The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with John Ballweg
Conducted by Richard Verrone
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Transcribed by Shannon Geach

NOTE: 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.

Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I'm doing an oral history interview with Mr. John Ballweg. Today is May 19, 2003. It's approximately 1:03 Central Standard Time. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech University in the Special Collections Library Interview room. Mr. Ballweg you are in Bellcamp, Maryland. Sir, why don't we start with some biographical information on yourself? Can you tell us when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

John Ballweg: I was born January 1, 1941 in Baltimore, Maryland. Up until 10 years of age it was pretty normal, then my father died when I was only 10. We had a rough time I guess until I got out of high school. Then things started coming together. When I say rough time it want; anything illegal or anything like that. It was just financially rough for my mother.

RV: I can imagine. What did your father do for a living before he passed away?

JB: He was a supervisor for the Pepsi-Cola bottling company here. I do have to say if it weren't for the owners of the franchise here in Baltimore, I would not have had a private school education. Even after my father died they pair the tuition for me to go to a private high school.

RV: Wow, that's wonderful! Did your mother work?

JB: Yes, she did. Then she married my stepfather who was not he greatest person in the world. He wouldn't work. After high school I pretty much supported the family until I finally made him get a job. Then from then on I was 23 when I went in the

service. I had a student deferment. I thought no, I think I'll just go on in the service. I went into the intelligence corps at Ft. Holabird, Maryland where I was trained. While there I applied for flight school. In February of '65 I started my flight training.

RV: Before we go there let me ask you a couple of questions about backing up a little bit into Baltimore. Tell me what kind of student you were, what your favorite subjects were in school.

JB: I'd say more on the English history side. Math I was not very good at. I just couldn't grasp it. I just tried a couple years. I ended up with like a general diploma. English, history, back then it used to be geography. Those were my favorites.

RV: Did you play sports?

JB: I was on the swimming team. We played intramural sports football, baseball.

RV: Was anybody in your family in the service, going back uncles, grandparents?

JB: My brother was. He was drafted in1956 I believe it was. Spent time in France. He was in the quartermaster.

RV: Was he in the Army?

JB: Yes.

RV: Ok, was he any kind of influence on you as far as you joining the service?

JB: No, none at all. I wanted to make something of myself and I figured the service would be the way to do it.

RV: What year did you graduate high school?

JB: '58.

RV: Did you go to college?

JB: Yes, I went to two years of college and worked at the same time.

RV: What did you do?

JB: I worked for Pepsi for a while. Then I went with a company called Alco Groviewer was a printing company and worked for them until I went into the service. I also worked part time in a funeral home.

RV: You said you basically supported the family?

JB: Yes, I did. He thought he was a super salesman. He couldn't sell a snowball to an Eskimo. There was no money coming in so I had to take just about everything I made to keep at least my mother and my sister going.

RV: Yes, sir. How many siblings did you have?

JB: I had a brother and a half sister.

RV: You were in the middle?

JB: I'm in the middle.

RV: So you graduated in 1958, you went to work, what college did you go to for two years?

JB: Anne Rundel Community College here in the Maryland area.

RV: What prompted you to stop working and go into the service?

JB: Well it was when I got my student deferment. I looked at it and I thought to myself I'm not going anywhere with what I'm working on. I worked in an office that just drove me up the wall because I was not an inside person. I thought let me give the service a try. That's when I enlisted.

RV: What year was this?

JB: 1964, January 22.

RV: In 1964, how aware were you of U.S. foreign policy, what the United States was doing in Southeast Asia? You said this was September so it was right after the Gulf of Token incident. Were you aware of what the United States was trying to do in Vietnam at this point?

JB: In '64 it was very little. It was strictly advisory at that time. There wasn't a lot said about it. There wasn't a lot written about it. Just that we were over there. Nothing like later on down the road. I just really didn't think much of the foreign policy. I though well I've got a chance to do some traveling and advance myself. That's the main reason there was a big sales pitch at the time from the services to enlist versus being drafted because when you're enlisted you're guaranteed where you're going to go or what you're going to do. Drafted you could have done anything. That was really what prompted me. It wasn't really anything patriotic or anything like that. I just wanted to learn more.

RV: What did you want to do? You said when you enlisted you could kind of pick up your direction, what did you choose?

JB: Well, I chose the intelligence corps. The intelligence headquarters at that time was at Ft. Holabird, Maryland in Baltimore. I sort of goofed up when I filled out the paperwork because I wanted o be an agent and I ended up putting analyst down. Again I was stuck behind a desk. I did go to basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina.

RV: Tell me about that. What was your basic training like?

JB: At that time, of course I look back now it was nothing. At that time looking at it through my eyes it was pure hell. I started out I thought "oh, my God what did I get myself into"? It was screaming in your face and all this and that. Oh, geez. I got sick, had pneumonia for a week and I was recycled. In fact they just harassed, excuse my language, the hell out of me even when I was getting ready to go into the hospital. The company commander and all that. I thought oh, geez, is there a way to get out of this? I signed on the dotted line and I raised my hand, I'm stuck. Came out and I tell you some of the worst things were the runs. We were running two and three miles a morning. At that time you ran in full combat gear. You didn't run in tennis shoes and jogging suits the way they do today. I mean that would start out at like 4:30 in the morning and we'd finish up at like 10:00 or 10:30 at night. So there were long days and you didn't have a lot of time to think. They kept you moving. I sure peeled my share of potatoes. They still had KP then. I understand now they have contractors.

