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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with John Akins
Conducted by Kelly Crager
Date: 1 February 2016
Transcribed by Kate Lendvai**

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

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1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an oral history interview with Mr.
2 John Akins. Today is 1 February 2016. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas
3 Tech University and Mr. Akins is joining me by telephone from his home in Washington
4 state. Mr. Akins, to begin this interview, I'd like to get some background biographical
5 information from you. Can you tell me when you were born, and where?

6 John Akins: I was born June 8, 1947, in Helena, Montana.

7 KC: And what were your parents' names?

8 JA: John Creighton Akins and Mary Catherine Emil, maiden name, Akins.

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

10 JA: My father was a trained civil engineer for Carson Construction Company, I
11 think? Then, after a while, he moved out to Seattle when I was young, around two years
12 old, I guess, with the family. And he worked for a contractor, general contractor, became
13 their estimator, working in Alaska for a while, while we were in Seattle. Then moved on
14 to Tacoma, Washington, for another general contractor, as their estimator, and became
15 their kind of go-to guy there, for that contractor, building bridges, roadways, some
16 buildings.

17 KC: And what about your mother?

1 JA: My mother, I guess, had worked as a teller in a bank, and then was a
2 homemaker until around '60s, late '60s, when most of the five kids were grown. I have a
3 younger brother, Juan, who is fourteen years younger than me. At that point, she wanted
4 to work. She worked in a daycare or a preschool, and also did a lot of volunteer work
5 with members of the Catholic parish, which she belonged to.

6 KC: You mentioned that there were five children. Is that correct?

7 JA: Correct.

8 KC: Okay. Now you grew up, I guess, in the Seattle area. Can you tell me about
9 your childhood growing up?

10 JA: Yeah, grew up in the Montlake District, which is just on the edge of the
11 University of Washington, on the other side of the canal that runs between Lake
12 Washington just past the Huskey Stadium and the Elliot Bay and through the swamp. It
13 was a great neighborhood, a mix of blue collars and some professionals. Had the
14 University of Washington arboretum. It was a huge arboretum which was two blocks
15 away. We would run around and play in the neighborhood, in our alley and the alley
16 behind our house and into the arboretum, a couple blocks down there. We got lost there
17 one time. We let the dog out then, unfortunately. Got home, didn't tell anybody we were
18 gone. Sold papers there in Husky Stadium, PI (Post-Intelligencer) paper, gamedays, and
19 got in free at half time to watch the players, ended up in the Rose Bowl back then, but I
20 don't know. Anyway, so that was great growing up. You know, a lot of just riding bikes
21 around, running around the neighborhood. Exploring the Health Sciences complex just
22 across the canal, going on the elevators up and down, learning the way around Mount
23 Lake bridge. A little bit of Cub Scouts there, and then my family moved about thirty
24 miles south to Tacoma when I was eleven. So, then we lived in a house on the hills,
25 overlooking Puget Sound. So, we weren't far from the hills, we were at the foot of that.
26 We were overlooking the swimming pool in the backyard. We were on Sixth Avenue
27 Tomato Farm, actually it was owned by the neighbors, the Perrys, who's extended family
28 included the Wallmakers and were all a part of that, we had a house right next door. We
29 had a lot of open, first floor lot, open ground to run around there. People came down and
30 walked through our yard to the empty lot to the local swimming pool, including Cahill,
31 who was an Olympic gold medalist.

1 KC: Is that right?

2 JA: In the '60s, probably '64, '68, something. Yeah. So then, junior and high
3 school, the high school was a big high school, 3000 students, more than 700 in my
4 graduating class.

5 KC: Wow.

6 JA: So, I just got called out by our wrestling coach and football coach. They
7 would get everybody at PE, call out my weight, almost eighty-eight pounds, and would
8 tell me to get up to 120 so that I could turn out. Then I graduated at about 110.

9 KC: Hmm, okay.

10 JA: Well, I was strong but not big enough, they wanted me to be 120. Big
11 enrollment. I always thought I would do good if I went to a small town with a small high
12 school, but that wasn't the case.

13 KC: Yeah. And what year did you graduate high school?

14 JA: 1965.

15 KC: 1965. Tell me about the world as you understood it, in terms of the Cold
16 War. What is going on? As you're growing up out there on the West Coast, how did the
17 Cold War impact your life and what did you know about what was going on?

18 JA: Well, I was on a lake in western Washington, (inaudible) lake, or something.
19 The night that Sputnik was coming over, and I was in a rowboat with my dad,
20 (inaudible). We saw the first segment or so across the horizon at night. So, it was serious.
21 I got serious about school because I noticed all the students around me in my new school
22 in my new home. They were all pretty serious students. They became my buddies, so I
23 emulated them, and I got serious about school. But I was a good memorizer, and I was a
24 good kid. So, I did well in school, it was in my traits. And I saw John Kennedy. He came
25 to Cheney Stadium, which was a triple A baseball stadium. And we got out of school to
26 see him make an appearance there, so it was kind of—everyone liked it. I remember
27 when he was assassinated, there was a twenty-minute period before first period where we
28 went outside and looked at the mountains. And I was very serious about occupations. I
29 was studying the New York Life book of occupations that listed all the occupations and
30 what they did, how much money they made, and what was required education wise for
31 various occupations. And so, the emphasis became on science and math, so that we kept

1 up with the Russians. Also, business, John Kennedy instituted this goodness program in
2 public schools, and that was right up my alley. I loved playing sports, running around
3 chasing people with a ball or getting chased, or whatever. I was shorter than the average,
4 you know, by high school, I brought myself up in ways. And I just loved transport and
5 working. I loved mowing lawns and cleaning houses, and then I got my first job at fifteen
6 at Albertson's grocery store. Eight hours a week, cleaning the produce department and
7 the meat department. And, you know, I said I want to be a boss boy to my manager, and
8 they thought I was small. And then they promoted me to boss boy, so then, I didn't turn
9 out for wrestling because I felt very important having a job after school. It made me feel
10 big. And my mother had taught me how to keep track of money, and I loved her. And I
11 discovered that when you keep track of it, you watch it grow because you're more careful
12 about spending it. You kind of like having \$200 in your Great Falls bank, or Great Falls
13 money bag, and paying for my own stuff, tennis, skiing. And so, I was serious about
14 going to college and getting a good occupation and the American dream.

15 KC: Mm-hmm.

16 JA: Which, a few years later I ran into a problem because I failed Accounting
17 220, second quarter accounting my sophomore year at the University of Washington. We
18 only had two tests, midterm and final. I had a C- on the midterm. I was struggling. I went
19 to the teaching assistant, who was a grad student. I said, "I don't get the book." And he
20 said, "I don't get this book either." So, we got a new book, new textbook. Anyways,
21 when I failed accounting, I got no credit.

22 KC: Mm-hmm.

23 JA: And without those three credits, I was one or two credits shy or staying on
24 track to graduate in four years, so I lost student deferment, and then I had to run around
25 and figure out what to do.

26 KC: And what direction do you go? You talked about the student deferment,
27 obviously that was keeping you, I don't want to say protected from the draft, but out of
28 the draft as you're going to college. But now that that is gone, you can do a number of
29 different things, what did you want to do?

30 JA: Well, when I was fourteen, I finally decided I wanted to be a physical
31 therapist.

1 KC: Okay.

2 JA: Then my dad said no, that's woman's work. So, then I tried to get into
3 medical school and after a quarter or two of chemistry and physics—physics I got,
4 chemistry I don't get. I realized my first quarter; I went from some honors student in high
5 school to like a 1.94. so, I switched to building, technology and architecture, which was
6 sort of in between lower campus, the sciences, and upper campus, liberal arts. But, you
7 know, then of course, during my first year of college, I met Joanie Whitesell. We dated,
8 and I met her twin brother, Jimmy Whitesell, and Jimmy hadn't picked a major. And
9 when I got out of service, I ran into him, and he was finishing up his degree in physical
10 therapy and became the Seahawks first trainer.

11 KC: Oh, is that right?

12 JA: Yeah, damn. (Laughing) I should have stuck with it at the time.

13 KC: Yeah. When you're—

14 JA: Because at that time, there were very few men in that field, and they were,
15 you know, knocking it down and getting good jobs like that.

16 KC: Yeah.

17 JA: And now, I mean, in '98, or so, I went back to school after I was let go from
18 my job, at Washington State Conservation Commission, great job, my boss got pancreatic
19 cancer and died, and they hired the wrong guy. They didn't hire a local guy to replace
20 him, they hired a lobbyist from D.C., and he was a micromanager, and you don't
21 micromanage a former Marine infantry slash counterinsurgency guy, who figures out
22 how to get the job done without supervision because fucked up supervision can get you
23 killed, but, when you come back and do what we used to call the real world, back in the
24 United States, that kind of take, get out of my way, I know what I'm doing, doesn't work
25 with some managers.

26 KC: Mm-hmm. Well, let me have you take me back to your end of your time
27 there at the University of Washington. What did you plan on doing once your student
28 deferment was no longer available to you? Are you looking at the military now?

29 JA: Well, not right away. When I got that letter, it was the end of sophomore
30 year. But I had just found a job, a construction job, a union job, working in an

1 underground fifty-two-inch diameter water pipe replacing the old wooden one with
2 wooden staves and steel bands,

3 KC: Mm-hmm.

4 JA: Which, we worked under a river. I got that job, I kept that job and what I had
5 done while I was working, was I had, just before I went to work that summer, I actually
6 worked construction a little bit on campus, which was not quite as big as intermural
7 building and facility as Fort Worth, but it was a big job for a while. While I was doing
8 that, I ran around, I went to the Naval base near Seattle, they're still operating in
9 Magnuson Park, on the lake. I spoke with the CBs (construction battalion), and they said,
10 "Yeah, you got some construction background. Sure, sign up." And I said, "So how long
11 do I have to serve?" "Three years." "Oh!" I wanted to just do the minimum so I could get
12 it done and get on with my life.

13 KC: Mm-hmm.

14 JA: You know, back to school, and have the GI bill, which turned out to be
15 miniscule, meager to nothing. \$130 a month for books, tuition, board, everything. And
16 then I tried Reserves for, had a three-year waiting year, so I was walking on University
17 Avenue and there was a little Marine recruiting station. It had this, two-year program,
18 that you could enlist for just two years, and you could have delayed entry for a couple
19 months, I thought, oh. I'll check this out, because I can keep working all summer and I'll
20 be able to go in in the fall, September, instead of back to school. And so, I walked in
21 there and I asked the guy, "Now, if I sign up, if I'm volunteering, will I get to pick what I
22 get to be? Like a lifeguard in Hawaii or something." And he said, "Yeah, right. You get
23 what they call a dream ship, and you pick the top three." So, he told me that, and there
24 were all kinds of sorts of bases. And I said, "Okay." And then after working that summer
25 in that underground water pipe, I was ready to be inducted and I showed up at the
26 induction center in a part of downtown Seattle called Interbay, it was a big ole
27 warehouse. And the room was full—there must have been a couple hundred guys. They
28 lined us up alphabetically, and they started a show, and they were inducting people and I
29 saw this Marine, he comes up, strides out and takes the first five of us and says, "You've
30 been inducted into the Marine Corps." And I said, "Oh wait, I already signed—" I forgot
31 what they called the program, "two-year entry." And he said, "Shut the fuck up! Get in

1 here.” I think there were six guys, he could’ve taken me and another one because he
2 needed to have five or whatever. But anyway, so there I was. And in the end of
3 September, about September 27, when I would have been starting my junior year of
4 college, I was reporting at boot camp MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Training), Marine
5 Corps recruiting people in San Diego.

6 KC: Okay. And this is September of 1967.

7 JA: Right.

8 KC: Can you take me through your experience there at basic training? What was
9 that like?

10 JA: That was a lot of fun for me. I was the old guy; I had just turned nineteen or
11 twenty? Probably twenty, I guess. So, I loved the—I owned the obstacle course, and I
12 scored the highest in all four physical training tests, you know, which should’ve been a
13 strike right out of boot camp. So, I loved that part. I actually loved the drilling part,
14 everybody got it together and you could just be marching, and I had been in the marching
15 band in high school for one or two quarters, the first year of high school. So, that part of
16 drill marching, I even liked the drilling on the playground and the marching, once it all
17 came together how synchronized it was and how some of the moves you were doing were
18 pretty cool, like, I forget what they call it when you do stuff. And so, and the schooling
19 part was pretty easy for me. So, and the black humor and the fear—the fine line between
20 fear and humor, that the DIs (Drill Instructor) were using. You saw a little bit of it in the
21 movie *Full Metal Jacket*.

22 KC: Sure.

23 JA: But, our three guys were, I mean, luckily being short, we had the four
24 shortest guys at the end of the platoon from the back.

25 KC: Mm-hmm.

26 JA: And so, the four of us back there, we had a good time. We would do the
27 basketball weaves while we were marching in formation because they couldn’t see us.
28 You know, the drill instructors were up at the front, so they didn’t see us. Or somebody
29 would do a right slide, and the inside guy would give the outside guy a shove as we
30 pivoted to the right or to the left. And the other DIs on the ground saw us and the guy
31 ended up doing squat thrusts forever and ever. And that was harder than pushups.

