8 couldn't really see out. Later, you know, I found out that was to prevent anybody from
9 throwing grenades or something through the windows or, you know, hurting us. We
10 drove from Ton son Nhut Air Base to a place called the 90th replacement battalion at
11 Long Binh. Now, this was a clearing house for new people that were entering Vietnam at
12 the time. Once here, we received our uniforms, our clothing. You know, we had infantry
13 stuff on, and those uniforms were not applicable to Southeast Asia. You know, all of our,
14 you know, our clothes and equipment excluding weapons. We also were assigned a
15 barracks and it didn't matter who we were, it was all, you know, people from all different
16 places. I guess they did it alphabetically. I was assigned to a unit and a lot of the people
17 were at the end of the alphabet, you know, last name. We didn't stay with the people we
18 were all on the plane with, either. So once a year we were assigned the usual duties. We
19 were only there for about one or two days and as I said, my original orders were to go to
20 the first air Calvary, and they had formations in place where they would call out your
21 name and tell you the unit you were going to. Well, a couple days later they called out my
22 name and I expected them to say 1st Calvary and I was all set to go and they said 9th
23 Division. You know, those of us who were assigned there, "Where the hell is the 9th
24 Division? Nobody ever heard of the 9th Division before. So, you know, the sergeant was,
25 "Hey Sarge, who's the 9th division?" "Oh." He said, "Right down the road." Well, I knew
26 Long Bien was right near Saigon, but I said beautiful, garrison duty of Saigon at least
27 decent duty. Until we found out that the AO of the 9th Division was the Mekong Delta.

28 JS: Ah, right.

29 JW: Area of operations in my division was the Mekong Delta.

30 JS: Yes, sir.

1 JW: And so, we were sent to the old reliable academy at Camp Bearcat, the
2 headquarters of the 9th division at the time. When they operated on them. Camp Bearcat
3 was called Bearcat, but it was also Camp Martin Cox named for one of the first soldiers
4 who were killed in the 9th division, but everybody called it Bearcat. And once there, they
5 assigned us by our MOS's. No, we weren't, we were all different MOS's.

6 JS: Okay.

7 JW: We were assigned to barracks. We receive our weapons at the time, our M
8 16s and everything else, you know, we carried. And then we went through in-country
9 training again. This time it was the real thing. They showed us, you know, a booby trap
10 procedure, all the procedures that we would go through, what it was like. How we should
11 handle the people and in general, you know, Vietnam training itself and what we could
12 expect. It was much more realistic. At the end of the training period, we would all go out
13 on a, what do you call it? You know a maneuver.

14 JS: Like a patrol or something?

15 JW: Yeah right, but it was larger than that. We would experience what it was like
16 outside of the main basecamp. What it was like and what we could expect in the jungle,
17 but it was really right next to the base camp so there really wasn't that much of a
18 problem. However, you know, we had the big foxhole so we stayed in the foxhole so we
19 had to look out for the—the monsoon rains would come, and things would come at night
20 and it would be wet and muggy and there's no bathrooms, so you have to dig latrines.
21 You know, all the stuff that you couldn't experience in the main base camp. No showers,
22 you know, that was for two days. And going without a shower for a couple days, it really
23 bothered me, but I learned to live with it, I guess. Then we went back to the basecamp
24 and back to the facility where we were staying and at that point all of us were assigned to
25 different units and within the 9th Division. Ronny came in and said, "Listen, a bunch of
26 people are assigned to a unit which is the 3rd of the 39th Infantry. They just ran into a big
27 ambush down there and they needed their replacements really bad." I said, "Geez, here
28 we go." A few minutes later someone came in and they were asking for volunteers for a
29 new unit involving airboats. Again, my hand went right up. They said never volunteer,
30 well I did because I figured if I'm going to get killed, I'd rather get killed riding than
31 walking. Especially with all the mud and the slime because you were always in the mud

1 and constantly in the water. So, my hand went up, and I was selected as one of the guys.
2 They had some interviews with us to determine whether, I guess, the right kind of people
3 what they wanted. I was going to night school right after high school and I had almost a
4 year of college. And so, I think that kind of helped me, too. I forgot to tell you about that.
5 But anyway, that's how I got involved, that's how I got involved in airboats.

6 JS: Did you mention in your book that you talked to the guy about race cars and
7 stuff?

8 JW: Yeah, that was part of the interview. One of the questions I thought was kind
9 of stupid is, what would your parents say if you got killed? I said, "What the hell do you
10 think they'd say?" And then another question was, which was interesting, was "What is
11 the most dangerous thing you ever did?" So, I really want to get into this unit, so I said,
12 "Well, I was into drag racing at the time, but not a full-fledged person who did that." I
13 lied a little bit and said, "Oh, I used to drive a dragster." And he says, "Wow!" And then
14 he starts asking me about that and thank God he knew little about it. He didn't know
15 much he was a major and he didn't know anything about dragsters. So, I got into the unit
16 anyway. Then we were all pulled out of where we were supposed to go and given
17 separate barracks and told us to sleep in because the next morning, early, you'd have to
18 get on a plane and you'd go TDY, which is temporary duty which everybody liked at the
19 time because you figure you go someplace and then your pay would be increased until we
20 found out the TDY we got was really in Vietnam itself with the Special Forces who did
21 use the air boats and who trained us all in the boats. So, I was kind of looking forward to
22 that because they knew, you know, from basic training what the Special Forces were like.
23 So, I felt a little bit better about it. And that's where we—we got on a Caribou which was
24 an aircraft that was built to land in small places. I was off to a place called Cao Lahn
25 which is I guess somewhat west of Saigon about halfway through the country. It didn't
26 take us long to get there. We were met there by a Special Forces sergeant and he was our
27 training officer and he escorted us to the facility that they had and that's how we started
28 training in the airboats. The airboats, by the way, are like the boats in the Florida
29 Everglades with the airplane engine on the back. By the way, I didn't know what an
30 airboat was, really, when I volunteered.

31 JS: How many soldiers would crew an airboat? How many would be on the boat?

1 JW: It would be a gunner and a pilot and then you could take a Vietnamese, or a
2 Thai soldier would go with one other person. Basically, I say that because they were
3 smaller, and you could do that. And you couldn't take any more weight and basically you
4 would reduce the speed on the boat. And then we would become sitting ducks. Which I'll
5 get into at a later date. It's something that happened later on.

6 JS: Yes, sir. Well speaking of maintaining speed, what was the top speed for
7 them?

8 JW: About forty miles an hour.

9 JS: Okay, all right. So, you guys would generally try to operate at that speed then
10 when possible, or?

11 JW: Yeah sure, because that was your best defense. It was speed. But it's funny,
12 we were never allowed to do anything during the training period, never go at that speed
13 until the end. As we were training, they did put two Americans plus the driver on the
14 boats because they were operating slowly, and we had to learn how to drive the boats and
15 we weren't allowed to open them up or go fast. I would say about, you know, a week,
16 two weeks later after we learned the essentials of the boat itself. And then we were taught
17 different tactics to use. One of the tactics was one towards the end when we were allowed
18 to jump over rice patty dikes. The only way you could do that is the dikes themselves
19 were wet. So, what you would do is you would go very fast in the dike, towards the dike,
20 make a 180 and spray all sorts of water on it, turn around, and then right over the dike
21 you'd go. Thinking of describing it like shit through a goose, going right over the dike.
22 That's what you would have to do. That was just one tactic. We were most affected
23 because we weren't with the Special Forces because we were with the regular Army.
24 They only trained us. They trained us in their tactics and what they would do. We really
25 didn't use that many of their tactics when we went back to our regular Army positions.
26 We were most effective at night ambushes.

27 JS: Okay, were you guys trained on night ambushes during this time period?

28 JW: No, we were trained basically in tactics they used of recon, you know, some
29 assault in areas with the Special Forces. By the way, after we learned the basics, we then
30 went to one of the A teams which was located near the Cambodian border in an area
31 called the Plain of Reeds. Let me back up a little bit, once you're allowed to go full out

1 with the boats and drive the boats like they should. We all became instant airboat junkies,
2 we loved it. Same speed and the wind in your face was spectacular. As I said, we all
3 became fans of the airboat. So anyway, after our initial training we went up to a place
4 called Don Phuoc which was an A Team base right near the Cambodian border. The trip
5 up there was interesting, too, because we had to go on the Mekong River. That river is so
6 expansive and so massive that we had to hug the shoreline because we'd get swamped.
7 And you couldn't go fast because it was rough. It was like the ocean and ships would go
8 up that river and back that river up to Nom Penh in Cambodia. You'd see a ship go by
9 and you had this little piece of crap airboat and, you know, these huge ships, you had to
10 be careful, too, because their wakes and stuff could swamp you. So anyway, we made it
11 up there and we turned into an area that bordered on the Plain of Reeds and it was this
12 huge, huge area. I mean, I said in my book it was magnificent and it really was because
13 the colors and the wildlife. You didn't think anything about the dangers of it, but you
14 know, the beauty of it was really spectacular. You know, you're going forty miles an
15 hour and going through this area. You learned to keep your mouth shut, too. Because if
16 you had your mouth open, you'd get hit in the face a lot of times with bugs and whatever.
17 I guess that's where people learned how to eat grasshoppers or something.

18 JS: Right.

19 JW: Anyway, it was an experience. As we got to Don Phuoc, we operated out of
20 this unit as a Special Forces Operator. Then we would go on recon and take the boats out
21 to recon area and we would take the boat down and check out some san pans and that
22 type of thing. One time we were shot at from the border between Cambodia and Vietnam
23 was really on the Cambodian side. Well, we were respectively told not to go. That's
24 where they used to shoot at us from. You couldn't shoot back because it was Cambodia.
25 And if there was a Cambodian guard post that could see you, you know, then you had to,
26 you know, be cool the way it was done and do your own thing, but if you got longer in
27 the guard post and a guard left for some reason or whatever, then you would go into find
28 out where they were. I was thinking a lot of times they stayed. Before, they had their own
29 little camps set up and it would get them and then you would get the hell out of
30 Cambodia. So, I guess we were in Cambodia and, you know, before an incursion under

1 President Nixon about three years later, four years later. Maybe you shouldn't write that
2 down.

3 JS: All right.

4 JW: It's in my book so if they wanted to arrest me, they could.

5 JS: Right, yes, sir. Well, let me ask you this. I know you mentioned there in the
6 training aspect, one of the things they were teaching you guys about was about booby
7 traps and things using against the airboats. Could you talk a little bit about that?

8 JW: That's right, if you were going down a stream or canal, they used to set up
9 Claymores, Claymore mines on top and set them off as you would go by, but for some
10 reason the timing was never, you know, great on their part. And then other times what
11 they did was they would string piano wire across a canal or, you know, a small stream
12 where you couldn't see it. If you were going fast, you'd have some serious trouble. Well,
13 the Special Forces put a piece of angle iron on it and they wove a piece of angle iron to
14 their gun mounds. You know, you're sitting in a seat and it was taller than you so if the
15 piano wire did hit, you know, it wouldn't affect you. And then they started hooking that
16 piano wire up to claymores on both sides. Again, if you were going fast enough for some
17 reason, you would set up the claymores, but you wouldn't be hit by the shrapnel because
18 you would be by it by the time the claymore would go off. So as long as you were going
19 full speed. If you're going slow or whatever and you did that, you'd be in a world of hurt.
20 Another thing I wanted to ask you about, I know in the book you talked about being
21 introduced to the Nung people. Could you talk a little bit about them and your
22 impressions of them? The Nungs were Chinese and Cambodian mercenaries. Sort of a
23 mix of mainly Chinese that gets left over from World War II that goes onto the nationalist
24 side. They sort of migrated into Vietnam and Cambodia and that particular area. The
25 Army also utilized Montagnards. They were similar to the Nungs themselves, but they
26 were mercenaries that the Special Forces had hired to work with them and form an Army
27 to help us in Vietnam in that particular area. The unit that we were trained in utilized
28 many of those Nungs. They were really the people that would go out. There would be one
29 Special Forces man and two or three Cambodians on the boats when they would go out
30 on the mission. This was basically staffed by I think it was four Special Forces personnel
31 there and the other thirty were these Nungs. They were excellent fighters. You know,

1 they knew how to fight them. Like the Special Forces, they knew how to fight a war.
2 None of this touchy-feely crap. You know, you can't fire at this one, you can't do that
3 one. They would just go out and fight the war as it should be fought. So that was
4 beneficial to all of us, too, because we learned I guess how to really fight a war without
5 basically any restrictions. But that doesn't mean you can go out and kill villagers. We
6 didn't do that, and they didn't do that, but you know, they had a program called it Chu
7 Hoi. If you would capture a Viet Cong or whatever, he would go into this indoctrination
8 program and then he would become what they called, I don't know, Kit Carson Scouts or
9 whatever and then come into help you fight against their former compatriots. Which was
10 a lot of crap because when Charlie would shoot, he would shoot the hell out of you and
11 then they would run out of ammunition and throw down his gun and holler, "Choo Hoi."
12 You couldn't fight him, you had to take him in as a prisoner and take him over to the re-
13 indoctrination people. I thought it was a load of crap because you'd go through the
14 training to handle American weapons and stuff and it ends up, you know, becoming a 5th
15 column in the Army. Anyway, but with the Special Forces you learn what to do and
16 really what not to do. And that's something that I think was—well I'm here today
17 because of it. I like to think so anyway.