RV: How long did basic last?

JB: It was eight weeks. Actually for me it was 10 because of losing the first week before I got sick and then week I was in the hospital. So actually mine took 10. Then I was transferred to Ft. Holabird for advanced individual training.

RV: Tell me about your platoon leaders or your drill sergeants there and at Ft. Jackson, had hey been either in Korea or anywhere else? Did they relate these experiences to you?

JB: The first week like I said the company commander he was fresh out of college, ROTC. He hadn't been anywhere, second lieutenant. The second time when I was recycled, I was in a company with a captain and he had been overseas. He never said a lot about it. My drill sergeant, my platoon sergeant he was American Indian. He was

hard nosed. He had seen it all and he would relate. You think this is easy, you wait until you get out there in real life. Things like that. As far as any personal experiences, no they didn't get close to you. They wouldn't open up like that. They were there to do the job. It's almost like being, I'm sure you've heard the term TAC officer.

RV: Yes, sir.

JB: They are strictly there to get in your face and to get you through a course. They didn't care whether you liked them, whether you not like them. They didn't care less because in eight weeks you were gone. He put me through some stuff because of being recycled he hadn't gotten me off the bus. I came in from the hospital. There were things like shining his boots and thing like that of course nowadays is forbidden. Back then it was accepted.

RV: What was the most difficult aspect of your basic training?

JB: I'd say the physical training. It was. It was very, very intense. I didn't have any problem on the ranges. I didn't have any problems in the classrooms. But the physical side, every morning getting up and running. That was the hardest.

RV: What kind of weapons training did you have?

JJB: I had M-14s. That's all we were trained in at basic was M-14s. I didn't get into anything else until I go into flight school.

RV: How were you on the M-14?

JB: I was a sharp shooter. I made sharp shooter. I didn't make expert. I enjoyed that part of it.

RV: Tell me about going to Ft. Holabird, you knew you were going because you had signed up for intelligence correct?

JB: Right, right. Yes.

RV: What was that like in Baltimore was it much different from Ft. Jackson?

JB: Quite a bit. It was more of a compass. The type of courses we were taking were all classroom. We still had PT but it was nothing like it was in basic. I was fortunate that I could live at home because I was within commuting distance. For a private that was really unheard of. Since I lived so close and they were crammed, crammed for space. It was not much. Even though I lived at home I still had to be there for reveille, which was 5:30, which meant I had to get up like 3:30 in the morning instead

of like 5:00 because I had to drive up. I had my share of KP there too. As far as comparing it to basic, there was no comparison.

RV: So you said it was mainly classroom, a lot of classroom training?

JB: Yes, it was. As analysts we had to analyze all the intelligence information coming in and make sure it was channeled in the right direction. Photo analysis and things like that. Like I said it was mostly classroom.

RV: They would teach you how to analyze a photograph, how to analyze a report. That would come across your desk?

JB: Correct.

RV: Do you remember anything that they told you?

JB: Oh, Lord. I mean I'm looking back in 1964.

RV: At the time did it make sense to you? Did it seem, "Ok, yeah I can do this" or was it difficult for you?

JB: No it was quite easy. It was easy to pick up. That's when of course being in the intelligence corps, James Bond was the big deal then. That's when he first came out.

RV: Yes, sir.

JB: The bookstores were full of his books. All of us students were reading James Bond. It was very easy to do that type of work. Like I said I thought to myself after that I want to get out there in civilian clothes and play the agent. I really goofed up by checking the wrong block that way. It was still good. It was still enjoyable. I was there from April. I finished my course and I had orders to go to Frankfurt, Germany. In the mean time I had applied for flight school.

RV: Why did you do that?

JB: I thought I'd want to fly. I had tried flying when I was a teenager. I got the crap scared out of me by an instructor, "No that's not for me". It came about that they were looking for candidates for flight school. I applied. I took all the tests and I passed them. Took my orientation ride and I loved it. It was in a helicopter. So, once the paperwork went past the COs desk, I was frozen. They could not ship me out. I wasn't even accepted yet, but that process had started. So they put me in what they call a casual company. I was working for this old E-8 who ran the interrogation.

RV: This is still at Holabird?