1 KC: Yeah.

2 JA: So, made it through Marine Corps boot camp, that was okay. ITR (Infantry
3 Training Regiment), I was kind of disappointed by how loosie-goosey they were coming.
4 I was getting in fights anytime that the gung-ho, the young and dumb—they were in this
5 Hollywood mode. I had been through fraternity hazing, so the hazing part, although it can
6 get scary, I saw them stomp a guy's leg on the concrete cat latrine and break his leg. I had
7 gotten hit in the back of the head with a full magazine of 7.76 rounds in fourteen firing
8 range by this disgruntled range instructor. Now, I was seeing stars and stuff like that. So,
9 you had to be careful, but it was hard not to keep from laughing at some of the antics that
10 the DIs would do, unless they got violent. You know, sometimes they did. But they
11 were—the black humor, I guess you call it, or the scaring people to get them into shape.
12 It was scary when they take a M14 rifle barrel and tap it against the guy's forehead
13 enough to cut the skin, but the other times when they were just getting into somebody's
14 shit was hilarious.

15 KC: Mm-hmm.

16 JA: I think I was a bit older, I guess, and had been exposed to a couple weeks of
17 hazing or so. And then, ITR, they just rushed us through. “It's like, okay, did everybody
18 get the chance to orient the map and shoot?” “Uh, the sir, the private didn't get a
19 chance—” “Oh, shut up”, off to the next thing. So, the training was okay, but then I went
20 deaf on the M14 range, and so I was worried about how am I going to creep through the
21 jungle, because, you know, we were told what it was about and that you had to be
22 stealthy and stuff like that, be in on your senses. So, I was very concerned when I was
23 getting on, boarding the flight, at Travis Air Force base, I was last off to check in and get
24 my orders. And the guy goes, “Why are you going to Vietnam? You had orders to go to
25 language school in Monterrey, California, for at least three months.” And I went—
26 because I scored very high on language proficiency, I guess. And, you know, that was the
27 first I learned about that, and so I'm on the plane, wondering, why am I not in language
28 school? But it had turned out, you know, I was a rifleman in the Marine infantry, and I
29 landed in Da Nang from Okinawa. I remember letting out a deep breath when I got off
30 the plane, thinking, eighteen months. I wonder if I'll make it.

1 KC: Hmm. What did you know about Vietnam once you finished ITR? You
2 know that you're going to be going, and you mentioned that someone had been talking to
3 you about what to expect in Vietnam. What did you know about what was going on over
4 there?

5 JA: Well, I knew this, from reading *Time Magazine*, when, you know, you're
6 totally isolated in boot camp, but once you get out of ITR, you can set up a weekend
7 leave to look at newspapers and stuff like that. I knew that Marines were taking 80%
8 casualties, that was starting some fights in ITR, where these guys were getting all gung-
9 ho and couldn't wait to get over there to kill communists. They said look, Marine infantry
10 is taking 80% casualties. For those of you who didn't pay attention in math, for ten
11 Marines, eight are getting hit, killed or wounded.

12 KC: Mm-hmm.

13 JA: And they would say, what are you, communist? Jump me! And then the fight
14 was on.

15 KC: Yeah.

16 JA: So, yeah, that pretty much started a race riot in ITR on a different occasion.

17 KC: Is that right? Can you tell me about that?

18 JA: Well, let's see. We were getting toward the end of the day or something, and
19 a drill instructor or whatever you called them then, an ITR instructor, an infantry training
20 regimen instructor, told me to go into the barracks and go to the duty officer's office and
21 get something, I can't remember what. Probably some sheet of what's going on next, or
22 something. I got to stop a second here.

23 KC: Okay, no problem.

24 JA: A big black Marine, a big guy, had just finished mopping in the barracks and
25 I said, "I have to go in here and get this." And a guy got up, and he just bulldozed into
26 him and tackled him onto his back, going for the throat. And it just erupted into blacks
27 versus whites' battle. And I kind of crawled away and watched it all with the MPs
28 (Military Police) come in and swinging clubs, putting it down.

29 KC: Hmm. Now were there, there must have been, I guess, given the way this
30 took place, some underlying racial tensions there at ITR. Did you find this to be the case?

1 JA: Well, you know, I don't know. I didn't really see that – you didn't see
2 anything like that in boot camp. I didn't see any racial tension in ITR. Myself, Jean
3 Pulver, Marvin Cone, as kids, ten-year-olds, were the only white guys in the East
4 Madison YMCA in Seattle because that was, as you got further away from the UW
5 campus, going south, it got into, from the Montlake District that I grew up in, the blue
6 collar mix, some professional, into the low socioeconomic area. A lot of blacks. The
7 Central District, and the Central District is still the Central District but it's being re-
8 gentrified. So anyway, I didn't notice any racial tensions because you didn't get out of
9 line anyway shape or form, or you were inviting a beating or squat thrust forever and
10 ever.

11 KC: Right.

12 JA: And in ITR, I didn't notice it. I mean, I sold—let's see. I don't know if it was
13 before that incident, it might have been after that incident. It was a weekend, and we were
14 able to make phone calls. There was just a couple, maybe there were three phone booths
15 in a row. And I got in line, and I sold my place in line for a quarter until I had this huge
16 wad of change in both pockets, and then I went on up to the phone booth and went in and
17 called this girl I met before I went into boot camp who was from Philadelphia. I was
18 talking to her on the East Coast, and feeding quarters, and I had about three or four left on
19 the tray under the phone, and you know, in calls, you got interrupted, saying, "You have
20 two minutes. You have one minute." And right about then, the man, the stud Marine, who
21 was the platoon commander or something, he was a guy from Chicago, he was a very
22 dark, black negro, an African American. Perfect white teeth, he was a poster Marine. He
23 was very astute and buff, he could walk with that Marine drilling six to the front, swing
24 your hands, three to the rear, lean back and strut. And he came back to the phone booth
25 and said, "Hey, get out!" And I put my hand against the door and told him to be quiet.
26 And then, I kept talking because I just had a few more, probably less than a minute. And
27 he was getting animated and getting all troubled with a few other guys. And I wouldn't
28 let him in. And then when I came out, I sort of felt some of that pent up, maybe rage, that
29 the Marine Corps is trying to instill.

30 KC: Mm-hmm.

1 JA: And I just got right in his face, you know, nose to nose, and told him off, and
2 he backed down.

3 KC: Hmm.

4 JA: And everyone was afraid of him. You know, he was from Chicago, he was
5 black, he was very buff and handsome, and very confident Marine. And he backed down,
6 and boy, then after that, I was king of the hill. And shortly after that, guys were looking at
7 me and sizing me up, and I was like, okay. So, then I was getting into more
8 confrontations but before anything could change, we were on our way to the next stop. I
9 didn't really hear anything about whites disrespecting blacks, or blacks trying to hose
10 over whites, I didn't see anything like that.

11 KC: Yeah.

12 JA: I think that the Marine Corps, they keep you too tight and too in fear of
13 screwing up. You could end up in motivational platoon or correctional custody, you
14 could end up doing boot camp all over again or getting beat up. So, I bounced off a set of
15 lockers a few times by my DI, but it was all noise, you know, lockers in a tub against the
16 wall.

17 KC: Mm-hmm.

18 JA: They thought I had purposely tubed the officer candidate test. And so, they
19 were asking me about that and knocking me around. This was all noise; it didn't hurt me.
20 It was actually kind of funny. And it was a black DI, and I had a lot of respect for him,
21 and he actually respected me. He had, I can't remember his name, he was one of the few
22 Marines before they made it easier, to score the maximum 500 out of 500 points on the
23 physical training test. That's a rare thing. Now all these college athletes that are in the
24 OCS (Officer Candidates School) are maxing it, but it's a changed test, I've looked it up.
25 But, you know, the highest—my first test was 410. My last test was 480, so, he had
26 respected me. We all respected him. The chief drill instructor, Rudy, he'd get crazy. You
27 could see it in his eyes, he would really get on somebody's case. "What are those zits
28 doing on your face? I'll take a ball point pen and take them out of your face." He was not
29 joking. I mean, you could see it in his eyes, this guy was seriously pissed off. They want
30 their platoon to win as honor platoon based on scores, and don't want to be the dufus
31 platoon or whatever. But I never saw any kind of racial overtones or undertones at all.

1 KC: Yeah. Well, let me ask you this, you're in the Marine Corps, you know
2 you're going to Vietnam. What was your family's reaction to your impending trip to
3 Vietnam?

4 JA: Well, I think my dad could tell I was a bit concerned. We actually went over
5 to see my eighth-grade history teacher, who also had a shoe store, managed a shoe store.
6 And so, it was summertime or something, anyway we were over there, maybe it was the
7 weekend, to talk to him, because he had been in the Navy. And, you know, I told him, I
8 said, "I got orders for Vietnam," and you know, he went, "Oh. Make sure you have guys
9 you can trust that will back you up. Big guys." And so, that was like, okay, that's some
10 good advice, but why? My main concern was that, you know, I was pretty good on the
11 firing range, but I was concerned after that.

12 KC: Mm-hmm.

13 JA: But, you know, there was—when I expressed that concern to some in transit
14 period, transit company, an officer, I told him, "I'm not certain about going to Vietnam
15 and going in the infantry when I couldn't hardly hear after the rifle range." He blew that
16 off. And then, I got on the plane a couple days later, and ended up in Con Thien, which is
17 right up near the end the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone).

18 KC: So, you come into town, or into country, in Da Nang, and then they
19 immediately ship you up to Con Thien?

20 JA: Next day or so.

21 KC: And what unit was this?

22 JA: It was Echo 2-1. So, Echo company, second battalion, first Marine division.

23 KC: And you are a 0311 infantry rifleman, and you're headed to Con Thien. Tell
24 me about your first experiences there in Vietnam. What was that like for you to come into
25 the unit, to be in that part of the world, seeing what's going on in the warzone. Give me
26 your experiences of your earliest times in Vietnam.

27 JA: Well, we got off the chopper and somebody met us and walked us into Con
28 Thien which had been really hosed over by the NVA (North Vietnamese Army), or you
29 know, just earlier, so the previous months, or weeks. You know, it looked like a typical
30 Marine base that I later learned after being in Khe Sanh—well, Khe Sanh looked worse,
31 it looked like it was just a landfill with everything all busted up. You couldn't stay above

1 ground very long in Khe Sanh. And I guess there was looking back, I've read a lot, and
2 I'm reading about Con Thien. So, I meet an officer who tells one of his squad leaders,
3 "Get these two—" or, I think there was three of us— "Get these three guys some high
4 and tight haircuts." And I thought, why do we need to get high and tight haircuts here? I
5 thought that was silly. And then, he told us, he pointed out into the distance, "Those are
6 the Rao Co mountains, and that's where the NVA is dug in, and we're going to be in
7 there. So, you know, when the shit hits, it's sort of like a football game. You're a little
8 worried, and then after that first hit, you get hit, and then you're ready to go. Well, that's
9 what it's like." And I thought, that's ridiculous. Comparing it to a football game. As it
10 turns out, he was kind of right. So, then the next morning, we go out on patrol, and we get
11 out of the wire just a little bite, and there's some dead NVA. And I look at this one face
12 down, and he is big. He is over six feet. He is a big guy. And so, we were going, "Oh
13 yeah, Chinese." And I did know that China, the ones that are from the North, I don't
14 know if it's the ones from the North or the ones from the South, but the ones, let's say
15 from the North, they're really big. And so, I saw the guy—his back was still smoking
16 from being hit by a Huey gunship the day before or the morning of or something. And,
17 then I watched this black Marine, standing on the kind of upside of a bomb crater, and he
18 just opened up on that guy.

19 KC: Hmm.

20 JA: Opened up on the corpse. And it's—you know, his chest is all puffed out,
21 and everything, and he just unloaded a whole magazine on a corpse. And I thought he
22 might have been another fucking new guy, because that was my assessment. That's what
23 I thought. He must have been a fucking new guy, Hollywood, you know, been watching
24 too many movies or something. And then we went on, I was carrying a lot of gun ammo
25 because I was a new guy. I was just loaded down with my stuff, and then two boxes gun
26 ammo, and there was a very hot, I mean I was standing out here in the Pacific Northwest,
27 where it's damp and grey, probably forty degrees, but it feels cold. So, I set the gun
28 ammo down on the trail for somebody behind to take a turn on it, and I got kind of told
29 off about doing that, "You don't ever leave ammo on the ground!" I said, "I didn't leave
30 it where anybody would find it but the guy behind me." And then, but another one, he
31 saw a Marine ask me for water, so I gave him some water. And he came up to me and

1 said, "Look, don't give your water away. You're going to need that." And he was right
2 about that, too. Later, as you get tight with people, you share everything. But he was just
3 schooling a new guy and giving me some good advice to be careful about water. He told
4 me, you'll be out here for weeks, and months and you don't know when you'll come
5 across water, and if they can't resupply you, you're in a hump.

6 KC: You go out on this first patrol; can you tell me about the climate? Can you
7 tell me about, and you mentioned a little bit of the heat, can you tell me about the
8 environment that you're in? What's that doing to you?