18 JS: Well, these operations that you went on with the Special Forces guy and with
19 the Special Forces guys and that plain of reeds here. Was that where you had your first
20 encounter with the enemy?

21 JW: Right, that was the first time—you know, it's funny, too. On our way up
22 there before we got there we were told, you know, there's a whole bunch of people and
23 sampans and houses on stilts. You know, a house here, a house there. There's people all
24 around it and I would assume that if we weren't new or weren't training that those people
25 would have been questioned and attacked and whatever because they're all going to get
26 caught. So, we were told just to keep going, it's not a fluke and training base. As I said,
27 the first time we were really in flight with them was when we got shot at from the reeds
28 or whatever. Thank God nobody was hit or hurt. But that was basically the first time.

29 JS: Yes sir. I remember you mentioned in the book, the first time that you
30 believed you were shot at by the enemy it actually wasn't, is that right?

1 JW: Yes, that's correct. We were on a small canal and this was during our initial
2 training. We weren't allowed to go fast and all and three of us there and I heard a gunshot
3 and next to me was, you know, a bullet hit the water and splashed up and I thought we
4 were all shot at. And so immediately a complete, you know, toward the village and the
5 sweep and whatever. Come to find out later that it was the guy sitting next to me on the
6 boat had his finger on the trigger. Popped a round into the water. We didn't say anything
7 because it wouldn't have helped anything, but yeah. I said that was the, you know, and I
8 was driving the boat.

9 JS: All right.

10 JW: It's funny because of the sound where the sound is coming from. All you can
11 hear is the sound of the engines.

12 JS: Well, before talking about what happened after this initial training, I wonder if
13 you could talk a little bit about the unit itself and some of the guys in the unit. You don't
14 have to go into specific names or anything like that if you would prefer not to, but if you
15 could talk a little bit about the guys and some of the personalities in the unit if you don't
16 mind.

17 JW: In the unit itself, I guess, people came from all over the country. They were
18 from all over, you know, from Texas, from New York, from Wisconsin, from California,
19 from Louisiana. So, everybody grew up in different parts of the country, but we all
20 basically came together and we all became best friends. I mean, it took longer than that
21 for us to come together. It was interesting to see what their perspective of life is and why
22 they were there. You know, my best friend that I became with was a guy named Danny.
23 He was from San Diego, California, and he was a Navy brat. Have you ever seen the
24 movie—what was the movie with Robert De Niro and Cuba Gooding?

25 JS: *Men of Honor*.

26 JW: *Men of Honor*. The Robert De Niro character was Danny's father.

27 JS: Really?

28 JW: Yeah, he was just like him. For some reason or another we just clicked and
29 we became partners and friends, you know, till this day. Actually, we became friends
30 with everybody—or at least I did with just everybody in the unit. So, there was a couple
31 of people that, you know, I didn't particularly like, but they were still members of our

1 unit and, you know, they would help us just as we would help them. How can I say it,
2 we're like brothers. You know, we fought with them, we bled with them, and we ate with
3 them. We did everything together. So, as I said, we became a very, very cohesive unit.

4 JS: Right, so morale was pretty high then?

5 JW: Oh yeah, yup. I mean, nobody wanted to be there. A lot of people didn't want
6 to be there.

7 JS: Right.

8 JW: How many people served in Vietnam? Five or six million?

9 JS: Yeah, something like that, sir.

10 JW: I would say probably around, you know, three quarters of them didn't want to
11 be there.

12 JS: Right, sure.

13 JW: Probably more.

14 JS: Well, once you—not to back up too far, but once you first arrived in-country,
15 did you receive any—were you welcomed immediately? Did you receive any of the new
16 guy treatment that you send to hear about or how were you cheated being a new person to
17 the unit?

18 JW: You know, we really didn't have that, and I'll tell you why. All of our unit,
19 we're all new guys.

20 JS: Okay.

21 JW: And all of us were in the same boat so to speak. The only people that—we
22 didn't get any of that. I mean, we dished it out as we got replacements when people
23 showed up, but we never received that type of treatment.

24 JS: All right, well I guess getting back to the timeline here. Once you completed
25 that training with the Special Forces, where did you go at that point?

26 JW: Well, we went back to Camp Bearcat. We were kept separate and our boats
27 had not arrived from the states yet. The Army wanted to keep us on water so they sent us
28 to a line company which used whale boats to carry supplies and little outboard motor
29 boats for supplies or whatever. What that had to do with airboat training I have no idea,
30 but that sort of cemented our knowledge that we were in Vietnam because we were under
31 a lot. That's where I got wounded as a matter of fact. I was in-country, you know, what a

1 month? A little over a month and our platoon got mortared and as I was running to the
2 bunker, a mortar shell went off right next to me or it landed right next to me and knocked
3 me over. I did a summersault and got up and kept on running to the bunker and got in the
4 bunker and I was just trying to catch my breath and all of a sudden, I felt something
5 dripping down my back and running down my back. No pain, no nothing. I took off my
6 shirt and flack vest and whatever and a guy says, "He's been wounded." And so, they put
7 a bandage on it and that was it. I was lucky because it just went in just to my back and I
8 guess hit a rib and bounced off. It almost came out under my arm. There was a bulge
9 under my arm that didn't quite go through. So, when our boats came in finally initially, I
10 had one of the Docs at Bearcat take out the shrapnel. You know, as I said it was bulging
11 out, so.

12 JS: Right, right.

13 JW: It was just a little incision and out it came.

14 JS: As a result of the wounding when it initially happened, did you have to be
15 medevac'd or anything like that?

16 JW: No, no. In fact, they put a bandage on, and I went on a mission the next night.
17 It wasn't a question of whether I could go or not, but I convinced them I was ready to go.

18 JS: Yes, sir.

19 JW: We all wanted to go on a mission.

20 JS: How long did you remain doing this type of work before the airboats arrived?

21 JW: I guess it was about another two or three weeks. To about three weeks later
22 our boats came in from the states.

23 JS: Okay.

24 JW: And then we had another problem. We went back to Bearcats and got our
25 boats, and all our boats came in with 50-caliber machine guns on them. Problem was, in
26 order to shoot the fifty caliber machine gun, the boats had to be stationary. And if you
27 were driving along, you know, and fired the 50-caliber machine gun, the recoil, the thing
28 would flip the boat up on its side. So that was the first thing we had to change. We ended
29 up putting M-60 machine guns on them. Not all of them. In fact, we still had some fifties.
30 My boat still had a 50-caliber on it from when we were on our first mission which was—
31 well there was a machine called the tree crusher that was used to crush vegetation around

1 the base camp that they were building so the enemy couldn't hide. And this machine got
2 stuck in the rung sat and there was no protection covering the outside of this machine. On
3 the inside it was close for the camp, but it was still far away. So, it basically had no
4 protection. Needless to say, it was a very expensive piece of machinery. I think there's a
5 picture in my book where you see a person walking in front of the tree crusher so you
6 could see how big it is, how massive it is, and how expensive they were. So, as I said, we
7 were on guard positions and our boats were around the tree crusher this was all in the
8 special zone which was all mangrove swamps. What happened was they were clearing
9 brush and the tide was out and they didn't realize it and the tide came back in and they
10 were almost underwater. And then they couldn't move because the water and the mud got
11 on all of the moving parts of the engine and as a result it was finished until they pulled it
12 out to clean it out. But anyway, that was our first mission. We were assigned guard duty
13 of that unit. We had five positions all around it. Not all around it, but at least on a half-
14 moon positions. During the night, I had heard movement, the cracking of the twig, you
15 know. I called it back in and I said, "It looks like something is moving, is there anybody
16 out here that shouldn't be?" They said, "No, but come back to the boat." So, they recalled
17 all off the airboats into the tree crusher itself into that area to provide really close
18 protection. About five minutes after we had pulled up to the tree crusher and settled in, all
19 hell broke loose. The base camp that they were building was attacked by the Viet Cong.
20 Now this was—The Royal Thai Army had this company sized base camp that they were
21 building. The Viet Cong I guess wanted to make an example of, you know, how they
22 could go in and wipe them out. The tables were turned on them because they attacked this
23 camp and this camp had just got everybody back in their bunkers because of I guess, you
24 know, because the movement. And so, they were just going to be on the safe side. So,
25 everybody was in their positions when the attacked and did a real bunch of damage to the
26 Viet Cong. Thirty to forty VC were killed or wounded.

27 JS: Did either you guys or the Thai's take any casualties?

28 JW: Believe it or not, the Thai's did take some casualties, but they were minor.
29 And that was amazing for the veracity of the attack. When they attacked, I jumped on my
30 50 caliber machine gun because the enemy was in-between us and the basecamp when
31 they attacked, and I could see the tracer flashes from the enemy where they were fired

1 from. So, I got on the 50-caliber and started firing in those positions. But then they called
2 out from the camp, "Stop the firing because some of your stuff is going into the camp."
3 So, some of your fire is going in there. So, flare up and just only fire when you know you
4 have a definite target." So, we stopped firing and all night long boats are coming out from
5 the camp towards us, so we had to really hunker down, and the Viet Cong were trying to
6 destroy a camp and had no success. I think maybe from our firing initially or from our
7 initial reports to the camp, we'd probably done everybody, you know, safe. Not safe, but
8 anybody ready for any attack or anything. But that was an interesting night, too.
9 Especially when you have bullets flying right by your head and you hear them, and you
10 see the tracer rounds coming at you. You really couldn't do anything because you
11 weren't sure where it was coming from.

12 JS: Well, was this the firefight you mentioned in your book that wasn't too long
13 before Tet? Is that right?

14 JW: That's correct, yes.

15 JS: All right.

16 JW: About a week or two before Tet.

17 JS: Okay, yes, sir. Well, could you talk a little bit about your impressions of the
18 Thai soldiers, and did you guys work with them very often?

19 JW: How it started was when we both came in from the states, we were moved
20 right next to the portion of Bearcat that was allocated to the Thai Army. They had seen
21 these boats and they were operating in the Rung Sao area, which was southeast of Saigon,
22 just total mangrove swamp. They said, "Those airboats, we want those." And because
23 they were an ally of ours, any ally that we had in Vietnam got priority of almost anything
24 they wanted. So, we were assigned—I guess they saw what happened to the tree crusher
25 whenever we wanted to use us. So, we were assigned to that very same base camp, you
26 know, that was run totally by the Thai. The only Americans were they had an American
27 advisor with them. I guess up until May I guess it was, and this was in January, January
28 or May we operated with the one Thai Army. So that was an advantage, too, because you
29 didn't have to put up with any crap that you would have to put up for a regular Army.
30 The only time that would happen was when we would go into the bearcat for showers or
31 a hot meal or whatever. I keep saying whatever, I shouldn't. So yes, we did work with the

1 Royal Thai Army and they are excellent, they were excellent soldiers. And we really,
2 really cemented a lot of friendships with the Thai. As a matter of fact, the XO of the
3 advisor of the Thai unit was the son of Thonath Kittakachorn who was the prime minister
4 of Thailand at the time. As a result, when it came time from R&R, for me I went to
5 Thailand because the soldiers all kept extolling the virtues of their country, how nice it
6 was. I really wanted to see that, and I really fell in love with Thailand as much as
7 somebody could fall in love with something for a week. But the Thai people were very
8 good people and I fell in love with them from just working with them and being in the
9 unit.