9 JA: Well, I mean, I'm this still kind of in this fog of, "What am I into, and how
10 am I going to make it?" And I was just following the guy ahead of me, looking around at
11 this terrain, which reminded me of eastern Washington, which is agrarian. Our state is
12 split north to south by the Cascade Mountain range, Puget Sound area, commercial and
13 industrial and the eastern side is farmland and rolling hills, bare, you know. You can't see
14 very far from the trees or hills. It was very flat. Well, this was kind of flat, kind of open
15 and lots of bomb craters. I saw the size of them and the weather – it was hot. I wasn't
16 used to the weather, it was hot, you know. Even, a few days later, when another Marine
17 with more experience, "Are you taking salt tablets? You need to take salt tablets and
18 drink a lot of water." Because I was white, probably a little, I wasn't white, but I was,
19 you know, sweating profusely, looking weak, I guess. Or wimpy, something like that, and
20 he was warning me about drinking enough water. So, I was just taking this all in and kind
21 of watched guys who seemed to know what they were doing. And as day by day, it was
22 just shortly after that I got to Con Thien that we left on an operation where we spent the
23 next two or three months, two and a half, three months, maybe, at least, working our way
24 up to the DMZ, along the DMZ, up and down these hills and then into Khe Sanh to
25 reinforce base, Khe Sanh, because Tet had been going on for about two weeks. So, it was
26 the hardest thing I've ever done was climbing up those hills with a mere sixty pounds and
27 walking point a lot, it was always making me ache up, come down the column and down
28 the line and then I would go up to the front. And some of the terrain was so thick, you
29 could only bash your way through it. You couldn't even swing a machete. And it was just
30 brutally, physically hard. And then during that period of time, there was things going on
31 that were, you know, I saw a new guy fallout with heat exhaustion. He'd only been with

1 us a couple days. He got choppered in, and we're stomping up this hill, and it's not, we're
2 not bashing our way through, but it's hard, and he fell out. I've written a poem about this
3 called *The Stiner*. And so, he's in our squad and so, with the squad is ten guys but
4 actually there was only about four of us, that's how it is. And actually, I never saw a full
5 comp of men in the Marine Corps, they were taking too many casualties. But anyways,
6 he's on the ground, and we're pouring our water on him and trying to cool him down.
7 And the corpsman come up, Navy corpsman, and he's trying to give him, I think he put
8 an IV into him, and asked for a medivac and some sergeant came up, I noticed he was
9 from another platoon, the platoon behind us, I think. Or maybe he was part of our
10 platoon. Anyway, he came up and said, "Get him on his feet," he's kicking at the guy,
11 and the corpsman is kneeling down trying to get a medivac and said, "I need an
12 emergency medivac." And the guy said, "No way, no medivac. Get him on his feet."
13 While he dies right there and we'd emptied our canteens on him, and he died.

14 KC: Wow.

15 JA: And then, three of us had to take turns humping his corpse. Someone would
16 take my pack, and I'd get this long, lanky guy up and hump it. When we got to the top of
17 the hill, again, I was carrying him, and then we finally got up the rise and we got into a
18 flat area, I just threw him off me, rolled down onto my back and just thought, just walk
19 up and shoot me right in the forehead.

20 KC: Hmm.

21 JA: So, it was a combination of the strain of humping this corpse, but mainly, of
22 him basically, to me, being murdered by some gung-ho John Wayne type.

23 KC: That must have made a tremendous impact on you—

24 JA: Mm-hmm.

25 KC: To see the value that was placed or perhaps the lack of value that was placed
26 on this individual in the midst of these difficult circumstances.

27 JA: Yeah, well, a few days later, or maybe it was a week later, I don't know,
28 another incident, maybe it was even worse, was that the two guys I was walking with,
29 because every day you dig, and every night you dig, and in the morning you get up and
30 move out and you go and literally where I would get down and lay my rifle down and
31 rush into and bash into this foliage and just try to break trail. And years later, maybe

1 twenty years later, I read about a guy who said, “Yeah, we couldn’t get through this. We
2 would just take turns and get into a three-point stance and just bash our way through.” So,
3 I felt like, yeah, I know what you’re talking about. So, I had been watching Miller and
4 White, because these were two guys that, I found out that they had about five months in.
5 So, they’re very experienced.

6 KC: Mm-hmm.

7 JA: And I watched them every chance, if I was ever around, I would watch how
8 they would operate, what they would do, how they were doing it. And one day, we got a
9 hit, we got contact, and my guy in my little fire team, so that’s three of us, just fired the
10 compact captain in daylight, happened ahead of us, a little bit, ran to me, grabbed me, and
11 we were at the edge of the lip of a bomb crater, and he said, “We better watch here! We
12 better stay back here and watch here.” I could’ve hugged him, I wanted to stay back here.
13 Well, Miller and White were up ahead, and they went, they just told me and the other
14 guy, he went, “Whoa. They just went into that cave, and they shot two guys and dragged
15 them out,” and stuff like that. And I thought, yeah, okay. So, then a few days later, I
16 happen to me walking by, I’m ahead of Miller and White, so I’m feeling really good
17 about this, because I got two guys who know what they’re doing and they’re right behind
18 me. And all of the sudden, you hear this screaming sound like a freight train coming in,
19 and boom, I’m knocked onto my face. And I turn around, and there’s nothing, and I turn
20 around and go back ten, twenty feet, and there’s Miller and White laying in a crater just
21 chunks of meat.

22 KC: Hmm.

23 JA: And there was a short round. They said it was a short round, it was our own
24 artillery.

25 KC: Wow.

26 JA: So, an 81 mortar, probably. And nobody – I thought, you know, I’m looking
27 at just chunks of meat side by side in this crater. And I’m shocked. I can’t believe this, it
28 was our own mortar, that word came down real quick. And I said, “Who’s going to—”
29 You know, I was trying to think, I don’t know what I was expecting, but I was trying to
30 think, who’s going to answer for this? Who’s going to pay for this? This is, you know,
31 this was a mistake, probably. Was it really a short round, or did someone call in, did

1 somebody fire on our coordinates and not the coordinates ahead of us, because they
2 would be gone by fire that way.

3 KC: Yeah.

4 JA: So, this guy said, “Oh, that’s The Nam man. That’s fucked.”

5 KC: Hmm.

6 JA: And everybody was just very nonchalant about it. I couldn’t believe, how,
7 like, so what? Keep going. But that shocked me. I think that shocked me worse than the
8 guy not getting a medivac. Yeah. So then, on you go. Onward to get to Khe Sanh.

9 KC: Is this—I should ask you; how do you deal with this? You mention this that
10 someone said hey, that’s just The Nam, so you pick up and move on. But the first time
11 you experience something like this, you don’t know that it’s The Nam and that’s the way
12 things go sometimes. How do you process and deal with this mission in your time there?

13 JA: Well, I remember just thinking, there’s no way I’m going to make it here. I
14 mean, this is, you know, this was, initially, I was just, mostly, it was like fear, I guess. Or
15 the realization that it will be hard to survive thirteen months here. And so, I was kind of,
16 you know, I want to say in a funk, but I was just – it was just, day after day after day of
17 this. And just that how hard it was, how dangerous it was, it seemed like people getting
18 blown away by our own guys, dying of heat exhaustion, yeah, he went into heat stroke.
19 That’s fatal. I knew that from Boy Scouts first aid and other first aid classes, you know.
20 That shouldn’t happen. So, this was like, otherworldly shit.

21 KC: Mm-hmm.

22 JA: And it’s going to be really hard to make thirteen months.

23 KC: Now, you—

24 JA: But it’s an incremental thing. You shut down emotionally. You start to adapt
25 to violence, and you kind of become an automaton. I was having trouble also because,
26 what happened later on, trying to get to Khe Sanh, we’re working down, aching, I go up,
27 I’m walking point, and I’m doing it like they kind of showed us in ITR, you know, have a
28 little spirit and keep it in front of you and just crush the ground and see if you hit a booby
29 trap or if you find a string across the trail or something, that’s a booby trap. So, I was
30 being very careful, I was walking and scanning and moving slowly, to be stealthy. And I

1 have that shtick, and I'm going on. And my squad leader, he was a guy that would kick
2 you in the sole of your boot to wake you up in the morning—

3 KC: Mm-hmm.

4 JA: so, you would get up and get ready to go. Randy, I told him don't ever kick
5 me in the sole of my boot to wake me up. Just leave me alone. Anyway, so Randy comes
6 striding up, pushes me aside, "You're going to slow," and walks into an ambush. Pow,
7 you know, he's down, screaming, fire going out and coming in, branches are fluttering
8 down, I mean, I crawl out, you know. I crawl my way up and he plops on his back, I see
9 blood all over his hands and so I get out a towel dressing and I start wrapping his hands
10 and then I realize his shoulder is hanging on by a thread.

11 KC: Hmm.

12 JA: So, then I kind of do the lifesaving grab, I grab him around the chest, pinned
13 his arm into him and slithered my way back, hauling him back, hauling him back. He's
14 screaming, I'm trying to tell him, "Shut up! Shut up!" You know, branches and leaves are
15 fluttering down over us, I get him back then, our sights over. I get him over and the guys
16 are firing, and I'm firing and everything. And we are in a canopy now, area, so, he is
17 screaming for Martin, and I say something inappropriate, like, "I tried to save him. You
18 know, if you're feeling pain, you're alive." Or something like that, you know, "It's
19 okay." And that didn't go well with his friends.

20 KC: Hmm.

21 JA: And right away, I was starting to get criticized, you know, about, I think I
22 was also sick. I was coughing up stuff and I was getting yelled at, "Why are you always
23 sick!" You know, stuff like that. And I said, you know, "Oh, I've got sinus problems."
24 And they were, I realized, they were not happy that that was Randy and not me.

25 KC: Hmm.

26 JA: And so, you just, as you go along, you start to adapt. I was learning that these
27 guys in charge may not be the best leadership.

28 KC: Yeah.

29 JA: So, I was learning that. I was learning that. I was coming to terms with the
30 fact that I'll make it. And finally, one day I got some mail, and I saw a picture of my
31 youngest brother, so he was seven at the time, and he had built a low hurdle in the

1 backyard, and somebody caught him just as he was clearing that low hurdle, a broom
2 hitched over two chairs or something, and I saw that, and I said, "I got to get home. I've
3 got to see this." And so, I made up my mind then that I was going to not give up and that
4 I was going to keep going.

5 KC: Mm-hmm.

6 JA: And then, I started adapting to the violence. I started shutting down. And
7 then the next thing that happened, you come to that line, where if you cross over, you're
8 going into the dark night. You are starting to brood on the excitement now. Many runs
9 would come to that mind, they would turn back and run. They shoot themselves in the
10 palm of their hand. When we finally got to Khe Sanh, the first night that I'm on radio
11 watch, you know, some guy comes to get me, takes me back, hands me the radio in the
12 trench line in Khe Sanh. So, I'm on watch for two hours. So-and-so has a neck, wake him
13 up in two hours. Here's a watch, here's the radio. Okay, so I'm looking out and I'm
14 thinking I'm seeing fire, but what I'm seeing is fireflies. I've never seen fireflies, but
15 every once in a while, the night would kind of light up and so I'm really spooked and I'm
16 really trying to focus, not stare too deep in the area. And then the radio comes on and
17 says something like, "Blah blah blah blah blah blah, sitrep." And I go, "What?" and
18 he goes, "Just say, all secured, negative contact." So, I say, "All secured, negative
19 contact, out." And a little bit later, so I'm watching, and I think, are these people creeping
20 up on me? And then I realized, those are butterflies or something. And then, all of the
21 sudden I hear this, pow! And I look to my right down the trench, and I see a figure
22 running at me. And I jump out of the trench, and I've got my 16 and I'm ready to shoot,
23 and I hear this, "Help! I'm hurt." Sounds like an American. It was another Marine in the
24 bunker down the way, shot himself in the palm with a .45.

25 KC: Hmm.

26 JA: And then later on, when we're still in Khe Sanh, we see the postcard, "I'm in
27 Japan, I'm going to get medical discharge." But it was a self-inflicted wound. I mean,
28 somebody tells me, I got interviewed by this officer, "What happened?" I said, "Well, I
29 was on guard, I was on watch, and a figure ran at me and said he's hurt, and that's all I
30 know." So, he claims he was cleaning his weapon, but the word was, other people said

1 he'd been talking about doing this. And stealing a weapon in the middle of the night, if
2 you get a chance, you're sleeping,

3 KC: Right. So, different people deal with these pressures and things differently,
4 clearly, is what you're saying here.

5 JA: Oh, these young Hollywood types, you know, I mean, been watching movie
6 types. One was claiming he was homosexual, the guy shot himself through the palm of
7 his hand. Oh! I'm in Khe Sanh, and well, I first find a bunker that nobody was using,
8 everybody was kind of crowded in this one big bunker. In the anvil, some Marines
9 before, somebody had built three-tiered, out of wood pallets, a rack, all three walls, it had
10 two bunks or three bunks, they crowded there. Well, I found a bunker a little way away.
11 It was small, it was dank, and nobody was in it. It was empty. So, I claimed it. I put my
12 stuff in there, blah blah blah. And so, I get on watch somewhere and I had to go and
13 guard or patrol or something, and I come back, and there's a pile of shit there. And they
14 ask, "How come you don't play cards with us?" "I don't want to. I got tired and all." "Oh,
15 your mother wears combat boots and drives a beer truck. I'd bet your old lady twenty
16 bucks, so she would get off her back." And I got real tired of that really quick. I didn't
17 like playing cards, I only read paperbacks. And so, I cleaned that mess up and, you know,
18 I had my own place. But the guys that were immediately working around me in my little
19 team of three of us, they liked me. And one of them was a black guy, I can't remember
20 his name. I think his name was Roe. Before we got up to Khe Sanh, on our way, we were
21 in an area called Ca Lu, where we had to guard bladders of fuel oil. And so, we're one
22 day going, and just black guy and I are guarding, and he just jumped me, right? Because,
23 they had, all these Marines, I think they think, "Am I bad? Am I a badass? How will I
24 know?" Well, there's a little guy there that reads books. I'll jump him. But he just jumped
25 me, you know, I about tied him up in a knot, choking him and everything. And then I
26 said, "Okay, I give up." And then I let him go. Well, he was my friend after that, Randy
27 before, he knew that—wait, not Randy. Well, yeah, Randy, he knew that, when I hauled
28 ass, our squad leader back, he knew I could be counted on. And the other guys right
29 around knew I could be counted on, whether I read books or didn't, you know, sitting
30 around dissing each other's moms and girlfriends and blah blah blah, doing that, but they
31 do.