10 JS: Well, how could you guys communicate with them? Could any of them speak
11 English?

12 JW: They did speak English. The one's that didn't would really say thanks to the
13 ones that did and they would translate for us. We would try to learn a little bit, but other
14 than a "How are you?" and that thing, we really didn't make an effort to learn the
15 language because so many of them did speak English. I learned a few phrases, but I can't
16 even remember them to this day, you know, but they were just basic phrases.

17 JS: Okay, well before getting into Tet, I guess if you wouldn't mind talking a little
18 bit more about your duties and the daily routine in Vietnam and what life was like out in
19 the field.

20 JW: Well, the only life whether you were out in the field or it was taking up with
21 very mundane duties, very worrying duties. The biggest factor was the object—I guess
22 the Army was trying to keep everyone busy from doing bad things. But when we were at
23 the Thai camp, we ended up having to build a bunker to house all of us, to house our
24 platoon. We had to fill, it seemed like thousands of sandbags to make a large bunker.
25 When we weren't on a mission, you know, a night ambush mission or a patrol mission we
26 would come back, and we would have to fill sandbags. We had just gotten done—again, I
27 don't know whether it was pictures of that. I think there's pictures of that and the
28 pyramids that we had to end up building. Yeah, there is. You can see from the pictures
29 how many sandbags we're talking about. We had just gotten done with that and about a
30 couple weeks later we were moved to a different area and had to bulldoze the bunker. So
31 that was kind of frustrating, too, but that's what life was like in Vietnam. When we would

1 go back into the main base camp and for shower or hot food, we were then assigned
2 duties that had to be done at the unit itself such as KP or burning shit or perimeter guard
3 in the main base camp. You know, if you're a combat mission and you're out in the field
4 and you want to come back into the main base camp and relax, but they didn't let you.
5 The first sergeant of the E Company—let me back up a little.

6 JS: Sure.

7 JW: We were working with the Thai's because we were assigned to a unit called
8 the 15th Engineering Battalion. The reason for this was they had five ton trucks and small
9 cranes which would facilitate moving our airboats around. So, as I said, that's why we
10 were assigned to that unit. That unit didn't particularly like us that much because we were
11 basically infantry people. We were like prima donnas, but we were getting some medals,
12 we were getting promotions and certain things. Mainly because we're working with the
13 Thai's, but we were not well liked by the engineers. As a matter of fact, as we needed a
14 replacement sergeants or whatever, it would replace those sergeants with people from the
15 engineering and they would become our NCOs. Then we had, you know, they thought
16 they were hot shit and, you know, they were all shake and bake sergeants and I mean
17 shake and bake was a term that was given to—they needed a lot of sergeants because they
18 kept getting killed. They set up a sergeant school for people, you know, in Vietnam itself.
19 These were all graduates of this school. That's why we call them shake and bake because
20 two weeks later they'd come out and thought they knew everything. You know, and we
21 were out there getting all the glory and stuff and they resented that in kind of a way. And
22 sometimes I don't blame them, but anyway we would go back into the base camp for
23 showers and they would serve us a hot meal and then they would assign us through
24 perimeter guard at different KP duty or just in general something they'd do to piss us off
25 even more. So, we didn't really like going much into the main base camp. I liked staying
26 out, but we did like hot showers and we did like hot food occasionally. We were pretty
27 much at liberty when we were outside of the base camp doing our own thing and that was
28 nice. There was a lieutenant that was assigned to our unit that for some reason I became
29 his driver, and we had a three quarter ton truck, a small truck. Anyway, a small truck.
30 Like a pickup truck. It was assigned to the Thai's and he had a friend in Saigon, and he
31 had me drive him —after we came out of the field, he said, "Go get cleaned up, I want

1 you to drive me to Saigon.” I said, “Okay.” So, I showered and changed and got the truck
2 and picked him up and we drove into Saigon. Well, his friend was a bar girl at a hotel,
3 and he had a drinking problem. and they had a restaurant and a bar on top of it so it
4 overlooked Saigon itself. He would see his girlfriend, he’d get drunk, you know, then
5 there was all sorts of problems. I’d basically take care of him. Anyway, to make a long
6 story short the next day we went back to the base camp and the 1st sergeant ordered me to
7 come into his office and said, “Where were you? You were perm guard.” I said, “What
8 are you talking about, my lieutenant wanted me to drive it into Saigon.” He says, “You
9 were scheduled for perimeter guard and you weren’t there. You were absent without
10 leave. You didn’t say anything to anybody.” Well, I didn’t think I had to, but I should
11 have, you know? He said, “You see these on my desk, these papers? These are papers
12 promoting you to sergeant.” He took them and he ripped them in half and threw them out.
13 He said, “Next time you’re going to be burning shit duty every time you come in here.” I
14 wrote the story. Did you read that part of the book?

15 JS: Yeah, I did, but would you mind explaining for the recording?

16 JW: Well, the latrines in Vietnam were not in the ground, they were fifty-five
17 gallon drums and were strategically placed under a hole in the latrine. You go into these
18 fifty-five gallon drums and everyday these drums would be changed with empty ones.
19 The full ones were pulled out and then diesel fuel was mixed with the feces and you
20 would have to stir it up and mix them just like you were mixing flower or something with
21 eggs. And then you had to light them on fire, and it would burn. That’s how you got rid
22 of the feces and the barrels would be empty and it would be ready as the barrels were
23 filled up that you replaced them with then you would do it vice versa. And you were
24 assigned that duty. Oh, I don’t know whether it was rarely or not, but unless you did
25 something wrong then they sign it to you every day. See, that was another reason all of
26 these duties we’d get out of because you know, we’d be out on missions in the base
27 camp, you know, outside of their control. You know, that’s another reason. Anyway,
28 that’s what he said I would be doing whenever I came back into base camp. I think I
29 figured out it would be better than an article 15. You know, they’d fine you for money
30 and they’d fine you for that and go on your record. You know, you didn’t want that. So
31 anyway, I don’t think I ever burned another thing of crap again because we were either

1 always on missions or doing something else. You really never had the time for yourself.
2 You were always doing something. And again, as I said, maybe that was better because
3 you didn't have time, really, to think about getting the hell out of there and wanting to get
4 out and dangers that you would go through.

5 JS: Well, could you talk a little bit about as far as when you guys were out in the
6 field. What sleeping quarters and food and things like that would be like out in the field?

7 JW: That's another interesting thing. Where we slept was the bunker that we had
8 built. You slept in that bunker. Food—from time to time we would get a number of tin
9 cans of tomatoes or frozen chicken or frozen veal. Beef sometimes. Basically, canned
10 goods and I was really the one to start—I act like I'm the only guy there and I certainly
11 wasn't, but I was familiar with cooking. I ended up cooking a lot like spaghetti one night
12 we cooked. The meat and tomato sauce I would cook. The neighborhood I grew up in
13 was an Italian neighborhood. Basically, I was familiar with Italian food and, you know,
14 basics to what I knew what I was doing. On another occasion I got cans of butter. When
15 I say can's, I'm talking large #10 cans of butter that we would melt the butter and we'd
16 make oil. We would cook up some fried chicken. Somebody wanted fried chicken and we
17 had chicken, but they said, "Who wants to try some fried chicken?" One of the guys said.
18 Wait a minute, we can't do that. Let me try and see how this will work out. So, we melted
19 the butter, and it became the oil that we'd fry the stuff in. the chicken itself. We had some
20 bread. It was stale and I made some breadcrumbs, and we coated the chicken and we
21 dropped them in. Actually, it came out damn good. So, you know, stuff like that. When
22 we didn't have food, we would go into the base camp and have food, so we didn't have to
23 cook or anything. I remember one time the Thai's used to cook their own food, too. They
24 killed the marsh gear, which is about the size of a dog, a small dog. They'd cut strips of
25 meat and prepared it their way. That was my introduction to Thai food. It was really
26 good. Everything the Thai's ate was cooked with peppers. And they weren't peppers that
27 you would probably—I mean, these were really red hot chili peppers and everything they
28 ate was hot. So, "Try this, you'll like that, try this." And they would give us stuff and
29 boy, I'll tell you, it took a long time for the pain to go away. I mean, it was an experience
30 that one does not wish to have ever. I think getting shot was better. Yes, you eventually
31 gained a taste for that, but initially when you've never had it before and all of a sudden

1 you have it, forget about it. I remember, too, that during the Tet Offensive on our supply
2 lines were really screwed up. What they delivered to us was ammunition and C-rations
3 and beer. And so, you get a lot of C-rations and that was an interesting meal, too. They
4 had different varieties and the lima beans, franks and beans, the little tins of pork. It's like
5 a pork roll. It's like chicken, little bits of chicken in a roll type of thing. You know, a
6 chicken roll I guess it was. They were put in those cans. For desert there was peaches,
7 canned pears, fruit cocktail. Pound cake, if you can believe it was canned also. That was
8 my favorite. People liked that. We would eat all of these meals, but to heat them up, what
9 we would do is break off—we had C-4 which was an explosive material. I would break
10 off a little piece of C-4 and put those in an empty can and light them on fire and put the
11 C-rations on top and you would open the C-ration and you would cook the C-ration in
12 about two seconds. The heat was so intense. It was the white hot heat from the C4. It
13 didn't explode, but it burned. That was our main method for eating the C-rations. Fruit
14 you didn't have to worry about; fruit cocktail or peaches or whatever. Which was, you
15 know, decent, but most of the stuff in the cans was bearable. Peanut butter and crackers
16 in a can and peanut butter crackers and jelly. No, it was peanut butter and crackers. The
17 jelly we got—you know, every once in a while, somebody would get something sent
18 home and they would, you know, put in a can of jelly or a bottle of jelly. So, we would
19 have to train every once in a while. The Navy, what they called PBR's were river patrol
20 boats. They used to have excellent, excellent food. I mean, they had steaks, you know,
21 really good stuff. For us to trade with them they wanted captured weapons. Well, we
22 would capture a lot of weapons most of America made, but they really wanted Chinese
23 and the AK-47s and that. That's what they would trade. They would trade with us for
24 steaks. And then they give us a case of steaks or a couple of captured weapons. Every
25 once in a while, we would set up a nice grill and grill steaks. No potatoes or whatever and
26 vegetables to go along with that, but that's how we would eat. You know, we would
27 either eat vegetables if somebody had something and we would cut that up and eat that,
28 but no balanced meals is what I'm saying.

29 JS: Right.

30 JW: That you were used to.

1 JS: I know you mentioned as far as sleeping quarters and things would be
2 bonkers, but how often would you guys really get to sleep? Did you have to sleep
3 whenever you could or how did that work?

4 JW: That was basically it. Like in the afternoon before mission, before we would
5 go out in the afternoon, we would catch a few Z's and then when we would come back in
6 for missions, we would catch a few Z's. Anytime we could we could sleep. When we'd
7 go out on the switch positions one of us would sleep and the other one would be
8 awakened. We'd off set, but you never really slept on these missions because you never
9 really trusted anybody. You slept when you could and you know, flip flops were a big
10 thing, too, because you were always in the water and everything was always wet. So,
11 when we were back by camps, we would put on flip flops to dry our feet out. You make
12 do. You make the best of the situation, I guess is what I want to say.

13 JS: Well, another thing regarding life out on the field. I know you had a couple of
14 sections in your book talking about I guess wildlife and insects and things like that. Could
15 you talk a little bit about that about the leeches and the mosquitoes and that type of thing?

16 JW: If you go back, remember when I was wounded and went on the mission the
17 next day?

18 JS: Yes, sir.

19 JW: Well, the mission we were on was—I'm not even sure where it was. All I
20 know was it was south way down in the Mekong Delta. And it was an old estate that was
21 all bombed out. I guess they grew rice and stuff at this place. There were rice patties all
22 around to the front of this area and back and back onto the canal. We were assigned to go
23 out to this rice patty dike as perimeter guard and guard the camp. We had howitzers set
24 up there, you know, a howitzer battery. And then they said we were assigned to guard
25 this perimeter against attack. Well, we were sitting on the perimeter and I didn't too
26 much like the idea of going into the rice patty. All of a sudden it was dark, and we were
27 sitting there, and a machine gun opened up, a Viet Cong machine gun. Bullets were going
28 right over our heads so immediately we dove into the rice patties. You know, laid up on
29 the dike itself with the lower half of my body submerged in the rice patty. The Viet Cong,
30 I guess, were doing target practice to see what they could hit because after a while the
31 machine guns stopped. They called in some helicopters for air support. You know,

1 attacking an area where machine gun fire was coming from because you'd see choppers
2 make passes and fire their weapons. They would pull out and you could see Viet Cong
3 shooting back up at the helicopters, you could actually see the tracers. And then we'd
4 come around again and strafe the area and rocket the area and go up and go turn up to
5 come around and you would see tracers from the ground coming up to the helicopters. So
6 that was interesting. All night long we just laid on the dike with the lower half of our
7 bodies in the rice patties, listening and seeing until first light The next morning
8 everything was fine, and we got up out of the water and stood up to go back to the main
9 area where we were staying, and I felt an itch on my leg. I went down to scratch it and I
10 felt this long, slimy thing on my leg. I thought, "Jesus, what the hell is that? Is it a snake
11 or something?" Then I dropped my pants to see what it was and all over my legs and, you
12 know, down were leeches and everyone was about six or seven inches long. I started
13 panicking and the platoon sergeant grabbed me and said, "Listen, relax, these are
14 leeches." He says, "I've got them too." So, he dropped his pants, and everybody was in
15 the rice patty and says, "We all have leeches on us." We sat there pulling leeches off each
16 other. These things were seven or eight inches long and he lit them with a cigarette, and
17 they'd shrivel up and contract to about an inch long. Then they would fall off. Because if
18 you pulled them off, they would leave their heads in there in your body and it could
19 become infected, so you didn't want that. So, you would burn them off and then they
20 would let go and the blood would run for a while because it was in their saliva had an
21 anti-coagulant in it, which made it easier for them to suck your blood. So, it would bleed
22 for a little while and then eventually it would stop. But that was my experience with
23 leeches. Boy, I'll tell you the way I felt before I was—just like in the Humphrey Bogart
24 movie, "The African Queen" he was pulling the boat along the water and he got in the
25 boat and leeches were all on his body. Just like that. The only difference was the leeches
26 on his body were short. Maybe they were African leeches or maybe they were quite
27 elongated. So, I know how he felt. A lot of animals, a lot of insects, nothing big. The
28 biggest, I guess, were the spiders that we used to see every now and then. There were
29 mud puppies. You know what a mudpuppy is? It's like an amphibious fish.

30 JS: Yes, sir.

1 JW: And they lived all in these mangrove swamps and they would come out of
2 their holes in the mud and I guess mate with other ones. That's their existence. When the
3 tide would come in, they would disappear. Birds of all kinds, Herons, Egrets,
4 grasshoppers and bugs, spiders. That was one of the things, booby traps had in them
5 wouldn't be a tunnel rat going through tunnels because only smaller guys could do that.
6 But that was one of the booby traps they would sent out. The spiders, they would put
7 them all in a box of some type. Then you would crawl through the tunnels and trigger
8 something and then all the spiders would drop on you. Snakes: that was another thing
9 they used. A lot of snakes. You know, little snakes. What they called krait snakes; they
10 were two steppers. You know what a two stepper is?

11 JS: Yes sir, could you explain it though?

12 JW: Well, once they bit you, you would take two steps before you die. They're
13 called two steppers. You had to be careful of them. Like I said, leeches and bugs. The
14 general stuff in the tropics. We didn't see any tigers or lions. We operated basically
15 towards the coast or in Rung Sat which was a coastal mangrove swamp. We weren't in
16 the mountains. Even elephants were there for a while. Water Buffalo were all over the
17 place, but they used those for b-plowing, for harvesting. They used ducks. Ducks were all
18 over the place. They used to them like chickens. All of the farmers had a flock of ducks.
19 I'm trying to think of anything else. There were fish of all kinds. I would go fishing; that
20 was interesting, too. We'd take a grenade and throw it in the water. It would go off and
21 the fish would be stunned and floated to the surface. And we would learn what fish we
22 could eat and what fish we couldn't. Dogs of the Vietnamese are food to them. they
23 would eat them. Thai's wouldn't eat them, but the Vietnamese would. The Vietnamese
24 were very heavily influenced by the Chinese. You know, the Chinese will eat anything.

25 JS: Right.

26 JW: I'm not being offensive, but anything that walks, crawls, or flew was fair
27 game for them to cook and eat.

28 JS: Well, we're coming pretty close to the two hour time limit for today. Did you
29 want to go ahead and take a break for today? Is that okay?

30 JW: I'm fine.

31 JS: Well, the only trouble is I have another interview coming up pretty soon.

1 JW: The only thing we didn't touch on, too, is the one operation where we were in
2 as the blocking force. The Royal Thai Army was making sweep and we were the
3 blocking force on the other end, and they would squeeze towards us and hopefully push
4 all the enemy or whatever towards us and we would catch them in the crossfire. Well,
5 when they were done making a sweep they came up to the boats and we would pick them
6 up and go back to the camp. Two of the boats were loaded with Thai soldiers and because
7 of the weight of everything, they could only travel at two miles an hour. The enemy
8 pulled a fast one and ambushed us.

9 JS: Oh really?

10 JW: April 10, 1968, that's the day my platoon sergeant was killed. I was one of
11 the first boats to arrive on the ambush scene because we were up on the other end, the far
12 end of the line of the canal. They were operating towards the lower end of the canal
13 where the boats would pick them up and take them back. Well, his boat and another boat
14 were ambushed, and his boat was hit with a rocket, an RPG. The boats were made of
15 fiber glass and the rocket went right to the boat itself and exploded in the water, but it did
16 make a big hole and both the water caused the boat to capsize. Everybody on the boat
17 was either wounded or thrown overboard. So, as I was one of the first to arrive on the
18 scene and they were getting machine guns from the enemy position and I had moved my
19 boat in between those people in the water and the enemy positions and provided covering
20 fire while another boat came in and rescued those in there. We called an airstrike and the
21 gunships had suppressed the firing, too, so thank God it was brief and only a couple
22 people on the boat were wounded. My friend Craig was on a machine gun when the
23 rocket landed right next to him. Because it didn't go off and went through the boat and
24 off into the water, he wasn't hit from that at all. So, talk about luck. However, my platoon
25 sergeant, the back of his head was almost gone, according to Craig, from an AK47 or
26 other machine gun fire. As the boat rolled over, he was in the seat, he was driving and we
27 never did find his body, we never did recover his body.

28 JS: Thank goodness.

29 JW: So, to this day and as a result we had picked this date for our reunion in 2002
30 of our unit. On April 10th at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in D.C his widow was there.
31 We brought her in, we invited her. You know, she never got the true story of really what

1 happened. But she got the answers to her long unanswered questions. The story is told in
2 my book. Toward the end of the book there is a short story called “Finding Lost
3 Brothers” and that tells the story of the reunion and how we as a group reconnected after
4 all the years. You know, after thirty-five years none of us had ever seen each other except
5 maybe for one or two of us, and it was a very emotional experience and one that I’ll
6 never, ever forget. It was just like we left each other the day before, brothers meeting
7 after thirty five years.

8 JS: Yes sir. All right, well I’d certainly like to cover that with you and Tet. I’ve
9 got quite a few more questions for you if we could schedule a second session sometime.
10 Would you mind doing that?

11 JW: Not at all, not at all.

12 JS: Okay.

13 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech
14 University continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr. James Wollner. Today is
15 August 31, 2010, and this is interview session number two. Okay, I was wondering if we
16 could begin today, if you could talk a little bit about your impressions of the enemy and a
17 little bit about how they operated.

18 James Wollner: Well, the NVA—you’re talking about two different groups here.
19 You’re talking about the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese regulars. The Viet Cong
20 were a very dedicated group of individuals. They believed in what they were fighting for.
21 They were a really tough enemy. I don’t know what else to say other than the fact that the
22 Tet Offensive of ’68—after the Tet Offensive of ’68 there was virtually no more Viet
23 Cong left. It was all North Vietnamese regulars because what the North Vietnamese did
24 was basically use the Viet Cong as the shock troops in their various attacks. As a result,
25 they lost extreme, you know, most of their infrastructure. So, after TET the War was
26 prosecuted strictly by the north and controlled by the north. The North Vietnamese were
27 also a very disciplined soldier. How they enforced that system, I don’t know. The Viet
28 Cong themselves when they controlled different areas, they ruled by terror. That’s the
29 only way they could get cooperation with most of the people. As a result, most teachers
30 or village leaders or whatever would be, you know, assassinated or killed. I’m getting
31 another call, but that’s okay. Okay, don’t worry about it.

1 JS: Did the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese operate differently as far as
2 tactics when they would fight against you guys?

3 JW: No, it was pretty much the same tactics until towards the end when there was
4 more confrontation and counter attacks. The smaller attacks before Tet was hit and run is
5 what I'm saying. After Tet, the VC sort of retreated them with their wounds, so to speak.
6 They still, you know, were regional attacks at different areas, but not a whole heck of a
7 lot as much. When the North Vietnamese came in there were much heavier attacks in
8 certain areas.

9 JS: Okay.

10 JW: In the south in our area there was just standard attacks. No large attacks were
11 made after the Tet Offensive. Just the same actions that they took before ambush tactics
12 or isolated attacks on certain outposts. Ambushes, bombings, that sort of thing.

13 JS: Well, you've mentioned Tet a few times. Could you talk about what Tet was
14 like for you guys, the guys in your unit?

15 JW: Well, they did, the VC, a pretty good job during Tet, especially in blocking
16 and cutting supply lines. We lived basically for a good two or three weeks on C-rations
17 and beer. That's all we got because they were only flying the choppers with ammunition
18 and C-rations. Most of the roadways were cut, they were, you know, normal supply lines
19 were cut., but we recovered fairly quickly and as I said, we lived on C-rations and local
20 food if we happened to come across it. As far as the damage they did, it was severe,
21 especially in the city. We pulled out from our area and pulled guard duty for some
22 engineers in the Cho Lon section of Saigon which was the Chinese section which is
23 where most of the attacks occurred. And came from. We became, I guess, infantry guys.
24 A lot of us were infantry anyway, but we didn't work on the boats or on water. We just
25 pulled guard duty in Cho Lon and we helped to build some of the schools, some of the
26 buildings, but that wasn't too long. They taxed our infrastructure pretty good. It was a
27 victory for us because many, many, many of them were killed. Although, it wasn't
28 portrayed that year in the states, just the opposite, but it was a loss for them over here.
29 We killed a lot of them. Yes, they did a lot of damage and, well, I don't know, sort of did
30 damage to the psyche of the American public, I guess. As I said, in Vietnam, like I said

1 there was no Viet Cong after the Tet Offensive. Well not none, but there was very little
2 and they suffered a great deal of casualties.

3 JS: How long did you say that you guys remained in the Cho Lon area?

4 JW: We were there for about three or four days.

5 JS: Okay.

6 JW: I mean, the devastation in that area was unbelievable. Very few buildings
7 were standing without any damage. The funny part of it was, that was a Chinese section
8 of Saigon.

9 JS: Had it calmed down? Had the violence calmed down in Cho Lon by that point,
10 or?

11 JW: Yeah.

12 JS: Okay.

13 JW: It wasn't like up in Hue where the Marines were. Where they had pitched
14 battles in the city itself. They either died or withdrew from Cho Lon itself, but boy they
15 stayed there, and it was a real nasty fight up there. Thank god we weren't up there in the
16 north, but then in the South it was different. I guess the proximity because up north there
17 was more NVA regulars that were there and more man power than they had than they had
18 in the South. I think that's why they used mostly VC from Saigon area because they
19 needed to eliminate any southern opposition.

20 JS: Was there much of a lull as a result after Tet? Did things quiet down for a
21 while or did it continue along?

22 JW: Yeah, they did quiet down for a while until they reorganized what they had
23 left, and they were supplanted with NVA soldiers. That really didn't start up again until I
24 would say probably around August of '68 and then they went right back to what they did
25 before., you know, they had enough people. Let's put it that way and do more damage.