1 KC: Yeah.

2 JA: I didn't like it. I didn't, you know, I liked talking to the corpsmen, they were
3 smart. One of them was a black corpsman, he was really smart. You know, I thought,
4 "Wow, so you went through all of that school? How long was that school?" You know,
5 and he was a Navy corpsman. Wow, I was impressed. So, I was sort of a—and this was in
6 the immediate part of the town, where we were.

7 KC: Mm-hmm.

8 JA: I found another bunker. What was it? We got moved over to the other side,
9 not along the flat line, the back side of Khe Sanh, and we were, I found another bunker
10 where I pretty much had it to myself, and was reading a book—it was Hemingway, *In*
11 *Our Time*, by Hemingway. And this Marine comes in. We had heard that he was getting
12 out, sent home, because he was Jehovah's Witness. He had this big, green block letter
13 USNC on his shoulder, and he popped into this bunker one time, and he said, "Come on,
14 Akins, let's fight." You know, fuck off. Then he batted the book out of my hand, and I
15 knew what he was doing, he's baiting me, and I wasn't going to play that game. I picked
16 it up, kept reading it, and he batted it out of my hand, picked it up, kept reading it and he
17 batted it out of my hand. "Come on, let's fight!" I said, "Tip off," you know. And he
18 came up to me and I said, "Okay, sounds like a good idea." So, he called out to the
19 bunker, and I was walking in front of him. I am not afraid of you, I don't care how big
20 you are, how bad you think you are. So, we walked down to the flight line, not far, and I
21 knew he was going to try to fuck with them, they teach us that. So, I walk in front of him,
22 and we get underneath this bombed out C-130, this hole, and we're under the wing, and it
23 turns out he tries to, you know, I turn around, and he swings, I duck, and I knock him on
24 his back, and I am once again going for this throat, and I want to kill him. You know,
25 he's going home with his big Marine tattoos and his stories about what a hero he is, and
26 I'm only, like, a month or two in, so that rage was coming out. And another guy pulled us
27 off, pulled me off him, and I don't know where he came from, whether they were his
28 back up, or what, or they just happened to be near this area, I don't know. But they pulled
29 me off him, and the next morning I had to talk to the I think he was the commanding
30 officer, and he says, "I don't know what your problem is, Akins. But you're going to

1 CAP (Combined Action Program), and they always get overrun.” “Okay, fine, I’m out of
2 here.” So, I went to Combined Action platoon, which is counterinsurgency.

3 KC: Well, let me interrupt you there, Mr. Akins, just to try to clear some things
4 up.

5 JA: Oh, I’m going on and on.

6 KC: No, that’s perfectly fine. When you arrive in country, you go to Con Thien,
7 but very shortly thereafter you are going on foot to Khe Sanh, is that correct?

8 JA: On the way to Khe Sanh.

9 KC: On the way to Khe Sanh. And how long did it take to get there?

10 JA: I think it took about ninety days. I don’t know, it seemed like I got there,
11 because we were in Khe Sanh, we were just living underground with the rats, and they’re
12 big rats, you know. You can’t spend much time above ground because of stuff and
13 mortars, or rockets. So, I think I was leaving Khe Sanh in the first week of June, when he
14 said you’re going to CAP, and they always get overrun. I was choppered to Phu Bai and
15 it was June 8th, and there was a package from my dad, it had some liquor sealed in a
16 purex bottle, it had some foam on it, and I just turned twenty-one. So, I think it must have
17 taken almost ninety days to get to Khe Sanh.

18 KC: And what was the purpose of you going to Khe Sanh, just to reinforce it? At
19 this time, of course, Khe Sanh is being hit really hard.

20 JA: Right. We were getting—well, before we got there, they were getting up to
21 thirty rounds a day. And I could set my, if I had a watch, I could set my watch by the
22 incoming. I also learned I could identify what was being shot at, whether it was an 82
23 mortar, 122 rocket, 152 artillery rounds. I could tell you what it was while it was in the
24 air and whether it was going long or short or getting close. I got blown up in a bunker on
25 guard with another Marine, a black Marine. I think I beat him when we crawled out of
26 that thing, it was half caved in, I remember he looked grey from all the dust in this thing.
27 And the jeep parked right next to it was on fire, and I said, “We got to get to that
28 command bunker.” We were right outside the command bunker for Khe Sanh, and I think
29 I beat him there. We both popped out at about the same time, timed it, and I was just like,
30 bang, and we were in a foot race.

1 KC: Yeah. Could you tell me what the living conditions were like there at Khe
2 Sanh, being bombarded so heavily during this time? What was it like to live there in this
3 kind of environment? What were the surroundings looking like? You already talked about
4 the trenches and the bunkers and things. Can you give me a description of Khe Sanh
5 while all of this is coming in?

6 JA: So, it was blasted apart. There was garbage and smoking and bombed out
7 bunkers, structures, like little wood, plywood structures. You couldn't stay above ground
8 very long, so you were living like a rat. When you did get outside, like this was, all
9 socked in, and you realized they couldn't see you, it felt really good to just be up and
10 above ground. It looked like a landfill that had been abandoned, or something. It was
11 busted up, camel crates, pallets, it was pretty rough. Pretty grim, you know, like the top
12 of a landfill or something. And it was just, you know, I got garbage details every day
13 when it was our platoon's turn. And finally, a black guy was talking about his girlfriend,
14 Rose. I tried to tell him, "Rose is not going to be there for you when you get back. You
15 know, she's going to be with your brother, your cousins, and other guys." You know, this
16 is in my head, Jody—

17 KC: Jody, of course, right.

18 JA: Yeah, well, he would tell us, "Why are you fucking with my man Akins all
19 the time?" You know, "Why are you giving garbage detail every day?" I don't care, you
20 know. Whatever, I got my brush, you know, just putting my time in, and trying to fix it.
21 So, in 2000 I went back to Vietnam, and I went to Khe Sanh, and when I got there, I just
22 got the chills. I had the hairs standing up on my arms, because it was socked in, but you
23 could still see the bottom of the mountain range. Because Khe Sanh was in the Dakrong
24 Valley. They were calling it Khe Sanh because of the Khe Sanh hill in this valley called
25 Ta Con, T-A C-O-N, two words.

26 KC: Mm-hmm.

27 JA: And someday it would be, like, socked in and you could barely see the thing
28 in front of you, or to your west, or east, and then the hills were kind of close on this part.
29 So, and other times, you watched the jets work out. And when the jets were working out,
30 you could get out above ground and just watch them, because they were right out in front
31 of you. Just run after run, dropping 500 pound or 750 pound bombs. And then, it was

1 kind of like, “Yeah man! Go!” And it was safe, so you could be up outdoors. But it
2 was—and there was, you know, for me, it was, if you went outside the wire, we weren’t
3 going outside the wire anymore because it was right after they had twenty-five Marines
4 had laid outside the wires that were ambushed. There was a lot of controversy over this
5 incident, whether their lieutenant took them beyond where they were supposed to go
6 because he got gungee—

7 KC: Mm-hmm.

8 JA: or whether he was supposed to go there, and they walked into this big L-
9 shaped ambush and twenty-five Marines laid out there for a couple months before things
10 quieted down and it was safe to go out there. Because there was no way you could get
11 into that spot without getting hit. It was too well protected, and you just had to wait until
12 you bombed them out of there, and you could go in and recover them.

13 KC: Yeah. Well, that brings mind to question, with all this taking place, with all
14 this activity, what was the morale like with the Marines there in Khe Sanh?

15 JA: Hmm. That’s—give me a second on that. There was, this putting on timing, I
16 would rather—you know, while I was sitting there, in Khe Sanh, getting shelled, I wasn’t
17 up in 881 North or South, or 568, or 961, I wasn’t up in those hills and I kept reminding
18 myself, well, I’m glad I wasn’t here for the hill fights just before I got in-country.

19 KC: Mm-hmm.

20 JA: Because that was brutal. And I’m like, yeah, we’re sitting here, waiting for
21 the big siege. So, I don’t think the morale, it was just like, it is what it is.

22 KC: Yeah.

23 JA: This is what we’re doing, and this is, you know, this isn’t so bad, it could be
24 worse, I guess.

25 KC: How are you guys being resupplied up there?

26 JA: Um, by truck from Highway 9 by Dong Ha. Or, sometimes by train, and by
27 helicopter.

28 KC: Mm-hmm. And how long would you be at Khe Sanh before you moved out?
29 Or before you went to the CAP, the CAP platoon.

30 JA: Let’s see, you know, I didn’t keep track of time. I never had the calendar
31 going or anything. I only know that I got to Con Thien in late January, early February.

1 And I left Khe Sanh first week in June. So, I would say, I must have been in Khe Sanh
2 seven or eight weeks or something?

3 KC: Oh, okay. Yeah.

4 JA: How long could it, I don't know, it's hard for me to pin down.

5 KC: Sure, sure.

6 JA: Because I didn't care what day it was, I didn't care what tomorrow was, it
7 didn't matter.

8 KC: Mm-hmm.

9 JA: Time wasn't something we measured. Some people did, but when they got
10 shot, they never did. I never did my whole tour because by the time it was time for me to
11 rotate, I was already home. I was home. I was so adapted to getting home, to protecting
12 civilians and getting bad guys, and I was an adrenaline junkie. And I didn't even know,
13 by the time to go home, I was home.

14 KC: Yeah.

15 JA: But by the time I was going home, I was under for murder—investigation for
16 murder.

17 KC: Well —

18 JA: And that happened in uh—

19 KC: Well, Mr. Akins, let's stop there for today because I think that is going to be
20 another topic we want to take on when we have a little bit more time, okay?

21 JA: Sure.

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Interview with John Akins

Session [2] of [2]

Date 8 February 2016

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 John Akins. Today is 8 February 2016. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas
3 Tech University and Mr. Akins is joining me by telephone from his home in Auburn,
4 Washington. Mr. Akins, we left off last time, and we just finished up your time there in
5 Khe Sanh. You described what was going on, kind of the pace of life, what the place
6 looked like, what everyone was going through, the morale, et cetera. And you had
7 mentioned that you were going to be moved to a Combined Action Platoon, a CAP
8 platoon, can you give me, and give the listener of the interview, an idea of what a CAP
9 platoon was, its purpose.

10 John Akins: Well, this was the Marine counterinsurgency effort where you had a
11 squad of Marines working with Vietnamese military or Vietnamese militia or Vietnamese
12 popular force troops.

13 KC: Mm-hmm.

14 JA: So, we would try to combine the warfighting with keeping the bad guys away
15 from villages and hamlets, and at the same time, provide some civic action. Help with
16 digging wells, help with building schools, and in my case, probably one of the major
17 parts of the civic action was relocating a small hamlet of fisher families out of a basically
18 free fire zone, a zone that was pretty much infiltrated by North Vietnamese Army. I
19 believe they were probably gearing up for the summer offensive, because we were getting
20 a lot of action in the spring of '69.

21 KC: Okay. Now, when did you make this move to the CAP platoon?

22 JA: It was about the first week of June in '68.

23 KC: Okay, '68. Now—

24 JA: That's when, you know, the word had come down from full Khe Sanh which
25 was hard to stomach because so many Marines had been killed or maimed in that effort
26 that was getting to reinforce Khe Sanh during and after Tet of '68. And then, all of the
27 sudden, they say, wasn't worth it. Moving on. Fold it up. Blow it up. So, that was kind of
28 a blow to the attitude of my and other's that, you were by then, pretty certain that this was
29 a wasted effort. This whole conflict with, it was a waste. So, morale was kind of low,

1 generally speaking. But there were always those that, you know, the true believers of the
2 ones that are, maybe, not as well educated or as sophisticated, they just go by the book
3 and do their best.

4 KC: And clearly, you are not one of those true believers by this time.

5 JA: No, no, by this—yeah. I realized that it was just a total waste.

6 KC: Mm-hmm.

7 JA: A feudal effort. And then after fighting, or working with Vietnamese, South
8 Vietnamese fighting forces, that realizing and understanding that they weren't committed.
9 They wouldn't fight. They weren't going to put themselves in harm's way. They were
10 going to take advantage of US logistics, you know.

11 KC: Mm-hmm.

12 JA: And survive. So, we could—we understood that feeling. We were frustrated
13 at first that they wouldn't fight, that they were dangerous to take into a fight or into an
14 area where you were likely to get contact. So, in the last team I was with, three of us
15 broke off and operated on our own once we got a couple more Marines, and a corpsman,
16 and we basically operated on our own for six months or more. Without supervision. And
17 we left the locals behind when we went on patrol or threatening an ambush or, you know, if
18 we were doing civic action we include. If they would help us, well, I hate the cliché win
19 their hearts and minds, but they would help us get across our message to the locals that
20 we were trying to keep the NVA and some of the Viet Cong, there were some Viet Cong,
21 we were trying to keep them at bay so they wouldn't interfere with these peoples' lives.
22 And at the same time, we would try to help them with supplies or equipment or, I'm
23 talking about like farming. Or in the cases where fishing, there wasn't much we could do
24 to help them with supplies. But, medication, I mean, we'd get weekly MEDCAPs
25 (Medical Civil Action Program), we tried to do that weekly or as often as we could, and
26 as often we could spare medical supplies, then we would hold what we called a
27 MEDCAP, where we would go into a hamlet or small local Vietnamese farmers or in the
28 latter team, fisher family, and treat their injured as best we could.