26 JS: All right, did your unit take any casualties as a result of Tet?

27 JW: As a result of Tet, I'm just trying to think. No, just before that when we were
28 operating in the Rung Sat with the Thai's. While we were working with the Thais in the
29 base camp there were some casualties. Before we even got the airboats, I was wounded
30 and two other people in my unit were wounded at a place called Tan Tru before our boats
31 came in from the states by mortar fire. They had mortared this base camp we were at, at a

1 place called Tan Tru. I wasn't even in country for, you know, just a little over a month
2 and I got wounded already, so. When our boats didn't even come in, but it wasn't serious.
3 Also, I told my folks that a couple of people who were with us also got wounded. One got
4 a slight wound in the arm and another got a slight wound in the leg. All from shrapnel.
5 The big battle that we had was just before Tet. On our first mission we were pulling
6 guard duty for a machine called the tree crusher. One of the pictures here in the book that
7 I sent you was of the tree crusher. It got stuck in the mud. When they were whacking
8 down trees, they didn't realize the area was swamp, when the tide came in, it was all
9 water when it got stuck in the mud. It was about, oh, maybe a hundred fifty to -two
10 hundred yards outside the base camp and that they were enlarging the field of fire which
11 knocked down trees and stuff so the enemy couldn't hide. Well anyway, we were pulling
12 guard duty for that unit and we were in a semi-circle around the tree crusher from the
13 water side and the Viet Cong attacked us by base camp figuring that it wasn't ready yet.
14 It wasn't totally unsafe and they could it make an easy victory. Well, they surrounded the
15 camp, and they were in-between the tree crusher and us and a we had them in a crossfire
16 they didn't even know it. My boat was the top of like a semi-circle around the tree
17 crusher itself and I was up on the far end and I heard, you know, with people walking and
18 you heard twigs snap when somebody walks. There was all sorts of movement, so I
19 called in thinking it was probably a patrol or something. It was in back of us and they
20 said, "No, there's no patrols out there." They ordered us, all the boats, back to the tree
21 crusher. They moved all the boats back because they wanted to make sure the tree crusher
22 had more protection as this was the area that they thought the VC was going to attack.
23 The camp was alerted so they were all ready for anything and all of a sudden, all hell
24 broke loose once I got back to the tree crusher. It was a decisive defeat for the Viet Cong.
25 There were four Thais wounded in that battle and none of them were really serious and
26 that was it. That was thirty or forty Viet Cong that were killed and there was blood trails
27 leading off everywhere around it. That was our baptism of fire. I had a fifty caliber
28 machine gun on my boat, and you could fire a stationary, but it you were driving along
29 you couldn't fire it because the recoil from the machine guns would flip the boat up on its
30 side. So anyway, I jumped on the fifty and I start firing where the tracer rounds are
31 coming from. But then we wanted to stop firing because some of the firing was going

1 into the came because the Viet Cong was in between us and the camp. So, we stopped
2 and just sat there and watched the fireworks. It was interesting, but none of us were
3 wounded in that fight. So, it was pretty good. Most of the time when we were wounded
4 was because we were ambushed by the enemy which was quite frequent. Once, you
5 know, your biggest weapon was speed to get out of this situation. So, you would do that,
6 but if you were going up a small canal to check it out and the canal ended, you turned
7 around to come and came back out and, in the meantime, the enemy would set up on you
8 and you got ambushed. We lost a Thai soldier and one of my buddies hit three or four
9 times and managed to get out of the situation and bring his boat back, he won a Silver
10 Star for that, by the way. He saved a lot of lives on the boat. Another person was
11 wounded again in another mortar attack. One of our people was wounded in a friendly
12 fire incident that was a short round and would fire mortars out from the camp. It was a
13 short round that some had of the powder failed to go off and it came out of the tubes and
14 it hit him in the head. It didn't explode or anything, but it hit him in the head. You know,
15 he had a severe head injury because of it. Other actions we were very lucky except the
16 one day that our platoon got ambushed when we were employed as a blocking force and a
17 couple of boats were picking up the Thai soldiers after they made their sweep. Once you
18 put weight on the boat, you're lucky you're going three miles an hour. The enemy had set
19 up in the meantime to ambush these boats and the VC did a good job and my platoon
20 sergeant was killed. Another friend of mine was on the machine gun of this boat and then
21 the RPG hit the boat right by the machine gun and it went through the boat and it didn't
22 explode until he hit the water. He was unscathed, unbelievable. He didn't have a mark on
23 him. I mean, the boat flipped over and everybody in the boat was thrown in the water, but
24 he didn't have a mark on him. My platoon sergeant was the driver and fortunately they
25 got him squarely in the head. As the boat flipped over, other personnel on the boat were
26 wounded and the back of his head was gone, but we never did recover his body because it
27 went over, and the tides were going out at the time. We were so swift and so thin that we
28 just never found them. That's one of the things that I'm really sorry about that we never
29 did bring his body back. He was gone the tides were unforgiving.

30 JS: Yes, sir. That happened in April? Is that when that happened?

31 JW: April 10th.

1 JS: All right.

2 JW: April 10, 1968. Always is a day that I'll never forget. Did you happen read
3 how the reunion came to be?

4 JS: Yes sir, I did. I'd certainly like to talk to you about that before the interview's
5 over with and about how that all came together and about how you came to write the
6 book as well.

7 JW: Okay. Let's see, another question I have for you about the Thai soldiers. How
8 long did you work with them? Was it your entire tour or just for part of it?

9 JS: No, almost for the entire tour. It was up through—well, right after the ambush
10 in April, April 10th. So, towards the end of April, they closed the bulldozed the bunker
11 and we left the Thais. We no longer worked with them. We basically were on our own
12 with the engineers. We worked with a few units as—we were more effective with night
13 ambushes and we'd inspect traffic on the rivers. A couple of ambushes we would go out
14 on, but we'd essentially, up until August I guess it was, late July or August we basically
15 were working on the Dong Nai River. Basically inspecting. And every once in a while,
16 we'd go out on the ambush position. We would go out on recon position a lot of times.
17 But no particular unit, until August. I was a short timer by then and I had just gotten back
18 from R&R and the 9th Division was moving its headquarters from Bearcat to Dong Tam.
19 They had been in the process of moving it, but they did it to make our presence felt more
20 down in the Mekong delta itself. At that time, we were used for carrying supplies to
21 certain units. Totally not what we were supposed to be doing. You know, you follow
22 orders. That's what we liked about it, too. When we were working on the river, we were
23 pretty much to ourselves. You know, none of the military crap that you had to put up with
24 in the main base camps.

25 JS: All right, well did you guys ever have any contact with or work with South
26 Vietnamese troops?

27 JW: Well, not really. I'm just trying to think of if we officially—the only people
28 we can think of that we worked with occasionally were something called rough puffs.
29 That was the regional forces, the popular forces. Now, our airboats went in from the
30 states and we ran operations out of Cat Lai to a further town, further up the river called
31 Na bei those were the basic people. You never knew if they were VC anyway half the

1 time, but that was the only time, and they were basically older people. All the young ones
2 were either in Viet Cong or the South Vietnamese Army. So, we didn't affect them at all.

3 JS: How about your impressions of Vietnamese civilians. I know in the book you
4 mentioned a few times about kids hanging around. Could you talk a little bit about that?

5 JW: Every place you went, no matter where it was, there were always kids. You
6 know whether it was in the base camp or in a small town there's always kids running up
7 to you and you felt for them. They were the people, I guess, most hurt by the Vietnamese
8 War. And you couldn't help but not like them. There was one kid when we were at this
9 place called Tan Tru before boats came in and his name was Thamy. His father was a
10 village chief who was assassinated by the Viet Cong for not giving them rice. He was
11 standing in front when both him his father and mother were killed. We all sort of took
12 him in, took care of him. We would give him jobs to do. He would sweep up our hooch's
13 and take care of our clothes and stuff when we'd give them to him and do our laundry if
14 he wanted to. You know, just in general. He got to be, you know, we all liked this kid and
15 one day they came when their boats came in from the states and we had to leave. We just
16 up and left and he was, you know, there all alone and nobody to take care of him
17 anymore and whatever happened to him, I don't know. That was very, very hard and I
18 think that none of ever befriended any of the kids like we did Tommy because it was
19 tough when you had to leave an area, or you had to leave him behind. I mean, it's not that
20 we didn't care, but we gave the kid everything that we had, extra candy all the time, c-
21 rations, or anything that we had. They needed it or wanted it. We never got close to any
22 of these kids after that. None of us.

23 JS: How did you guys find out the story about his parents? Did he actually tell
24 you?

25 JW: Yeah, yeah.

26 JS: Okay.

27 JW: Nobody was around so we assumed it was true and yeah, it's tough. There
28 was no other adults around that could verify that. I mean, this happened about six months
29 before we had gotten there. His father, as I said, was the village chief and they wouldn't
30 give the Viet Cong rice, so they made an example. That's why I said they ruled by terror.
31 And that's what they did. But a kid should never see his mother and father killed.

1 JS: No, sir. Well, was his English pretty good then?

2 JW: It really was, it really was. He was in this base camp, as I said, but the
3 Vietnamese are very intelligent people, and they pick up things very fast and he picked
4 up English very fast. We were surprised. I mean, there was a lot of things that we would
5 have to coach him to say and stuff, but eventually he was very fluent. I'd like to think he
6 maybe got a job with the current government or something as an interpreter.

7 JS: So, he has already picked up some English from previous American unit there
8 or from you guys?

9 JW: From the base camp itself.

10 JS: Okay, okay I got you. Well, another thing I wanted to ask you about that you
11 mentioned in the book about becoming the unofficial medic for the unit. Could you talk a
12 little bit about that experience?

13 JW: Yeah, that was interesting jungle rot which was, you know, a fungus, like
14 athletes foot. That's why when you came back to base camp, you always wore flip flops
15 to let your feet air out. So, I, you know, was very itchy so I developed sort of a cure, but
16 for it. You know, various little aches and pains and things like VD. If you got it more
17 than twice, I think, then you got an Article 15 which was a punishment. They would take
18 away some of your pay and you're fined. If they caught it more than once, yeah, they
19 didn't want to go to the medics and stuff, so I happen to be friends with a medic, and he
20 had some powdered penicillin and he gave me a few. When mixed with sterile water and
21 injected it, that would solve the problem. So, between that and jungle rot I became a
22 medic that way. I have to say this. I never had that problem although many of the people
23 did. It was interesting for cuts and bruises and stuff, you know? Stuff like that. I had all
24 the stuff for the jungle rot and for minor cuts and all of that stuff, so. I also became the
25 official cook. Every once in a while, a Navy PBR would come near us or come by and
26 they would want to know if we had any weapons we could trade. You know, one had a
27 case of steaks, a case of chicken, you know, all sorts of stuff every once in a while. So,
28 we would trade with them and weapons would be captured. And then we would, you
29 know, it was either feast or famine. You would pig out when you had that ability, and you
30 didn't have anything for a month or so. One time we managed to get a case of veal steaks.
31 You know, it's not like the veal that you get today. I mean, Army stuff. They all were

1 packed in a big frozen box. And then I made a sauce and I ended up making a nice veal
2 dish with spaghetti we had and made that up, Fried chicken on day. You know what a
3 number ten can is? The large cans? Butter used to come in that. We got some chicken,
4 you know, frozen chicken and somebody said, “Geez, we should make some fried
5 chicken.” I said, “Yeah, but we don’t have any oil or anything.” Then I thought about it
6 and we had one can of butter. I said, “Wait a minute, maybe we can melt the butter down
7 and use that as a deep fried stuff.” And we did. Like I said, it’s feast or famine. So,
8 there’s fried chicken and we had enough for another day and then we had nothing for a
9 couple months except for C-rations. The Thais used to shoot some animals sometimes
10 and they would repair it and make it. That was my introduction to Thai food, by the way.
11 I’ll tell you, if you’ve ever eaten true Thai food it’s with peppers. I mean, the hottest
12 peppers you could put your lips to. Mexican peppers would be nothing to these Thai chili
13 peppers. And everything they make is hot. I remember one day we were sitting and
14 talking, and they were cooking up some stuff and they invited us over there to have some
15 and stuff and it looked pretty good. We ate some and I put some in my mouth and forget
16 about it. They laughed their ass off too when the Americans were eating Thai food. And
17 then they gave us a drink. They had a liquor called Mekong and it was a drink that will
18 make the fire go away. So, we’d take a shot of that and it was just as bad, but believe it or
19 not, that solved the problem after a while, but you were probably drunk by that time, so
20 you didn’t notice it anyway. But it was interesting. You know, it was interesting. Like I
21 said, why I cooked this stuff is because we used to do some cooking at home before chefs
22 and plus, I grew up in an Italian neighborhood where my friends were Italian, so I
23 basically knew what to do any nobody else do anything. So, it migrated into that. It made
24 the time fly anyway instead of not just doing one boring thing after another.

25 JS: Well, besides cooking, if you had any downtime, how would you spend it?

26 JW: Well, there was very little downtime. When you had downtime all you had to
27 do is sleep. Of course, when we were—we operated mostly at night and so we would
28 have to sleep sometime during the day. But they always kept us busy. Plus, we had a
29 huge bunker that we had to build. We had to fill sandbags and that took up, believe it or
30 not, a lot of time. I always—sorry about that.

31 JS: No problem. You’re talking about spending a lot of time building that bunker.

1 JW: You know, we either had to build hooch's or we had to build sandbags to
2 build the bunker and it was a hell of a lot of sandbags we had to throw. Then we would
3 go out and operate at night, so we were always kept busy so there really wasn't a lot of
4 downtime. When we went to the Dong Nai River, when we operated back there with
5 more downtime. We would make friends with the kids and play with the kids who would
6 tell the civilians if they were doing something or building something. We would read.
7 You know, you'd get letters or magazines. You know, very rarely would you get books. I
8 was luckier than most of them, too, because I was the driver a lot of times for my
9 lieutenant and we would go places like to Saigon and different places of interest. Like
10 MAC-V headquarters and Long Bien. So, we wouldn't be stuck in one place all the time.
11 So, I think that's what kind of helped me, too, as far as, you know, keeping it together
12 instead of all of these different things. As I said, I cooked something, and I just keep
13 busy. You wore the faster the time went by.

14 JS: All right, did you get a chance to go on R&R?

15 JW: Yes, I did.

16 JS: Because we were at work with the Thai's, the Royal Thai Army and they say
17 how beautiful their country was and you know, how nice it was. I said, "Geez, maybe I'll
18 take my R&R and fly to Bangkok." Not only that, the executive officer of the Thai unit
19 with the son of Thonath Kittakachorn who was the Prime Minister at the time. He sort of
20 gave us—if you go there, if you go to this hotel you stay here, it doesn't cost anything. It
21 didn't cost you anything anyway, but you know, he gives a lot of tips on where to go and
22 what to do. So that sort of helped. I went on R&R alone. There was nobody else in my
23 unit, but it was such a small unit that we couldn't afford it. You know, one or two people
24 leave at the same time. So, we all went wherever we went alone, and you would just
25 make friends with people on the plane going there that was going the same place as you.
26 That's basically what we did. Anyway, I ended up going to Bangkok and I fell in love
27 with their city. It was a beautiful place. It was clean, neat, and nice, the people were all
28 nice. You know, maybe it's because I was a soldier and spend the money, but they were
29 all very, very nice. It was a great place to go. It was beautiful and pretty. What we would
30 do is once we were assigned a hotel and told them where we wanted to go and we were in
31 a hotel, I made friends with this one guy. He was an infantryman from the—I forget

1 what it was, it was the other companies in the 9th division, and we were always assigned
2 together because it was always the buddy system. If you were assigned, you'd stick
3 together and go through the whole place. So, we checked into our hotel and then we went
4 out and got a cab driver and said what we were remotely interested in and he says, "Well,
5 I know a very good place and if they could do it and won't rip you off and nice girls in
6 there." So that's what we did. And then we also hired him for the whole week to be our
7 exclusive chauffer, I guess. And we went all through Bangkok, all around Bangkok and
8 got the different tours at the different temples. It was good because he was a student at, I
9 guess at one of the universities there. He was sort of not the run of the mill Thai, but the
10 class system is very sort of middle-class, I guess. So, he was very happy to show us all
11 around, show us where to shop. You know, if we wanted to take a ride to the jewelry
12 store, so to speak, or which restaurant had the best food. I'm sure kick back from all the
13 places he showed us, but it was nice to have that type of thing rather than just to spend on
14 your own. The girls that we had, we also kept those girls for the entire week. You know,
15 you could do whatever you wanted to do, but it was much nicer, you know, to have that
16 sort of consistency. Plus, it was safer VD. But the young ladies in Bangkok were always
17 required by the health department to be all checked out. Cause that was a major R&R
18 center, too and that's were a lot of GIs will go and they didn't want them coming back
19 with anything or catching anything. It was nice and the time flew by. I mean, you were on
20 R&R for seven days, but my god, it's like three days and all of a sudden you have to
21 come back.

22 JS: So how much time did you have left in your tour when you returned?

23 JW: Well, I was scheduled to go until September. The end of August and early
24 September was my DEROS. So, I had just a very short time when I got back from R&R. I
25 took R&R later than normal. Most of the people would take it, you know, midstream or
26 not to long after that. But I waited not the end of my tour, but towards the end anyway. I
27 also got back, and I wasn't back too long when the 1st sergeant of the unit said that he
28 wanted to see me and I wanted to see him and he says, "Listen, your father's in the
29 hospital. You were granted an emergency leave." You know, my mother at the time had
30 severe rheumatoid arthritis and was really bed ridden. My father had gone through some
31 surgery and I was an only child. So, I said, "Sarge, I only have three weeks left and when

1 I go home and I'll be over there for two weeks and what do I have to do, come home
2 back to Vietnam?" And he says, "Well, you're not going to be able to clear Vietnam
3 because you've got emergency leave and you've got to get on a plane and your plane is at
4 two o' clock this afternoon." He says, "Well, let me try. A friend of mine has a jeep over
5 here and he can chauffer me around." "Well, you could try." And he did and I cleared
6 Vietnam in about two hours and got on a plane. I remember there was an officer that got
7 bumped—because you had priority and I thought that officer was going to kill me he was
8 pissed. Hey, listen, I went home on emergency leave. Then after Vietnam, after I was
9 done with my leave, I was scheduled to go to Fort Knox, Kentucky, but I managed to get
10 that changed to New Jersey, and then I was reassigned to a training company at Fort Dix.
11 I spent the rest of the time I had in the Army there. Then I got an early out to go back to
12 college. So, I got a three month early out.

13 JS: Well, before getting into life after Vietnam, if I could ask you a few more
14 questions about leaving. Did you develop any sort of short-timers syndrome in your last
15 days there?

16 JW: Oh yeah, we all did. Nobody would want to go on missions, and nobody
17 would want—we'd always look for stuff to do in the main base camp. We would, you
18 know, do everything we could not to go on missions, I guess. Let the new guys in the
19 hood.

20 JS: Because you guys had been created as a—well, the unit had been created by
21 guys coming in about the same time. Was most of the guys going home at about the same
22 time?

23 JW: Yes.

24 JS: Okay.

25 JW: Most of our unit was. You know, during that time people got wounded or
26 whatever we'd get replacements in and people from one reason or another would leave or
27 be doing something else and then our replacements would come in. By the time that I was
28 scheduled to leave, the original group—I guess most of us were scheduled to leave in
29 September. I left early and then I had to leave a lot of my stuff there that I accumulated
30 over time. I never did get that stuff. They swore they would send it to me, but I never got
31 it. As I said, towards the end we operated out of Bearcat and we built a bar on bearcat.

1 You know, we just didn't go on any missions. We tried not to go on any missions. I think
2 all of us—once in a while you'd get stuck and you'd have to go, but yeah you get the
3 short timer's syndrome, and you don't want to do anything. They're going to get you
4 killed, but they're so short. And nobody wanted to get killed towards the end. Nobody
5 wanted to get killed anyway or wounded.

6 JS: Well, another thing I know you mentioned in the book you talked about later
7 on towards the end of your tour that the tactics had changed somewhat. As far as
8 compromising speed.

9 JW: Yeah, they did. And that's one of the reasons, too, we didn't want to go
10 because we knew if we ended up resupplying, you know, ammunition to a lot of troops or
11 carrying a lot of troops. That's where many of us or in fact all of us, even me, but most of
12 the unit if they were wounded, they were wounded during some type of function, you
13 know, which was detrimental to us because our speed was compromised. And I guess
14 they didn't particularly like, you know, like the earphones for doing what they were
15 doing. You know, the regular Army didn't like them. We were a bastard unit anyway
16 until we were assigned to the 15th engineers and, you know, as things progressed in the
17 War and they had us do things that we shouldn't be doing, you didn't have a choice. So,
18 you just didn't want to—it wasn't the same as it was initially.

19 JS: Well, is there anything else we should cover about your tour? Anything we
20 haven't? Anything memorable or anything funny or anything like that that we haven't
21 covered before moving onto the trip home?

22 JW: Well, there was a—did we cover the shit burning?

23 JS: I think you briefly mentioned it last time, I think so.

24 JW: I thought that was the funniest part of my book. I didn't enjoy the time doing
25 it but looking back on it when I wrote about it, it was kind of funny. You know, I think
26 we covered just about everything. Just trying to—unless there's something in particular
27 that caught you.

28 JS: Let's see, one thing I remember I was going to ask you about was pets in the
29 unit.

30 JW: Oh yeah, yeah. We'd get dogs or a couple of us would have a pet dog, a pet
31 monkey. Again, animals there were—the Vietnamese ate dog so we would befriend one

1 and capture one and get it out of the hands of the Vietnamese and have a nice dog, but
2 then the dogs would always get diseases and stuff. So, you had to put them down. That
3 was another thing, too. You got a dog, and you were real close to the dog. I know one of
4 my buddies and my dog had this distemper virus and had to put it down and took it into
5 the base camp and they had limited stuff to put the dog to sleep with. I remember one day
6 they said, "Why don't you just take it out and shoot it?" and my friend got really pissed at
7 the vet and eventually he put him to sleep. He said, "You guys do this all the time.
8 You've got guns, just do it." I said, "Yeah, but who's going to do it?" And then you just
9 couldn't do it. Anyway, I don't know whether that was joking or not, but he said there's
10 nothing you can do except put him to sleep. The monkey we had—I'm trying to think of
11 where I saw this. I guess from one of the guys. I have a hard time remembering, but they
12 came and gone. You would keep them for a while and then you would have to move, and
13 you could not take them with you. Again, that became another pain in the neck. Try not
14 to keep them for a while and then you would have to move, and you couldn't take them
15 with you. Again, that became another pain in the neck. So, try not to do that, either.

16 JS: All right, we'll let me talk about the trip.

17 JW: There was one when we were in the ambush position one night and we heard
18 movement on a main river and I called in a gunship and he came into the area and he, you
19 know, machine gunned the area and rocketed the area and the next morning there was a
20 dead water buffalo, and a farmer was screaming because that was their main work animal
21 was a water buffalo. I guess the Army had to end up paying for that. I think they paid for
22 anything that they did damage to. You can see that with the power of the mini gun on a
23 helicopter because there was a zillion holes in the thing. I don't know whether that was
24 funny. It was funny to us, but it wasn't funny to the farmers.

25 JS: Well, anything else before coming home?

26 JW: No, I think that's basically it. There's a lot of little things, but when you put it
27 all together it's all basically in the book.

28 JS: Yes, sir.

29 JW: It was different things. And a lot of things I am interested in like nature and
30 animals and plants. But that was me, that wasn't everybody.