29 KC: Well, let's go back to the, I guess the structure of these CAP platoons. How
30 would the Marines and Vietnamese work together? And what sort of things, and you
31 talked about what sort of projects you would work on, but are we talking about training,

1 we're talking about military missions? Explain to me the interpersonal dynamic and how
2 it worked with this small group of Marines. Because we're talking four, five Marines.
3 Maybe more, maybe less, from time to time—

4 JA: Living in these—

5 KC: living in these villages.

6 JA: Yeah. If you have five or six in a little compound, you were considered a
7 squad.

8 KC: Mm-hmm.

9 JA: A squad is what, ten or twelve, with a sergeant, or something? But actually, it
10 was maybe five or six at the most Marines and probably all eighteen, nineteen, and
11 twenty. I turned twenty-one over there. So, young and not full complement, but you
12 would set up a little compound. So, you would have some bunkers dug in, and you would
13 have a barbed wire perimeter fence, and maybe you had some wire or some apron wire
14 out there in front of your perimeter and around each side, if you were, you know, not
15 backed up into the mountain or something. So, you had a little perimeter with a few
16 bunkers, and then you had five or six Marines. And usually, you would have five or so
17 Vietnamese and they would have bunkers as well. And some of them, they were coming
18 and going, and some of them were staying in the local villages, and others were spending
19 most of their time at the comp, at the little compound. And so, you had an area of
20 operation around this compound where you patrolled, set up ambushes, and you just took
21 the local fighters with you. And showed them how to do it. And you would train them,
22 per say, and you helped them work on their English, and they helped us work on our
23 Vietnamese.

24 KC: Mm-hmm.

25 JA: So, that was training. The other part of it was on the job. It was exactly how
26 you learned to become a savvy warfighter, it's on the job. It isn't back in campus when
27 you're in MCRD in San Diego.

28 KC: Mm-hmm.

29 JA: We'd go with them on the job.

30 KC: And who were these people that you had been working with, these men who
31 you had been working with in the platoon?

1 JA: The locals were almost teenage, most of them were a little older, into their
2 forties. And they were equipped with nylon rucksacks, instead of canvas. We had M-16s,
3 they had the same equipment, basically, as we did. And they were just like one of us, but
4 they were Vietnamese, and we were American.

5 KC: Mm-hmm.

6 JA: So, we had a complement of corps of ten or twelve, or less, Vietnamese
7 stationed at our compound. And when there was Tet, they were gone, because that's their
8 only holiday, and they'd go with family. But during regular part of the year, it was pretty
9 much assigned to your compound and lived there with you.

10 KC: Mm-hmm. Now, were you, or I should ask you this—how was it decided
11 that a village would want, would need, a CAP platoon with them? Are the village leaders
12 going to the Marine Corps and saying, "Hey, we would like to have you guys here to help
13 protect us." Is the Corps saying, "Hey!" Or is it provincial advisors doing this, or how did
14 that work?

15 JA: Well, initially, I mean in the first two teams I was with, was probably the
16 regular United States people working with local village chiefs and our bureaucracy to
17 have, I guess, maybe these agreements. So, that was already in place when you got pulled
18 out of infantry and sent to the CAP and sent into that program.

19 KC: Mm-hmm.

20 JA: You got a week of orientation, a few days of orientation. And then were sent
21 to a team. So, they were in place. Now last thing, we actually were the bureaucrats, I
22 guess. We'd post this one hamlet that was not far from the team that we were assigned to,
23 which was CAP 117. And the three of us decided to break off, we just didn't go back
24 after day-long patrol. But the next day, we went down to the nearest hamlet that we had
25 come through before we swung north, and found it, but it didn't look like a good place
26 for a CAP. We went back to that nearest hamlet and talked to the village chief and said,
27 we put him on the map, we're going to set up here and we will try to work with your
28 local militia or your local popular force troops, and you can, we will work with them.
29 And the village chief sent a day or two later a crew carrying, and we had got over barbed
30 wire and stakes and those empty sandbags, and stuff like that. And his crew came up and
31 helped us build a compound, we just worked together side-by-side with them.

1 KC: Mm-hmm.

2 JA: And that was great. Working with these guys that ranged from twenty to
3 sixty, just getting to know them and eating with them. So, we worked so great with them
4 and said, “No, you don’t have to fill the filter apart like it’s a pump. You just light the
5 other end.”

6 KC: (Laughter)

7 JA: They liked that, we liked filtered, they liked menthol cigarettes, so that too.
8 Stuff like that. So, we just worked together, side-by-side, got it together and in no time, it
9 was a few days, we had a nice little compound. We had one strand of barbed wire and
10 stakes around it—three strands. I think later we might have put a little, that little, tall
11 apron wires out in front of the three wires fence around our little compound. And we had
12 about, one two three, maybe six bunkers, three for us, three for them. And it was a small
13 little compound, so it didn’t have a big, like you look at, the sunken covered picnic area.
14 That was the first CAP I was with had that, that was kind of like where the locals, or the
15 popular force or the Vietnamese militia types, would string their hammocks and hang out.
16 And during the day, and during the night they were in the bunker or on watch or on patrol
17 for an ambush. But our little, our last team, 116, we didn’t have that much. We had a
18 little high ground and a small compound, and we had the river on one side, and the jungle
19 front and back, and the ocean on the east side.

20 KC: So, you’re chosen for this mission. You didn’t have any facility in the
21 Vietnamese language, at the time. I assume that you went to a language course, probably
22 in Da Nang, is that correct?

23 JA: I did. Which turned out to be fortunate because I was on the truck at, near the
24 Chu Lai air strip, waiting for a driver to take three of us from CAP 111 to the chopper
25 pad to go to the new CAP 114. So, we’re sitting on the truck, in the back of the truck
26 waiting for a driver to take us to the chopper pad, and there’s a local marine there, this is
27 in a rural area. We had pet monkeys that were entertaining us. They would sit on your
28 shoulder and leaf through your hair, and find little things to eat, and it felt really good. a
29 little massage. And all of the sudden, another Marine clerk came out, and said, “Akins,
30 get off the truck. You’ve got orders for language school in Da Nang.” And it was a thirty-
31 day intensive, ten hours a day, six days a week school, and if you fail one daily quiz you

1 were booted out and sent back to the base. Well, I had been trying to learn Vietnamese
2 once I got around them and once, I got into the CAP program, because I figured it was
3 one thing positive that I could get out of this experience.

4 KC: Mm-hmm.

5 JA: Because it was for my good. And I maybe mentioned, I found out, when I
6 was leaving Travis Air Force Base, or the other one there in the Bay Area, California,
7 that I had had orders for government defense, three months to one-year language school,
8 in Monterrey. But that didn't happen, instead I was just on my way, this is during Tet. Tet
9 had erupted, and two or three weeks later they needed us in infantry and got transferred.

10 KC: Sure.

11 JA: And I worked on getting better at Vietnamese all the while that I was in CAP
12 program.

13 KC: The first platoon that you belonged to, as I recall, is 111. Where was this one
14 located? What village are you in, or nearby?

15 JA: This is a funny thing about our tour in the main part, you are moving around,
16 and you don't know where you are. But we were in Quang, what was called Quang Nam,
17 Quang Ngai province—

18 KC: Mm-hmm.

19 JA: which is now part of Quang Ngai. So, Quang Ngai and Quang Nam were
20 separate little provinces not far from highway 1, maybe west of Highway 1. And, out of
21 Da Nang, about seventy or eighty clicks, near an area called Chu Lai, which basically,
22 Chu Lai is now maybe just a Vietnamese air strip. But Chu Lai was headquarters for all
23 the series of CAPs that were designated by one-one-whatever.

24 KC: Mm-hmm.

25 JA: So, its first combined action group headquartered in Chu Lai was maybe
26 thirty, I don't think it was thirty, maybe thirty minutes, maybe forty-five minutes south of
27 Tan Ky, which is where the Army MAC (Military Assistance Command) compound was,
28 and they had a little air strip and spot there. So, Quang Ngai province, now called Quang
29 Nam, is. And between Chu Lai, near Chu Lai, south of Da Nang. South of Hoi An, which
30 is a port city back in the 1700s, probably the busiest port city, one of the most busy, in the
31 world, was Hoi An until the rivers tilted in. That was maybe forty clicks north, and Hoi

1 An is about an hour south by Da Nang. And then we moved, I moved, one month before
2 we got overrun, everybody was killed or wounded when I was at language school. So,
3 one month I'm just about finished. So, the next CAP was 117, which was due east of Tam
4 Ky, which is a little frontier boom town on Highway 1 between Hoi An and Chu Lai. So,
5 Tam Ky was in also Quang Nai province, which is now Quang Nam province.

6 KC: Okay. Now, you talked about the civic action types of things, as well as the
7 MEDCAPs that you would be involved with from time to time. What about the military
8 mission? Can you tell me how you tried to achieve the military mission of the CAP?

9 JA: Yeah, it was real simple. We were given a—get rid of NVA and Viet Cong.
10 So, we were like, *Friday Night Lights* every day or every afternoon, or you know, it was
11 a lot of NVA and Viet Cong right north of our paws, and we were 116. Where, the river,
12 it did split into all these delta waterways, you know, this whole area is just, it's got—if
13 you look at a map, it's got fingers of inlets and little islands and sandbars and stuff.

14 KC: Mm-hmm.

15 JA: So, what we found west of 117 and north of Ky Phu hill, Ky Phu hill was our
16 jumping off spot, when we crossed the river from 117 and went west toward the ocean
17 across this river that is split into many little deltas and rivulets and stuff. We were now in
18 a hot area. We were the only position in that area and so, we could get into a fire fight
19 just about anytime we left the wire day or night. For several months it was like that. Now,
20 there were times where it was slow, there were times when we were recouping, I guess.
21 And I mean, I remember sitting around, it had been a few days since we had gotten
22 contact. And I said to everybody, "Hey, you know, it's been a few days since we had
23 gotten contact, it's time to get some. Let's go out tonight, let's leave early in the morning
24 and go north." And we would most likely get into an ambush or fire fight.

25 KC: Now, for these things, did you set up ambushes on a particular trail like
26 typical? Or were you walking around looking for things, looking for intelligence, or were
27 you just waiting for the ambush? What are you doing there with them?

28 JA: There was all kinds of, let's see—the planning part was when we decided our
29 mission for a while was going to be relocate this little hamlet that hot area up north.
30 Okay, so that took a lot of planning and stuff. We made recurring visits in the area. We
31 found a local, we told him as quick as we could, you know who we are, you've probably

1 heard us in the night getting ambushed or something. We're down at this position, there's
2 a hamlet south of us with vacated homes and bunkers and everything, and we're offering
3 you the opportunity to move south with us and move to a safe area south of our position.
4 And then we'd have to get out of there because we would get in fights.

5 KC: Mm-hmm.

6 JA: So, usually, typically, it was through all this combat stuff I had designed and
7 zoned up for me and pick up my 16 that was already in my pocket, and we were ready to
8 go. And if we went out in the daytime, or anytime we went out we were looking for a
9 fight because we had adapted to this job which was pretty exciting. And especially when
10 you're getting surrounded and you've got to run for it. Or if you're up invited to fly with
11 a fighter pilot, and you have to be back in Tan Ky on Highway 1 and some Air Force guy
12 comes up to you, and he's at that MAC-V (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam)
13 compound. And he says, "Hey! Are you those guys that are way out there doing those
14 things?" And I say, "Yeah, that's us." I got out my map, showed him here's our
15 committee, and he said, "Yeah, I noticed you guys were getting a lot of contact up there.
16 Would you like to fly with me?" And so, then the next morning, I went up with him.
17 Well, that was pretty exciting, to see him bomb down from up here for all of I Corps.
18 That was maybe typical, that just got, it went into the headquarters record book. That
19 didn't make the E6s and E7s and E5s happy and all that. We were doing stuff like this,
20 this is stuff officers do, not a bunch of lance corporals and PFCs (Private First Class).

21 KC: Well, let me ask you about that. You say that you guys just came back, I
22 guess you were 117, and decided you just weren't going to go back because you liked
23 this other area better.

24 JA: We didn't go back that one afternoon, we just stayed, three of us stayed.

25 KC: So, three of you stayed, you just said we're going to set one up here. Who
26 did you tell, "Hey, we're setting one up here. We need some supplies, we need some
27 wire, we need some additional guys." How did that work?

28 JA: Well, we just told the other Marines who had been at 117 longer than two of
29 us, and then maybe—I think maybe the third guy hadn't been there all that long. We had
30 already figured out that this, 117, was lame. They were just sitting in biding their time
31 and we did nearly get overrun one afternoon.

1 KC: Hmm.

2 JA: And, you know, I had been assigned there and I had just been down in the
3 jungle. You could harvest trees there. And my other guy, my other new guy, must have
4 become my main partner, he was on an AM-16, and basically, we were the only two who
5 had been returning fire. And so, when we saw how this new team was doing, we weren't
6 at 117 all that long. But when we found out they were upgrading, and we went on that
7 patrol one day, leaving behind, basically, the squad leader and the assist at 117, and so
8 half of us, at 117, or a few of us, with a bunch of local militia, went up north and found
9 this high ground and looked around and I just made the comment that this would be a
10 good place for a position, and my buddy Bart, the new guy, goes, "Yeah, why don't we
11 stay?" And the third guy goes, "Hey, yeah." And so, we told the ones that were going
12 back when it was time to go back, we're not going back. And they're going, "You're
13 fucking crazy!"

14 KC: Hmm.

15 JA: You have a radio with the locals, give us your radio and whatever grenades
16 you have and anything extra you've got, and we'll be fine. And so, they gave us the
17 radio, because the locals had a couple of radios. And they went on back to 117, and we
18 stayed. And then, what we would do was, we would radio in sitreps, situation reports, to
19 headquarters in Chu Lai. And we were checking in, we had stuff to tell them. It was this
20 many kills, this many captures, you know, when we captured twelve NVA. We found
21 some maps on NVA, who we're dealing with, we're dealing with NVA, we did get two
22 Viet Cong, we got one AK-47, so we would just give them situation reports. The only
23 time we would contact the rear was when filled them in on what we accomplished and
24 when we needed supplies.

25 KC: Mm-hmm.

26 JA: And so, it was all done by radio. Later on, they got tired of us being out there
27 on our own and doing this and doing that and having Army people contact us and setting
28 up a little operation for them, "Oh, you're going to go up this side of the river, and you're
29 looking up there? Well, here's where we are, here's where we operate up the river from
30 where we're going, so, we'll form a blocking force if you're going up the river to go near
31 the river, and if you find something, we'll be here. Here's our call sign." And then we

1 would move up. You know, I mean, I ended up in some tent near MAC-V, showing on a
2 big wall map, showing these guys where we were, and where we hit contact. “Oh, you’re
3 going up here? Okay, well, you might get some contact because you’re opposite of where
4 we’re hitting contact.” And then we would plan a little joint operation with the Army. We
5 had a split post, where we would take them, we would patrol at the split post a couple up
6 the coast and split post. One day they wanted, some of us who wanted to go on land
7 because of what we were doing, we took up a little road, got sniped at, and went back,
8 and they were saying, “You’re fucking crazy, you guys. You’re out here by yourself?”
9 And so, I don’t know where the animosity came from between our headquarters, this
10 level, the staff, and us. They were just reading our report and monitoring our radio calls.
11 Of course, we would be calling in and firing. We would be calling in chess, I had the call
12 sign for the Missouri, so if we got a sign there, we would call them. Because if they were
13 a little off, that was bad, and that’s a huge artillery peak.

14 KC: Mm-hmm.

15 JA: Maybe the Air Force guy (inaudible) that bomb thing, definitely. I mean, I
16 would call that one in and the Air Force guy, that fighter pilot, called me the day after and
17 talked about what we did. I mean, we saw the secondary explosion and it was pretty
18 exciting sitting right over a target and planes coming in, and basically right in front of
19 you, it seemed like, maybe forty meters in front of you. And the cloud of smoke, with the
20 pilot over it, just saying, “Hey, do you see where those jets are?” And zoom! “Oh, yeah.
21 There they are!” You know, right in front of us, and secondary explosions are going off.
22 He’s talking to me on the headset from up in the plane, McJagger, and he’s coming
23 straight down. So, that’s exciting.

24 KC: Yeah.

25 JA: He taught me how to fly the plane on the way back—on the way to and from,
26 he let me fly. He gave me flying lessons.

27 KC: That’s pretty cool.

28 JA: Yeah. He gave me his jumpsuit, too. He told me, “Take the wings off if we
29 get captured on the way.”

30 KC: Right, right.

1 JA: We were all in infantry. Up north, all around Khe Sanh, and then we just
2 adapted to—we already adapted to the violence, we already figured out this was a lost
3 cause. We’d already figured out that fucked up supervision is dangerous. And so, we just
4 melted into a really efficient team. Where nobody was in charge, they set somebody up to
5 be in charge, it was a guy from 111, we were friends with him, but he didn’t fit. He had
6 gone career. He had gone lifer. He had started telling us what to do, and not like, “Hey
7 man, stop.” And he was messing up our program, so I asked the chief for him to leave,
8 and they moved him.

9 KC: Hmm. And the chief could do that then?

10 JA: The chief? Yes. The Vietnamese had more power than anybody, I guess. I
11 mean, you know.

12 KC: Yeah. It’s their village, it’s their people, so they stand reason. You’re there to
13 assist, of course.

14 JA: Yeah. So, I figured after that, it was all calm. So, basically, four or five of us
15 were there for a while were getting our PhD in rule of warfare, and then, dealing with the
16 system, or actually, avoiding the system. Avoiding the chain of command.

17 KC: Mm-hmm.

18 JA: Avoiding the, you know, the stateside military thing that often was present in
19 your areas in the Vietnam combat zone. And then, so, for every 1 warfighter, that is
20 actually in the shit, there are seven to nine in a nice, rear area where they’re coddled,
21 except for the backstabbing, and the lording over rank and you know, stuff like awards.
22 They were probably nineteen and did two tours, or three, because the further and the
23 bigger—the further someone fights, and the bigger ones they face, the more (inaudible),
24 for my information.

25 KC: Mm-hmm.

26 JA: They’re just strutting and walking around back there.

27 KC: Yeah.

28 JA: It was corrupt. It was contact. That’s pretty exciting. Escaping death, you
29 know, having jets work out over you, having Cobra gunships fire for you. Having Huey
30 gunships helping everybody out. Army artillery helping Marines from miles away.

1 KC: Now you have written about this somewhat extensively, and I guess what we
2 could probably call your memoir.

3 JA: Right.

4 KC: *NAM AU GO GO*; I believe is the title of it.

5 JA: *NAM AU GO GO, Falling for the Vietnamese Goddess of War*.

6 KC: There you go, thank you for that. Can you talk to me about the process by
7 which, at least according to you in the memoir that you've written, you kind of transform,
8 I guess is the way to say it, from being a line soldier to someone who's working in
9 counterinsurgency, who's working in the CAP platoon, who's living, eating, breathing
10 with the Vietnamese you're working with. It seems to me, and I hope you'll be able to
11 speak to me with this, a different kind of sense of mission or purpose of why you're there
12 and operating out on your own as it develops, it seems like it fit you and it fit the others
13 with you. Can you talk about that a little bit? Kind of explain what I'm trying to get at
14 here.

15 JA: Yeah. The whole warfighting experience is going from so-called trained
16 warfighter stateside into combat it was an incremental process you go through. First you
17 have to shut down emotionally, and in that process, you also adapting to violence. You're
18 also coming to terms with the fact that it's a waste. A total waste. And so, then you come
19 to that line where you're either going to shoot yourself in the palm with a .45 to get out of
20 it, or you step over, and I call it going into the dark end, and you start to improve on the
21 excitement and the challenge of the fighting, escaping death. And then the teamwork that
22 evolves out of that where you have now kind of, the atom bomb, until you go rogue.
23 Rogues are the ones that go out and murder. Going native. Well, some of us might have
24 gone native, all I figured was, adapt to our situation and fate, which was most of us didn't
25 believe we were going to make it. You know, it was dangerous. And you stop thinking
26 about home, and the less mail you receive and the less time you go into rear areas, the
27 better and the more thoroughly you adapt to being a survivor warfighter with a little shred
28 of compassion to give to protect the innocent and not just shoot into the open at anything
29 that moves if you're bogged down.

30 KC: Mm-hmm.

1 JA: We didn't shoot at pigs. We didn't shoot at chickens, you know. The South
2 Vietnamese would shoot at a parrot. "Oh, free bird! I want to get a bird." You know, and
3 they would do it when you weren't looking, and the muzzle would be right over your
4 shoulder, and they'd fire. They were—they almost, I had said we, we had shut down
5 emotionally but there was still that flicker of compassion. The way we felt when we
6 heard what happened in My Lai, which is not that far from Chu Lai, was this, we wished
7 we had been there to help Hugh Thompson and those gunners about that.

8 KC: Hmm.

9 JA: Because we would've gone down dying and killing, we would've been
10 murderers. So anyways, because you just don't do that.

11 KC: Mm-hmm.

12 JA: Atrocity was just not part of gung-ho shit. Now, 111 had a gallon jar of
13 (inaudible).

14 KC: Hmm.

15 JA: He also punched me on the side of the head one night when I thought we
16 were getting a PRC-25 radio off my shoulder. So, my elbow was pinned into my side,
17 and that was terrible. But it almost knocked me out. I was standing and seeing tweedy
18 birds and swaying left and right.

19 KC: Yeah.

20 JA: So, it was just me and not my team, so when we got that radio call and
21 everybody was gone, that, you know, and he was gone in the morning. You can't do that.
22 That's a death warrant.

23 KC: Mm-hmm.

24 JA: And so, I was going out. I was transferred to 117, and then there's 114. And
25 then it just happened. And then some seven of us had operated on our own, and I said, oh,
26 we didn't have the chain of command. We didn't have the squad leader. We just stayed
27 connected through radio reports and requests for resupply and medivacs. And the slip
28 posts were a part of our team. They—the only time we saw slip post was when we were
29 out. And they would take one or two of us into the forest for the night where we could
30 eat, and sleep on mattresses, and sleep without the nervousness.

31 KC: Hmm.

1 JA: So, I don't know if I answered your question, I might have gone on a tangent.
2 But the process is incremental, and when you end up with three or four guys, because
3 people would hear about 116 and they were grungy, saying, "Oh, we don't want to go out
4 there." We would talk to them and take them on, and trial by fire, we would walk up the
5 beach and see how they reacted, and sometimes they didn't see the huge sniper rounds
6 and get down to get some guys from there.

7 KC: Mm-hmm.

8 JA: Some of them that got into a firefight, that was it for them. They got
9 themselves out from that corner and got themselves out from getting killed. "This is too
10 dangerous!" Well, we adapted. We really started to believe that we had to get back in and
11 we had to, some risks, to talk to a hamlet that was in a fire zone that was infiltrated with
12 NVA and Viet Cong. Maybe we didn't use the same labor, maybe—whatever. I'm happy
13 if they're winning in their camp, you know, doing their bidding, and we were up there
14 fighting and rounds were flying, and they're in the middle of it.

15 KC: Mm-hmm.

16 JA: I mean, if you aren't selfish, you then placed the lack of contact, and if you
17 hear a pop, you light it up. You fired away. And then you have to get out of there, and
18 then you get the type that you wanted.

19 KC: Yeah.

20 JA: You don't know if that pop was a civilian or an NVA or a Viet Cong.

21 KC: Mm-hmm.

22 JA: But it's all action and reaction. You'd get a sixth sense. I could almost
23 predict that we were going to get hit. And including one night, I called it. They were right
24 on ahead, I stopped the patrol, we were going, just us Marines going to the beach, and I
25 already had seen this area at daytime, and I came up and saw the tree line curved out, and
26 I said, hey let's check this out. So, everybody fell back thirty meters, and we had a go-
27 around, and I was going to stay up ahead, and it was a really small target, you know,
28 maybe five or six. And the others were thirty meters back and ready for action. As soon
29 as I had gone near that part of the land on the beach that curved out, where the tree line
30 that curved out, they lit it up and we were in a fight.

31 KC: Mm-hmm.

1 JA: And, I think, the best part of the adaption was from experience. From
2 experience your brain rewired and you're good. I think your circuitry in your head was
3 going to adapt in your prefrontal cortex would say, it was lit. It's coming, get ready. So, I
4 think that was unusual. Maybe not so unusual when you break off and operate on your
5 own. I think it's unusual is that adaptation, and yet, keep enough—your emotional radar
6 is sweeping a blank screen. When your friend gets killed, you don't think about it longer
7 than five seconds. It's better him than me. And the brainchild to the wire for several that
8 are dead or tore up from Viet Cong mortars, sending a message that these Marines can't
9 protect you, so you better suck it up. If you don't, this is what happens. So, this is what
10 you're dealing with. This is what you're trying to figure out what to do, and if you and
11 your peas in a pod, four or five guys in a decent pod, could be very effective and maybe
12 somebody should have come out and run a psychological test on us. Because I'm sure I
13 went a little bit wacky. It was risk taking, you know. Going a whole night hearing AK-
14 47s by both sides of the Vietnamese, shot at you from, I mean, there is the beach.
15 Looking at you when you're spitting on a (inaudible), then you become a firm believer in
16 luck.

17 KC: Mm-hmm.

18 JA: That's the AK-47s, you know. But thirty rounds, all thirty, we picked up
19 thirty rounds while I was wandering around bumping into trees with my eyes bugged out
20 from—I don't remember that part.

21 KC: Yeah. Well—

22 JA: I think—

23 KC: Did you stay here at 116 until the end of your tour, the thirteen months?

24 JA: Yes.

25 KC: Mm-hmm.

26 JA: And I was quite surprised when they talked about when it was time to rotate.

27 KC: Tell me about that.

28 JA: Well, I was just, like, kept it calm about home. I was home. We had the
29 ocean for our recreation, somebody got to the rear where there were opium trees, and
30 they didn't starve about it. You could have our six pack or comparable high baller tube
31 with an opium chewed joint, or a nearly dead CRP-25 radio battery, nobody threw a tiny,

1 pocket sized transistor radio to get on foot of the radio and get some marks in the
2 bandeau and showed each other how to move, our dances and just having a good time.
3 And breaking into a case of rations and getting chocolate, and the little things that came
4 into it, and the peaches and poundcake. That was our break, that and swimming in the
5 South China Sea.

6 KC: Mm-hmm.

7 JA: But I remember telling my new partner Barry, one day on the beach,
8 relaxing, that I'm not coldblooded and I'm into this shit.

9 KC: Hmm.

10 JA: And he—yeah. We're just living on the excitement. And maybe the thing that
11 kept us a little bit sane, because in Tan Ky, that's a combat, but the challenging part, I
12 think, was trying to protect the civilians.