31 JS: Right.

1 JW: Coming home was a real trip. Like I said, I came home on emergency leave
2 and entirely different from the way I arrived in Vietnam because I arrived via the Air
3 Force and I flew home via Pan Am. There were stewardesses on the plane, and they took
4 care of you. The plane was loaded up, as I said, I had to bump this officer off of there, but
5 once you're on the plane and the doors were closed, then the plane rose out of fifty
6 caliber machine gun range. Everybody says when you leave there's a collective sigh of
7 relief, it's true. Everybody just, "Wow, I'm finally out of here." And then seeing round-
8 eye women that you very rarely saw in Vietnam asking you, "Do you want anything to
9 drink? Some soda?" There was no booze, but it was nice talking to a woman for a
10 change. I guess everybody felt relief then and we flew from Saigon to Honolulu and
11 stopped there and only spend a couple hours in Hawaii. I guess we refueled and flew
12 from Hawaii to Oakland, San Francisco, near San Francisco. Once we were in Oakland,
13 that's when you turned in all your stuff and all your jungle fatigues and all that stuff. You
14 would get uniforms that would outfit you for your trip home. After Oakland, get a cab to
15 San Francisco, and get to your destination wherever you were going. Mine was Newark
16 and off I went, and I was really tired. I don't remember much of the flight other than
17 taking off and then all of a sudden, the stewardess was shaking me awake and, "We're
18 landing in a couple of minutes." And back in Newark. I remember there was this one guy
19 that went from Oakland Army Air Terminal to San Francisco Airport. You know, San
20 Francisco at the time was hippie heaven. There were hippies there and we were coming
21 back from Vietnam and they really dumped on you. We were sitting there in San
22 Francisco waiting for our flight and this hippie came by and he had his hands down his
23 girlfriend's back of her pants, you know, on her crotch almost. We just shook our heads
24 and the guy said, "What the hell are you looking at?" And he said, "What the hell are you
25 looking at baby killer?" And my friend got up and we went up and cold cocked the guy
26 and both of them went down because he has his hands down inside of her jeans. I said,
27 "Let's get the hell out of here and find some place to hide out for a while." Sure, as hell I
28 didn't want to get arrested the first day back in the country. I know San Francisco was not
29 a nice place to be at that time. So, we did, and we were both on the same plane back to
30 Jersey, but he was from New York and that's the last time I saw him. That's when we got
31 off the plane in Newark and I said hello to my parents that day and back home I went. My

1 father had just gotten out of the hospital and he had come down to meet me with a next
2 door neighbor because my father couldn't drive yet. We drove us back home. They had
3 moved in the meantime, too, so I came back home from a different place then before I
4 went to service. That was interesting. We were back home. And then a little bit after that
5 I was back up on the corner with friends again that I hadn't seen for a year.

6 JS: Upon coming home, did you have any period of adjustment getting used to
7 civilian life again?

8 JW: Well, I was still in the Army. You know, I was, you know, as I said I was
9 originally assigned at Fort Knox in Kentucky, but I managed to get reassigned to Fort Dix
10 for training period. You know, after my initial leave I had to get back to Fort Dix and
11 ironically, you know, in the training battalions, in the basic training battalions and I
12 worked under a drill sergeant and the drill sergeant did everything he could to keep trying
13 to get to Vietnam. I said, "James, "You don't want to go. Do everything you can to get
14 out of going." He says, "No, I want to go. How can I train these guys?" He says, and I
15 say "James, you don't want to go." Well, he ended up going. I don't know what ever
16 happened to him. He managed to get transferred, but it was interesting training. He was
17 the bad guy, and I was the good guy and you always have one good guy and one bad guy.
18 The sometimes you would change it up with the next crew or whatever. I was in good—
19 like I said, when I went in the Army, I was around 240 pounds and when I got out of
20 basic I was around 180 pounds. I maintained that all the way through and I was in pretty
21 good shape. With the troops you'd have to get up and run with them every day and not
22 look tired. They were ready to drop dead and then ready to go again. As I said, we were
23 in pretty good shape. And then I had the opportunity for an early out to go back to college
24 and I took advantage of that and got out in January, so I got out two months earlier than
25 when my tour was up. I went back to school and that was a trip because that was the
26 height of the student protests and everything so that was interesting. But no, I didn't have
27 any problems with me adjusting to anything. Maybe something's wrong with me, I don't
28 know, but suffice to say that things went pretty much, pretty easy for me. Maybe because
29 I always kept busy. I think that's why.

30 JS: Okay, did you follow the War pretty closely through the media after you
31 returned?

1 JW: Yeah, every night you couldn't help but not. You would pretty much follow
2 it. And then I think that the biggest part was at the end of the War when we left. That was
3 hard to take, hard to take. I think that's what cemented my pro-military extremely
4 conservative values because I saw what was happening with the military and to our
5 government.

6 JS: Well, speaking of that I know you mentioned a little bit earlier about going
7 back to college and the war protests on the college there. Could you talk a little more
8 about that and about your impression of the war protests there?

9 JW: Well back at school there was about six or seven of us that were Vietnam
10 Veterans or veterans themselves. Not necessarily Vietnam Veterans, but veterans. You
11 know, Air Force people or other people that were stationed in Europe, but there was
12 about four or five that were Vietnam Veterans. People sort of left us alone because I think
13 they were afraid. We didn't change that impression. There was one guy that I became
14 very friendly with and he was a Vietnam Veteran, but he was also founded the black
15 student organization at the school. You know, black liberation, Black Panther Party, and
16 close to that. We became good friends, believe it or not. We disagreed on everything
17 politically, but we were still good friends. I don't know how that happened. He just
18 recently passed away, by the way. He remained a friend right up until the day he died.
19 But it was interesting, my cousin also, my girl cousin went to school and graduated at the
20 same time. She was a year younger than me, but she started school before I came back.
21 We ended up graduating at the same time and she was "hippie" at the time, and we were
22 diametrically opposed on everything there, but we also became friends. Well, not became
23 friends, but we also stayed friends. And I became friendly with a lot of the people and a
24 lot of the hippies. I became friends with just about everybody and it was interesting. I ran
25 for student class president and was elected twice, junior class and senior class president.
26 Most of the people who voted for me were the left-leaning pinko commie bed-wetter's. It
27 was very interesting. I remember when I first started, I think that was moratorium day
28 thing. They wanted to put the flag down at half mass and there was five of us there. Five
29 of the veterans that stood at the bottom of the flag. Oh, maybe six hundred and seven
30 hundred other students that were in the radical movements and in the student
31 mobilization organization that wanted to put the flag down for moratorium day thing. The

1 five of us stood around and said, “That flag is going to stay up there. It ain’t coming
2 down and if you want to take it down, you’re going to have to go through us.” The
3 president of the college came over to me and he said, “Listen, they want to put the flag
4 down.” I said, “Dr. O’Brien, that flag is going to stay right where it is and it’s about time
5 that you listen to other points of view. It’s not coming down.” They called the policeman,
6 and the policemen were all on our side. Anyway, needless to say the flag stayed up. So
7 that was my claim to fame against the angry mobs. Like I said, it was interesting. I mean,
8 I’m now 64 years old and I’m running for town councilman of my town along with the
9 three people who are also lifelong residents of this town. We are going to try to stop the
10 town from going to hell in a hand basket. We just want to rectify a lot of the problems
11 and that’s why we’re running. This is the first time that I really dabbled in politics, per
12 say. I mean, I’ve always been involved and behind the scenes, but never for elected
13 office.

14 JS: So, is the election in November then?

15 JW: Yup, November 2nd.

16 JS: Yes, sir.

17 JW: This whole town is entirely in the hands of the, democrats. We’re running an
18 uphill battle, but we’re going to do the right thing for the taxpayers because property
19 taxes in this town and nine years of democratic administration, the property taxes in this
20 town have risen 90 percent these past 10 years. Some people are just really pissed off. So,
21 we have a pretty good chance.

22 JS: All right, well before wrapping the interview up I’d like to ask you about that
23 reunion. How that all came about. And also, about the book and how it came about as
24 well.

25 JW: You know, it was interesting as I said because we had purchased an Apple II
26 GS computer for our kid’s to use for school. You know, it was new technology. I didn’t
27 want anything to do with computers and my wife didn’t so much either or care about it.
28 The kids had to have the computer. They had it out of the box and up and running before
29 we knew what was going on. I mean, it shows you how much they’re not afraid of new
30 technology. We’re petrified of it. I was embarrassed by my kids into using the computer
31 for simple things and whatever. I started hunting and pecking with the keyboard and got

1 involved and then I came across an old journal that I had kept. All through the War and
2 the years after I never heard anything at all about airboats, I never saw anything about
3 airboats. I said, "You know, somebody ought to write a book about this." So, I thought
4 about it and I said, "The first thing you could write about the people that lived it. And I
5 and my brothers lived it so why don't I do it?" So, I started, you know, actually I was
6 going through some old stuff, an old duffle bag I had, and in that duffle bag I had a
7 journal. And I started a journal and got to Vietnam and I kept it up for about two or three
8 months after that until I stopped writing it and I'm sorry that I did that, but at least it gave
9 me a starting point to the book, so I did that. And then paperwork that I had in the Army
10 and certain awards that I have given I pieced together sort of a timeline and if you read a
11 book that's based on a timeline that you have. I started writing it and came up with a dead
12 end, but at the same time, "Let me see if I can get a hold of some people." One of my
13 buddies had relatives in a town. He was from Buffalo, New York, and he had relatives in
14 the next town over. So, when he got married he came down to visit those relatives and we
15 got together and that was, oh, two or three years, again we lost contact. I started right
16 things down, hunting and checking on the computer little notes. You know, "Let me try
17 to contact Phil and a couple other people, maybe if I can try to get people together to see
18 if they can remember certain things and see what their stories are." So, on and so forth.
19 That was really to fill in the blanks. Some had paperwork a certain time and they got
20 things and they remembered things and it helped me a little bit. I'd start looking for
21 others and I couldn't find them until one day a query was made by someone about
22 airboats. I also knew this other guy that was from Rhinebeck, New York. So, I contacted
23 him and managed to get a hold of him. And then he knew somebody, a friend of a friend,
24 you know, that was in our unit and I contacted him, and one buddy was like, "Well, one
25 buddy led to another buddy." That's how it started, getting everybody back together. And
26 he said, "When are we going to do this?" I had met with my buddy, a man named Dan
27 Lennon, and he lived in San Diego, California. Rick Rumsey was in contact with him and
28 that's how he put us together. Danny was so happy that him and his wife got on a plane
29 and came to Newark and visited us and then we went up to Reinbeck to visit. The three of
30 us, we hadn't seen each other in thirty-five years, and it was just like yesterday, you
31 know? We were all brothers, and it was really an amazing experience. And Rick

1 commented, “We should have a reunion, we should try to get everybody.” And Jim, you
2 know, because I wasn’t working at the time I had retired because of my MS and stuff
3 and, “Jim, why don’t you run it? You’ve made some contacts with a few people already
4 and let’s do it that way.” So, I did. And that’s how the reunion got started as far as
5 contacting different people. That was a story in itself. What was really, really
6 heartwarming was my platoon sergeant’s widow, getting a hold of her. You know, it was
7 difficult to say the least to get her because—after I got a hold of a lot of people, then I
8 heard about there was a Vets Administration where you could write to. They would
9 contact the people, if they were in the VA system, but they wouldn’t give you their
10 addresses—you had to self-address the envelope and put all of this stuff in it that you
11 wanted. and they would send it to them, but they wouldn’t give you the address. So, I
12 said, “Okay.” It was about three or four letters that I had sent out forming this reunion
13 train trying to get hold of them and they sent to them if they’re in the system. Well, my
14 platoon sergeant’s widow was in the system. The survivor, you know, the dependent
15 survivor of somebody that was killed in action. She got the letter and in it the letter I said
16 who I was and what we were doing and we’d really like you to come to this reunion. And
17 she received it, by the way, on Christmas Eve Day, the day before Christmas Eve which
18 was eerie. But she didn’t respond right away because she was very skeptical of people
19 who were praying upon victims and Vietnam veteran’s wives and families and whatever.
20 She had a lot of problems, but then she saw my name on the letter. Now, she had a
21 picture that her husband took of himself and me. I was the only person in the platoon that
22 was ever identified. So she decided to—contact me. This was done by e-mail. So, we had
23 some e-mail correspondence back and forth and finally she told me where she was living.
24 She lives in Coeur D’Alene, Idaho. You know, she had a lot of questions because her
25 husband’s body was never recovered, and the Army never told her other details other
26 than the fact that he was killed. That was one of her questions and I said, “Listen.” She
27 had a lot of questions and a lot of mysteries that surrounded his death. I said, “Come to
28 the reunion and all your questions and all your mysteries and everything, you know, any
29 questions you have, either I or somebody else that was there will tell you exactly what
30 happened.” To make a long story short I called her on the phone because I was tired to
31 talking through e-mail and I didn’t know what she sounded like. I really wanted to talk to

1 her. She had two kids, by the way, at the time. Anyway, we started talking and we struck
2 up a very long conversation and ended up we would fly her to DC because that's where
3 they were having the reunion at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. She said, "Oh, don't
4 worry about that, I'll meet you there and just tell me when and where." Because I booked
5 the Washington Hotel and that's where we all were staying, and I booked rooms for
6 everybody and we would meet there. Surely enough she was there and what an
7 experience that was., and like I told you, it was unbelievable. Some had beards, some
8 didn't. I was in my power chair at the time and I thought I would be the only one that was
9 in bad shape or couldn't walk, but everybody had problems. One problem or another.
10 Some people had cancer, some people had neuropathy, and their kids have problems.
11 This was also due to an exposure to Agent Orange. Some of them, you know, managed to
12 get help from the VA and others nothing. So, we got them going to the VA and as a result
13 result, all of them received compensation and help from the VA. So that was good, but as
14 I said it was a very heart rendering experience. By the way, this guy Phil that I said that
15 was from Buffalo, New York, who we couldn't find?