13 KC: Mm-hmm.

14 JA: That was the hard part, because you moved forty or sixty people with three
15 generations, or something, down the beach to relocate out of that hot area. Any time we
16 were up there, we weren't the only ones in danger, the civilians were in danger, and so
17 you need to be clam and keep it together.

18 KC: Eventually this, like you say, your kind of grooving on the excitement here,
19 well it's time for the excitement to end. What were your thoughts about leaving?

20 JA: I was not at all deliberating leaving Vietnam when I finally got on that plane
21 in Da Nang, I was very worried because I knew that I had five months and twenty days
22 left, my CO (Command Officer), trying to get me to re-up and I said, "Well, can I go to
23 jump school?" And he said, "No. jump school is three months, you have five months and
24 twenty days left and you won't get back." And then on the plane, I just could not feel any
25 sense of relief or celebration because I knew that in five months and twenty days, I would
26 be training troops to go over there.

27 KC: Mm-hmm.

28 JA: And that I could not do that. That I would be training them in Mexico and
29 Canada because it wasn't worth it, yeah. And so, I was kind of in a hump emotionally, it
30 took a lot of me because of that. I just could not—I was very worried about that I would
31 end up on a strip and making up that time.

1 KC: Yeah.

2 JA: Back in the brink making up that time. Because I was not training troops for
3 that. But I got an early out.

4 KC: How did you end up with an early out?

5 JA: Well, some of them, when you have had been in combat for a year or so, that
6 qualified for release from active duty, REFRAD. I did not know this. I did not know how
7 this worked, you came war side and then back home. But, on the bus, Del Toro, to
8 Treasure Island Naval Base, I sat next to this Chinese American who had been tabled for
9 some long, and he could tell right away that I was edgy. He saw the platoons all around
10 me that we saw going into Treasure Island Naval Base. And he took me into his wing and
11 said, "Look, this will help you make usual formations." First of all, I walked in and asked
12 the clerk where we check in, "What formations do we have to be at?" He got the whole
13 way out for that week. He took me under his wing, and said, "One, you're eligible for
14 early out. So, when we go to processing, I'm going to go with you and I'm going to make
15 sure your papers go in the right pile." And then he also said, "My brother is in some other
16 platoon and has his birthday, so first time we get leave we're going there. We can get
17 leave only officers get leave, so you come with me into the BX (Base Exchange), I'm
18 going to buy some Captain Clark. You stand over there with me and don't say anything."
19 This is a guy who had MPs (Military Police) following him everywhere. I went, you
20 know, it was hard to follow, and we listened and left. I said, oh okay, two MPs following
21 me everywhere I went those first few days I went.

22 KC: Hmm.

23 JA: Anyway, we go to the BX, and he goes over to the peacock stuff, and he gets
24 dual pack of the Captain Clark and a couple other things, and walked up to the checkout
25 man, or clerk, and he puts them on the table, and I'm standing right there, and he just rang
26 them up and gave it to him. He got out the peta, he pinned it on his jacket, and we walked
27 off to Treasure Island. So, I told him, you know, "I'm going to hit on some of these
28 chicks." And he said, "Yeah, right." Well, I did. I tried. And it was like oh, hey, how are
29 you doing, what's your major? And I thought, well, what am I going to say? Well,
30 anything, because I sure didn't want anyone to know where I've been and what I've been

1 doing. And even to this day, I'm not comfortable with people knowing what I'm doing or
2 what I'm thinking. I'm still kind of, like, preferring the shadows.

3 KC: Hmm.

4 JA: Unfortunately.

5 KC: Yeah. Well, you get this early out, when do you officially separate from the
6 Marine Corps?

7 JA: The release was in late April, early May '69. But the official six-year
8 commitment was up July 7, 1974, I think?

9 KC: Mm-hmm, because of the inactive status or whatever it would have been.

10 JA: Yeah, I was on inactive status.

11 KC: Mm-hmm.

12 JA: But not ready reserve.

13 KC: Yeah.

14 JA: So, yeah.

15 KC: Once you finish your time with the Marine Corps, on active duty, obviously,
16 what's next for you? What did you want to do? Did you have a career in mind, education
17 in mind? Did you want to go back to school? What was next for you?

18 JA: I just couldn't figure it out at all. I knew I had to get out of my parents'
19 home. But it was so bizarre to go from the bush to actually being on University Ave. at
20 the University of Washington where they bombed out the administration building where I
21 would have gone to sign up to re-admit to the University of Washington to take up what I
22 left off.

23 KC: Mm-hmm.

24 JA: That was just too weird. So, what—I didn't know what to do. I didn't know
25 what I should do. I even asked my dad what should I do, you know. I mean I never had
26 real close, kind of, relationship with my father. But he was Scotch Irish, you know. I
27 didn't know—I was so weird, I even, I mean, I sat down in front of the register, a little
28 heat register, in my parents' living room, opposite the front door like I'd done growing
29 up, all four kids, and later five, at least to one or two registers in the morning to get some
30 heat in the house, and I sat there and I realized that if I had to survive another day, I could
31 line up my whole family and kill them. And I, I have to start over. Well, I didn't know

1 how to start over. I didn't know where to go. Should I go to Greeley, Colorado and go to
2 school there? Because I had, one time looked at a map somewhere somehow and thought,
3 maybe if I make it home out of Vietnam, I'll go to Greeley, Colorado, a little college
4 town. I didn't know what to do. I sent a telegram to Bruce Barr in Brooklyn and said I'm
5 on this flight. And when I got off the flight, he was there. So, I spent a couple weeks
6 there, and we went to the United Nations building, and I went to Gettysburg by myself.
7 He got a job, and the plan was we were going to buy a motorcycle and go up to Canada
8 and head west back to Seattle. Because he had spent time in Seattle before he got
9 inducted. So, anyway, turns out we would've had to wait six months to get licenses on
10 motorcycles, so I remember going one day in Gettysburg and sitting amongst them in this
11 feeling, like, I could commune with them. I felt like, I know what you went through. You
12 went through a civil war, and I knew what you went through, but yours was honorable
13 and mine was not. I felt you know, guilt and shame. Even guilt of surviving. I thought I
14 would have been better if I had been killed over there. It would have just been better.
15 This is how I felt. So, I was trying to find my way. I came back, I flew back to Seattle, I
16 visited a gal who I had met before going into bootcamp in Philadelphia. She was still
17 living at home. I was too anxious. I wasn't going to wait for her to move out and get
18 together, so I just came home and said I will go to work. I worked, you know, from 12,
19 13. My first job was at 16. And so, I knew I could work construction, so I started working
20 construction. And I thought about, I didn't know what to do. So, I was answering an ad I
21 had seen and clipped it out and kept it in my wallet. I had seen it in *Sydney Times*, or
22 *Sydney Australia Journal* or something. And it was from that Colonel Michael Pear, who
23 was known as Mad Mike, who was an RAF, Royal Air Force former soldier that had
24 never been in combat, but he was running around in Rhodesia as a mercenary and trying
25 to use a good con artist or something. So anyway, he had been contacted by the US
26 government to get a mercenary force to go fight for the government in Cambodia. So, I
27 was just going to sign up for that.

28 KC: Well, yeah. Kind of get back to where you were in a sense.

29 JA: And what I was good at. And what I knew, and I said at least I'll make some
30 money at it, right. And then I contacted him, and he said okay, fly to Miami and speak to
31 so-and-so. And then we'll go from there, blah-blah-blah. And then I thought, who am I

1 going to be with? Guys that had been reading the backs of soldier fortune magazines,
2 guys that are rejects from the military, guys that are, yeah, who don't know anything? I'm
3 not going to have my team.

4 KC: Mm-hmm.

5 JA: And if I'm not going to have my team, I'm not going to do this. So, that's a
6 good thing or I probably wouldn't be standing here talking to you. So, instead, I start
7 working construction again and then I did go back to the University of Washington for
8 the sole purpose to stick it to Uncle Sam. I was going to get the GI bill. And so, I did that.
9 Well, I went and signed up at some temporary place in the administration building had
10 been bombed out. I wasn't really sure about coming back, and people running around
11 blowing things up. But I signed up, I had to pick history. I remember my eighth-grade
12 history teacher had said you can't get the GI bill unless you pick a major, so I picked
13 history. On the back of the UW, University of Washington, Seattle. And just so I could
14 get the Gi bill, and maybe I'll figure it out and it'll be co-ed, and maybe it'll give me time
15 to figure out what to do. And so, I'm back on campus and the GI bill was \$130 a month,
16 period. That was supposed to cover your costs, your educational cost to attend a four-year
17 university. So that means your room, your board, your books, your fees, your registration,
18 tuition, everything. And I thought, wow, that's not going to cut it. So, I would go to
19 school two quarters and work construction two quarters in order to have enough saved up
20 to go to school and not have to work. Because I wanted to play rugby, not work. So, I
21 managed to squeeze a four-year degree into eight years, I guess.

22 KC: (Laughter)

23 JA: Counting my first year-and-a-half before I lost my student deferment.

24 KC: And you wind up with your degree, what's the next step for you?

25 JA: Well, I had a teaching certificate, and this was 1974, and that's when they
26 had that oil embargo in '73, and so that's when they had the sign, the big billboard on I-5,
27 the main freeway between Coleman and Seattle. Last one to leave Seattle, please turn out
28 the lights. Some Boeing engineer or some graphic artist came up with that. So, we were
29 in a recession, our first recession. They were laying off teachers. So, I couldn't get a job
30 teaching. My student teaching, and I just began a long to-do list of jobs and careers that
31 ended in 2000. Or '99, so I think I worked construction, I did odd stuff, bartending, then I

1 worked at a flood irrigator in the Little Belt mountains in Montana on big cattle grazing
2 operation, and then I worked on green change that mill in Montana. I wanted to get
3 established in Montana, before I was born, I liked Montana. They had the rugby team, the
4 Old Boy rugby team, and I could plug in. I just liked it there, but I never could really get
5 established because it was all part-time or till work jobs.

6 KC: Mm-hmm.

7 JA: And so, then I got into Seattle Fire Department. I think I was 18th out of 2500
8 on their pretest and their physical test, and everything. But I had reservations with going
9 into a quasi-military thing, and it wasn't just it. Because, I mean, I'd be in there fighting
10 the first and others, as you get after recruit school, while they're still gearing up. And I'd
11 get in trouble because I'd be in there putting out the fire while they're gearing up. It's a
12 club, I didn't fit in. They were going, "Why are you always running up and down the
13 stairs working out?" Because I wanted to be in shape for rugby, you know. And I want to
14 be pound-for-pound, the strongest guy on the field. And boy, I had the aggression. So, I
15 made up for only being 136 pounds of twisted steel and sex appeal.

16 KC: (Laughter) Right.

17 JA: And it smoothed me out. That's a life saver. So, between playing rugby,
18 working construction, going off working flood irrigation, I finally got smoothed out. I got
19 into a four-year apprenticeship for fire relief, it was in the mountains and hills in an old
20 cabin that was apart of the old, the time programs. And it was kind of remote and
21 commuting through the such-and-such. With this apprenticeship, I let out a big sigh of
22 relief. I went, oh, this was a nice place to live. Got the dogs, I got a girlfriend, and I got
23 my health, and I know where I'm going to be for the next for years.

24 KC: Mm-hmm.

25 JA: And that was a big relief.

26 KC: Yeah, I bet.

27 JA: Big relief. And so, for those four years, when I popped out, I hit the road and
28 worked for the Wireman Welders for about twelve years. I liked the night shift, there was
29 no supervision, I liked the shadows. I liked the big job. Two hundred guys on the sight
30 and night shift. And welding, your kind of on your own and we're wiring or whatever on
31 the big stuff, I liked that. But then, my son was born, and so I thought I had to become a

1 steady-Eddy—I was forty, and so I tried to go white-collar. I came down out of Alaska,
2 working on the slope, on the Artic Circle on the oil pipeline, again, wiring and welding.
3 And went to a local, small town newspaper where my wife, or girlfriend, was working, as
4 a reporter. And I asked them to be an intern and they said, well, we're no longer affiliated
5 with union, and I was a union guy since I was sixteen. I said, "I don't care." And he goes,
6 "Well, um, what experience do you have?" And so, I showed him some writing samples.
7 I started writing a story, to practice up to try to become a journalist, and I later stopped on
8 the way, which was a mistake. Because I had all the names and the places and even
9 probably coordinates and stuff. But I—so, I got on. I said I'll work for free. And so, I
10 worked six months as like a junior reporter, at first, they didn't really give me anything to
11 do. I'd write press releases or something, but I kept picking people's brains. But a
12 business reporter from Sweden, you know, he said, "Oh, you know, don't use the
13 typewriter. Learn how to use the computer." And he sort of, gave me a nudge in the right
14 direction, and in six months I won a couple of journalism awards, and I was still trying to
15 learn more. I tried to become—I learned the dark room, where I wrecked that whole
16 camera that guy that gave me the help for his film, and he had to reshoot everything for
17 the big local community fair. So, then I kind of got smoked from there, and I just went, I
18 kept trying different stuff. They said they wouldn't, I couldn't—I wanted to become
19 liaison between the print shop and the editorial, because they were always squabbling
20 over space and what they—how, and I thought maybe I can learn what the print shop
21 does so I could help editorial so that we can work smoother together. That didn't go
22 anywhere, and I couldn't get a raise because I hadn't been to—the managing editor, he
23 said, "You can't get a raise because you hadn't been to chase school." And I went,
24 "What's chase school?" he goes, "Journalism." And I went, "Oh, well." And he came to
25 work one morning and one of those gals that are kind of the heart and soul of the
26 operation, most everything that's going on, worked by multitasks, small daily newspaper,
27 and knows what the boss wants, she said, "You better be careful, you're going to get
28 called in to see the manager." And so, I got called in there and decided to resign, so I
29 resigned there on the spot and moved on. Kept moving on and moving on until 2000. I
30 had my last job which was being a high school teacher.

31 KC: Okay. And when did you retire?

1 JA: Um, 2001, 2000? Yeah.

2 KC: Let me ask you this, Mr. Akins.

3 JA: I was in the VA system in '99 and they basically told me; you're retired.

4 After two weeks on the psych ward and talking my way out of any further mental

5 health—I mean, they wanted me to do another two weeks on the PTSD ward, but I said

6 this place is making me crazier. And so, they did release me after the two weeks stay on

7 the psych ward.

8 KC: So, they brought you in for evaluation, and that kind of rolls into what I

9 want to ask you.

10 JA: They put me in the door, for me, to treatment.

11 KC: Do you believe that you're, the way your Vietnam experience affected you,

12 had something to do with the numerous jobs, moving from place to place, not really

13 feeling comfortable in these places. Do you think that had something to do with it?

14 JA: Oh, absolutely. I didn't realize it that I was still operating like I operated in

15 CAP. Get out of my way, you know? You give me an assignment, well, the, get out of the

16 way. I would step on toes; I would go around people that wanted to muddle up on a

17 project just to get their name involved with it and stuff like that. I didn't need that. So,

18 yeah. It did. I mean, I would become the go-to guy and then I would get fired or I would

19 quit.

20 KC: Mm-hmm.

21 JA: Because I couldn't compromise my scruples, and I couldn't handle—and

22 white collar, especially, the backstabbing. It was amazing. People would try to trick you

23 into delaying your project so they could get theirs out ahead of yours, and then when you

24 say stuff like, "Well, let me run it by the boss." Then they'd come back a minute later,

25 "Never mind. Never mind." You know. But I just, I couldn't play office politics is

26 basically it. I couldn't do that. And it was strange to me. I write in the latter book,

27 *Drumming Out The Drum, A Marine Comes Home*, I write about what a waste it is that

28 these young guys that came home from Vietnam who had had immense responsibility

29 and even accountability, and decision making, and had to plan, it was really an eighteen,

30 nineteen, and twenty year-olds who were running the war. And the officers, who were

31 smart, recognized that these guys with five months experience were a valuable resource,

1 and said, "Let them plan the thing and run it by then." And they'd say that, and if it didn't
2 work, adjust. Those officers made good officers and probably survived better. But when
3 you bring that type of modus operandi back to the white-collar world in the U S of A,
4 you're going to get smoked.

5 KC: Yeah.

6 JA: Yeah. And so, my longest white-collar job lasted three years. And I
7 celebrated, I took my girlfriend and her friend, her roommate girlfriend, out to dinner in
8 downtown Tacoma, Washington on the sixtieth floor of whatever building it was, Bank
9 of America or something. You know, we had a little earthquake while we were up there.
10 How fun.

11 KC: You—

12 JA: So, yeah. It did cost me. But you know, it was—if you got with the right
13 company, a small startup, or something, you would have been an asset.

14 KC: Mm-hmm.

15 JA: And I almost did. I had a job lined up, kind of with Starbucks, and when I
16 called Howard Schultz after watching him testify in a W and M (Ways and Means)
17 meeting, in a Ways and Means Committee Meeting for the Washington State legislature
18 about our aggressive DNO tax, and he talked about Starbucks, I knew Starbucks, I'd gone
19 there many times, the original up in Pike Place Market along the waterfront of Seattle
20 downtown. So, there was a cutlery store next door and in between was my rugby friend's
21 little fish bar, so I was always up there replacing pocketknives. And so I'd go to
22 Starbucks, the two Italian brothers, and so when I heard this former New York trader
23 talking about it, I went right to my computer and got my work file up and my cover letter,
24 put a new date on it, wrote some new material, sent in my clip file to them, and I thought,
25 well, hey. This guy was a stockbroker, he's probably on the job at 6:45 (AM), like me.
26 So, I called him up, and he answered the phone. And I said, "Oh, I'm just following up on
27 that clip file I sent you about working for Starbucks, and I think you're on the right trail."
28 And he said, "Oh, yeah. I got your stuff, you know, but we only got six employees right
29 now. Call me in six months." So, two of his employees had worked for the governor and I
30 had worked for one temporarily for one of my temporary jobs, LNI (Labor & Industries,
31 Washington State), with Joe Bear. And the governor's Chief Financial Officer went to

1 work for Starbucks, and he's in the same little town that I had been at and lived at. And
2 so, I think I had it wired that I never followed through. I never did call.

3 KC: Yeah, there you go.

4 JA: Who are you going to tackle? Who's going to chase you?

5 KC: Right. You know, it's interesting that you have gone through this varied
6 career over the years, and like you say, you think it's clearly related to you experience
7 there in Vietnam. And that was the deal with the VA as well, as you mentioned.

8 JA: Oh, yeah. That was tough.

9 KC: You know, when you look back on all of these experiences, in the Marine
10 Corps, as a member of CAP platoon, being out there on the knife's edge, doing all of
11 these things, coming back to the States, and the difficulties that, obviously, are kind of
12 related, or came from this. When you look back on it, how do you think your Vietnam
13 experiences have most influenced you in your life?

14 JA: Well, I'm not afraid of dying. And I think there's a military way and a
15 civilian way and if you have experience in both, it might come in handy someday.

16 KC: Mm-hmm.

17 JA: Or it might be a good thing in the work world, but you have to adjust. Like I
18 adjusted to warfighting, but I really didn't adjust so much to working in an office with
19 hierarchy and stuff like that.

20 KC: Yeah.

21 JA: Bosses that really are—what's that, the Peter Principle. You know that?

22 KC: Right, yeah. Of course.

23 JA: Well, I didn't have to—you run into that in the military, but not out in the
24 bush. Well, out in the bush, you're just on your own, and that's the best. But did I want to
25 start my own business, no, I did not. I didn't have the courage for that because you not
26 only had to have something marketable, you had to be a rain maker.

27 KC: Mm-hmm.

28 JA: And I wanted to play sports after work. I wanted to train for sports after
29 work. I wanted to keep playing. I played rugby—wow, that's 45 or more, playing Old
30 Boys. And I wanted to, I was training for a rodeo, I had to stop that when I got a kid and
31 had to be a steady-eddy. I wanted to train for a triathlon, I did the Iron Man the first year

1 that I started triathlon and I did well. If I would have spent as much time and effort on
2 climbing the ladder as I did on training for competition, I'd probably be pretty well off.
3 But bored, I would be a boring person. I've had a much more interesting life—

4 KC: Yeah.

5 JA: this way. But it cost, because I couldn't find my—almost, well I did find my
6 (inaudible) in my boss side. My new boss and I, well, I saw a candidate, he was a
7 candidate for the job, and he was from Washington, D.C. and we were at a national
8 convention in Seattle. So, I'm walking across 4th Avenue, right in the hear of downtown
9 Seattle. Four lanes, big cross walk, and the colleague I'm with, he said, "See that guy
10 standing over there, coming our way? He's the other guy they're considering for Wayne's
11 job—" my boss that died of pancreatic cancer. And by the time I got across the street, I
12 said to my friend, my colleague, "What a dickhead." I was right. He wanted to
13 micromanage in a small office with only eight people and two of those people were field
14 hands, I mean, they were out in various parts of the state covering all parts of the state. So
15 really, there only six of us in the office. And I had this boss, he was a gem, he was great.
16 He called me in one day and I went, oh shit, I must have screwed up, I must have smoked
17 it or something. And he goes, he just wanted to vent a little bit because the governor was
18 thinking about moving our agency, our little state agency, into the gigantic Department of
19 Ecology, which is just a big bureaucracy. But we were a little team supporting a
20 grassroots organization that lived off of grants and stuff. Like school districts except they
21 were only conservation districts. So, I got on the phone with the governor's Chief of Staff
22 who had hired me to work as a staff writer for the democrats, and told them, I mean, I let
23 loose with short bursts and then I just told him, "You can't do this. You have the most
24 efficient model in the state of Washington, for getting work done on the field to protect
25 natural resources. This is it. If you take it into, if it gets part of ecology, it will just be big
26 three-ring binders on shelves. That's all that's going to get done. And he said, "Oh,
27 you're a good man." Just kidding. They didn't pursue it, but I think they have. So, that's
28 an example of—what? Yeah. I think I had a skillset, and I don't want to call it—but I had
29 this condition of, you know, not a shaping under supervision that isn't helpful. If you're
30 not helping, if you want to lead me, good. But don't push me or hold me back.

31 KC: Let me ask you—

1 JA: Lead me or follow me.

2 KC: Right. Let me ask you just one last question I have for you, Mr. Akins.

3 JA: Mm-hmm.

4 KC: It's a question that I ask all the Vietnam veterans that I interview, and it's a
5 pretty large question, so please, feel free to interpret it and answer how you see fit. But as
6 we look back, these fifty some odd years later or whatever it is from the Vietnam War—
7 what does it mean? What is the lasting historical legacy of the Vietnam War in your
8 opinion?

9 JA: Well, invading other countries doesn't work. War doesn't work, it just
10 creates more problems. Especially if you're meddling in somebody else's fight. Or riding
11 in on your white horse, and telling, a black cat, I'd say, and telling people how they're
12 going to run their lives or their government and everything and if you don't, we'll shoot
13 you or we'll get rid of you or something. This is a mistake. And we haven't learned from
14 our mistakes.

15 KC: Mm-hmm.

16 JA: And nobody should be in Commander-in-chief unless they walk points for a
17 while. Unless they got in the shit.

18 KC: Yeah.

19 JA: So, we need a war counsel. Not a Commander-in-chief. And you have to
20 have theologians, you have to have combat experienced veterans. Nobody that hasn't
21 been in the shit. And you need locals from this area, whatever area you're thinking about
22 invading, so light on the end of intellectuals and heavy on the experience to make the call
23 to go to war. Because if you foment war, I mean, here we are. Running around paranoid,
24 wasting lives and money when we could be, and spiraling downhill. We have lost all our
25 good will in major parts of the nation, and world. And we're doing, I mean, in Iraq.
26 Everybody thought I was crazy because I got upset about an invasion, invading Iraq. But,
27 I mean, my son's little league parents thought I was crazy. They started going, "Yeah, we
28 have got to go in there." And I go, "No, we don't." And I mean, I start, getting a little
29 bit—I think they could see it in my eyes, and I'd be talking low and slow and telling it
30 like it is, and they'd be backing up and, you know, like I was crazy.

1 KC: Well, Mr. Akins, is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview we
2 bring it to a close?

3 JA: Well, you know, when you said the other question, it reminds me of a
4 question a writer had told me, a guy who was, he is a sports psychologist, he played triple
5 A baseball and then he got cut and he went to Canada and tried for CFL football.

6 KC: Hmm.

7 JA: He's actually, he is a sports psychologist. And he asked me if I could sum up
8 my Vietnam experience in one word, and I thought, and I thought, and I told him I
9 couldn't but one phrase. He goes, "What's that?" And I go, "Time of my life."

10 KC: Hmm.

11 JA: I saw the worst of mankind, and I saw the best of mankind.

12 KC: That's a pretty incredible way to look at it.

13 JA: Yeah, because I saw people trying, you know, to save each other. And I saw
14 people trying to commit atrocities, you know. So, yeah. And I had a foot in two roles,
15 once I got into CAP.

16 KC: Mm-hmm.

17 JA: Protecting innocents and getting bad guys. And these bad guys are just like
18 me. You roll them over, except for a different facial feature and skin tone, they were just
19 like me. And you couldn't think like that for very long, just five seconds.

20 KC: Yeah.

21 JA: Because you had to go through their pockets and find intel and move on. And
22 you had to put your friends on the chopper and give them five seconds and that's it. No
23 more. So, I don't know. You end up with some chronic PTSD and manic-depressive
24 mental conditions. But you're wiser, and I sometimes feel guilt that when I came home, I
25 didn't tell it like it is. I said I would when I was over there, but when I came back, I felt
26 too much shame, too much guilt, a lot of pride in surviving and keeping most of the guys
27 that listened to me alive and well, or alive and home. I don't know if they're well. But it
28 was a hard thing to deal with because I knew the American dream, oh it's a good dream,
29 but it wasn't for me. If you saw my little house, you'd understand. To me, it's shelter. It's
30 not my—a measurement of my success or anything.

31 KC: Mm-hmm.

1 JA: And it's just, you know, there's nothing on the walls. There's clutter
2 everywhere, so, anyway. So, thanks for talking to me about this, and I think what you're
3 doing is really important. I think it's real invaluable—oh! And I wanted to tip you off to
4 Deyle Perryman. D-E-Y-L-E, Deyle Perryman, P-E-R-R-Y-M-A-N, he's in New Mexico,
5 Albuquerque, and he's done a documentary with a neighbor which is names Oasis Alou,
6 that's kind of a baseball name.

7 KC: Yes, yes.

8 JA: The Alou brothers, I watched them play here in Tacoma in triple A. But
9 anyways, he has a documentary he worked on, and it's called *Same, Same, But Different*.

10 KC: Mm-hmm.

11 JA: And he would be a good source for you. And he should have his
12 documentary in your archive.

13 KC: Well, I'll have to check on that.

14 JA: Mm-hmm. Yeah.