16 JS: Yes, sir.

17 JW: There's a reason we couldn't find him. He got into drugs and his next door
18 neighbor was also into drugs and trying to steal his stash and he shot him. Phil went back
19 home to the kiss's house and said to his parents, "He's got shot, and he needs help." The
20 parents just ignored him. Anyway, the kid bled out and died and Phil was convicted of
21 first degree manslaughter and he was sentenced eight years to in Attica. So that's why we
22 lost contact initially. While he was in there, he found Jesus, I guess, and became very
23 involved with the prisoners and, you know, found God so to speak and was very
24 instrumental in bringing a lot of people back to the lord. He was granted parole for his
25 exception help and care with the prisoners and the way he handled certain things. Then he
26 got out early and a friend of his got him into a divinity school and he became a preacher
27 and he's a minister of a church in Fitchburg, Massachusetts.

28 JS: Wow, how about that?

29 JW: Yeah, and you would never think that he would be one of those people that
30 would ever end up as a preacher. So that was interesting. Everybody's background was—
31 everybody from all over the country. We covered California, we had two or three people.

1 We had Alaska. That's where my platoon sergeant was from. Then we had Michigan, we
2 had Georgia, we had New Jersey, we had New York State, we had Missouri, we has
3 Louisiana, we has Texas, we had Arizona. I mean, everybody that I managed to get a
4 hold of turned out pretty good. Oh, another thing that was interesting, too, one of these
5 letters we sent to the VA and they would send out. Well, I got this letter back and it was
6 my envelope and said, "Person no longer at this address." But this addressed that the VA
7 had addressed and sent to him and I had my return address on the envelope, the letter had
8 come back to me. I looked at the address on there and the street was in Fresno, California.
9 Well, the street's name in Fresno, California, my brother in-law also lives on the same
10 street, but the street, however, is divided by a six lane highway. So, one's south and one's
11 north, but he lived on the other one. His wife worked at a bank in Fresno and I asked her
12 For help. I was amazed when I saw the address. Oh my god, talk about a small world. I
13 had to do some detective work and couldn't find the guy. So, I asked her, as she worked
14 in the local bank if she could find him and well, he had passed away. she found that
15 through SSA and some banking records that he had passed away. But I thought that was
16 interesting because it was only across the highway away. For thirty-five years he lived
17 close to my brother-in-law. Two of the other people, there's three people that we didn't
18 find, and we never found. There was one person who we never found initially for our
19 reunion. However, one day I'm sitting here and a little over three years ago now. This
20 woman that happened to see a copy of my book on the internet and she said she wrote me
21 an e-mail. "My husband's buddy was in the airboats and I want to get him a book. They
22 went in the buddy system in the Army, but when they got to Vietnam, they went different
23 ways because my husband didn't want to go into the airboats and his friend did." So, I
24 said, "What's your friend's name?" She goes, "It's Jim Hurley." Well, Jim Hurley was in
25 an ambush just after I got back from R&R and he was severely, severely wounded. In
26 fact, they all thought he was probably going to die." So, they never did get back to him.
27 Come to find out that Jim Hurley did recover. His face was shot, his jaw was shot, he was
28 shot in the back and arms and caught in a real bad ambush. He was so bad that the people
29 on the boat with him didn't think we was going to make it, but he did. She said, "Yeah,
30 he just retired. He's a history teacher right outside of Portland, Oregon." I said, "You've
31 got to be kidding me?" "So, here's his number, call him up." Sure enough, if you looked

1 in the book to see his picture of him standing at the bar that was built in base camp at
2 Bearcat Base camp. Do you have the book in front of you?

3 JS: Yes sir, I do.

4 JW: About 143, you see a guy in the white shirt. You can just about pick him out
5 at the bar. Well, that's me and the sergeant is Harry Walton and he died about a year ago
6 of lung cancer and the big guy on the end is Jim Hurley, that's the guy who was lost and
7 we never did find him. We thought he was gone, but we found him two years ago just by
8 an accident of nature and as I said, he was a teacher and Forest Grove OR., I have to
9 update this part of the story. We found him and then I put him in touch with everybody
10 and everybody was going nuts about that. You know, we happened to find him, and he
11 was as good as new. He wasn't really dead, but from what I understand his face was
12 gone, but it didn't appear that way. They did a good job, I guess, in the hospital. He was
13 in the hospital for about three years before he got out. They said he went back to school
14 and became a history teacher at a local high school, and he had just retired.

15 JS: Wow.

16 JW: Yeah, you think you found everybody we could and all of a sudden people
17 turn up. I don't think that's going to happen with a couple of others you couldn't find,
18 either. And everybody keeps saying, "When are you going to have another one, when are
19 you going to have another reunion?" I said, "I don't know, when I get up enough energy
20 to do another one, maybe we'll do it someplace in the Midwest or California." I've got to
21 worry about my daughter's wedding because she's getting married October 2nd.

22 JS: Oh wow, that's coming up. That's coming right in the middle of the
23 campaign, too. It's going to be very hectic.

24 JW: Certainly, sounds like it.

25 JS: Well, is there anything else we should cover? Anything else you'd like to say
26 before we bring the interview to a close?

27 JW: No, as I said it's a shame, we could get a hold of everybody. I know a couple
28 of them probably are dead, but it's interesting to see what people turned out doing and
29 what their lives are like, you know, since Vietnam. That, to me, is doing this. This was
30 really really the joint work of all of us. A lot of stuff from this book is from the reunion,
31 too. People will always think that you can't possibly remember all that, and you tell them

1 some other things that they remember. Without all of this input from everyone, the book
2 couldn't have been written.

3 JS: Yes, sir.

4 JW: It couldn't have been written. This is even more interesting; I think it's
5 fabulous. I found out through a guy who started in the airboats and really became a
6 washout, initially, after our training because he was really a dud. He was from
7 Washington State. One day—that's another thing that started me on this quest to find
8 people because he had posted some questions on the 9th division website, the airboats. I
9 read this, but he said some of the things and some dates and some of the things that you
10 would know only if you were there, that's the only way you would know. So, I bit the
11 bullet and said, "Hey, I'll give them a call." So, I gave him a call and talked to him and
12 sure enough, he was the guy that we had—not we, but my platoon leader disliked because
13 he was a dud and I sent him back to the line unit. Where, by the way, he distinguished
14 himself. He also was severely wounded at the time, but before with this unit. Anyway, he
15 told me he was in touch with a Norman Stone. Norman Stone was our platoon leader. He
16 had said, "Well, Norman had this tape of our unit." He said, "What are you talking
17 about," I said. He goes, "Video tapes weren't invented at the time." But he gave me his
18 number and his address. So, he was one of the initial people that I called. He lives in
19 Stonington, Connecticut, which is about an hour and a half away from where I live. You
20 know, I was totally, you know, amazed that he was so close, and we never ran across
21 each other or thought about it. Anyway, I asked him I said, "I talked to this guy in
22 Washington State and he said you had a tape?" "Yeah, I sent him a video tape." "How
23 did you get a video tape?" He says, "Well, my mother was watching a news program and
24 it was a clip on airboats that the BBC had produced. She knew that her son was in charge
25 of airboats, so she wrote the BBC and I think they sent her film of that. An 8-mm film or
26 whatever. So, they said, "Yeah, we can do that." And they sent it to her. Well, he got
27 home, and he retrieved it and I had it made into a video tape. I said, "Wow, could you
28 send me a copy of the video tape?" "Sure, no problem." So, he sent it to me. Me and my
29 family were all sitting down and watching it. There was one scene in there where all of a
30 sudden, my daughter said, "Hey Dad, that's you. That's you." Sure enough, that was me.
31 There was a picture of me. See, I was the lieutenant's driver in the airboats. I mean, he

1 was the driver of the airboat and I was on the machine gun. There's a picture of George
2 Washington crossing the Delaware River with his leg up on the boat?

3 JS: Right.

4 JW: Well, I was standing on the machine gun with the leg up on the boat. It
5 looked like George Washington crossing the Delaware and I couldn't believe it. Then it
6 went to another scene and finally it came to the end where our boats came in for a landing
7 and they had some coming in from a landing and sure enough I was on one of the boats
8 on the machine gun. Because the lieutenant hit gravel right away the boat sort of bounced
9 and he brought the boat in and I sat down very hard on the thing. As a matter of fact, in
10 my book, in the dedication I thanked the lieutenant and my derri're thanks you, too, but
11 you were a lousy driver. Anyway, how many Vietnam Veterans can say that they had
12 actual film or video tape of themselves in Vietnam?

13 JS: I would bet there aren't many.

14 JW: I was amazed. So, I had other people doing it and I sent everybody a copy of
15 that and sent everybody a copy. Everybody was amazed. That was amazing. So, I guess
16 that's—it's amazing how things happen, I guess. I guess that's what I'm saying things
17 you don't know, and you don't expect always turn up, well this is real blockbuster. I
18 mean, the clip was only about three minutes long, four minutes long. You know
19 something, I think I sent a copy of that video tape to Texas Tech along with the book.

20 JS: All right, I'll have to check and see.

21 JW: Check it out. I think I did, I'm not sure.

22 JS: All right. Let me check and see about that.

23 JW: See, the BBC was doing this story on America's allies and the allies that we
24 had in the Vietnam War. They were focusing on the Thai's. Because the Thai's were
25 working with us, that's why they did it, I guess.

26 JS: Well, I don't believe we've actually mentioned the name of the book for the
27 recording for the future in case people ever listen to this.

28 JW: The book was called, *The Bamboo Shoot: Story of the 2nd Airboat Battalion*.

29 JS: And for people listening, future listeners of this, where can they get a copy of
30 it?

1 JW: They can get it at Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble online, both of them
2 online because they can't just walk into a store. Which is hard as they might, they can do
3 that, they can't because it's not a big seller.

4 JS: Okay.

5 JW: You can purchase the hardcover or the softcover. You can get it from the
6 publisher Xlibris, too.

7 JS: Well, anything else before bringing the interview to a close?

8 JW: No, I don't think so. I think we pretty much covered everything other than
9 the fact that the day I got home from Vietnam was the day I met my wife.

10 JS: Oh wow, okay.

11 JW: The funny part of it is, a very good friend of mine was having a rehearsal
12 dinner and he lived across from where we used to hang out and I was hanging out just
13 waiting for someone to come along and I came out from across the street and said, "Jim,
14 come on over." Again, all these people were there, and they said he was having a
15 rehearsal dinner. He said, "I didn't know you were going to be home, you still had time
16 left in Vietnam. You're coming to the wedding anyway." So, he invited me to the
17 wedding, and I said, "These are all your college friends, I don't know anybody." He said,
18 "Don't worry about it. I'll sit you at Madeline's table, you'll know everybody in ten
19 minutes." So, I said, "Okay, and dinner that night and sure enough I sat at Madeline's
20 table. I ended up taking home one of the bridesmaids. So, a couple weeks later I came
21 back to visit his mother and they had just gone off to Purdue where he was pursuing a
22 PhD and audiology, you know, his mother was like my second mother and I was over at
23 the house when Madeline happened to be over there, too. I asked her out and one thing
24 led to another and now forty years later, here I am. But other than that, that's basically it.
25 Being disabled also gave me time to write the book, too because I retired and wasn't
26 working. I couldn't work, but I could punch a key or two on a computer so that's what
27 started me on this quest. They say when something bad happens, there's always
28 something that you might not see it yet but there's always something good in it too. I
29 don't know what the exact quote is.

30 JS: Well, all right then I will bring the interview to a close.