JB: At Holabird and I played the prisoner of war for the different classes that would come through. The day before I would get a role sheet. This is what you're supposed to be. You're supposed to be meek and mild or you're supposed to be very aggressive, scream at the interrogators and all that depending on what role I was playing. I did that until I was accepted into flight school, which was like November of '64. I was to report in February at Ft. Walters, Texas. In January my mother went into the hospital for exploratory surgery. I was there. Like I said I worked for this old E-8. He was a great, great guy. He gave me the time off to go to the hospital while she was having the surgery. I was the only one there and the doctor came out and told me that it was cancer. And that it was pancreatic and there was nothing that he could do. I fought, fought for a few days. I went to this E-8 and I said I'm going to withdraw my application. I want to stay close to my mother because I was sort of a mama's boy. I helped her through all this stuff with my stepfather. So he sat me down and talked to me like a father that I hadn't had in years. He said, "Does your mother know how sick she is"? Said, "No". He said, "What do you think she would think if you all of a sudden decided to stay here? Yes, you can we can get you a compassionate assignment here. But, what do you think she'd think?" I said, "Well she'd probably realize that something's really serious". He said, "You're right. Now, what did your brother do with his life"? I sad, "Well he quit school and he was drafted and all this". He said, "Now look at you, you are going to flight school. You're going to become an officer. What does your mother feel about that?" I said, "She's very proud of the fact that one of her sons had really gone somewhere". He said, "Ron" and that's the first time he ever called me Ron. It was always Ballweg this. Hey Ballweg that. He said, "Ron it would be a big mistake if you stayed because your mother would know what was going on. And also she would always feel like it was her fault that you did not succeed". So I thought ok. He said, "Now if anything happens, they'll send you home over the weekends or anything else that you need. Don't worry about that". Then I just said ok. I went to flight school.

RV: He made sense to you?

JB: It did. It really did. I kept the letters really going to my mother. I knew that things were getting bad with her. At the time I was not dating anybody. One of the student nurses where my mother had been in the hospital I was writing to her but as far as

anything serious I wasn't. I was engaged before I was accepted to flight school. My fiancé broke it off with me. We had been going together for three years or something like that. Well, I went to flight school.

RV: When was this when you went down to Ft. Walters?

JB: February '65. So I was out. Again that was like a college campus down there. The colonel, post commander had put out a directive that these young men are training to fly. They're training to do something that is not a natural thing with them, especially with helicopters so we don't need to harass them on top of it. So, it was like a college campus.

RV: How long was your training to last?

JB: That lasted until the end of May. It was split at that time between two posts. There and Ft. Rucker, Alabama. We did a standard retreat. I was out at retreat one evening and they called me in and I had a phone call. It was my ex-fiancé. We got back together and my mother was upset about it because she said, "All she wants to do is get out of the house. She's a real nice girl, but." You're young and you don't think of things like that. So between when we left Ft. Walters, we left on a Friday and we had to report in on Monday. That sergeant was true to his word about letting me have time. The school knew the condition of my mother. They let me go home en route so I could fly back here to Baltimore as long as I was down there at Ft. Ricker on Monday morning. So I did. My fiancé and I saw each other too. My mother calmed down a little about that and everything was fine. She was really swollen. I didn't think anything of it, because everything again being young everybody's going to live forever. So I went to Ft. Rucker that was like candidate school. They had not gone to the college campus, but it was fun. It wasn't physical. It was just the seniors would get in your face and you were like a plebe.

RV: This was your flight training?

JB: At flight training.

RV: Can you describe to me exactly how they trained you and what you learned?

JB: In Ft. Walters I trained on the H-23 helicopter, which was made by Hiller out of Hagerstown, Maryland. Just a small three-passenger bubble. It was one of the old bubbles.

RV: You had never flown before?

JB: I had never flown before.

RV: How was it the first time you actually flew the helicopter?

JB: Petrifying. You're moving everything. Of course you've got to keep your head on a swivel to make sure you're not going to run into anything. Your right hand is working the control. Your left hand is working another control. Both feet are working pedals. It's like you talk about being coordinated. If you're not coordinated, forget it. I was not coordinated.

RV: Did you have doubts that you were going to make it through this?

JB: There for the first 10 hours I thought I'll never make this. I finally got the aircraft under control abut then wed be flying along and the instructor pilot would cut the power like we had an engine failure and I'd turn into the trees instead of an open field. I wasn't looking. I wasn't thinking ahead. He said, "I'm going to put you up for what they call a prog ride, which was a progress check with the flight commander". If you bust it, then you're out. I went up and I did everything right. Three hours later I soloed. From then on it was a piece of cake. I look at a helicopter today, nothing to flying them. But back then, forget it.

RV: Seems like that was a psychological hurdle you just over came that.

JB: Well, they are not made to fly. An airplane is built aerodynamically. A helicopter is not. It's like a rock. You're forcing it to fly.

RV: That's an interesting way to put it.

JB: Yes, you force that aircraft into the air. When I got into Ft. Rucker I went into the old H-19s, which they would give us a row. Like Charlie row, find one that flies. That's when they were so old. Find one that you can fly. You always went out and found something wrong with them. Sometimes you go through four before you got a decent one. We would taxi on out to the take off pad and we would lift it up to a hover and we would do what they call a clearing turn, which means you push in the left pedal and turn the aircraft 90 degrees to make sure there's no aircraft flying over you as you come back around the turn to take off. In reality what we were doing was a power check. With left pedal in the helicopter that takes power. It's just the opposite of an airplane. When you put in right pedal, it takes more power for right pedal with an airplane. With a

helicopter it's left pedal. If it doesn't stay at a hover, you go back and you find another one. That was the reality was what that check was. So I flew those for like 60 hours over a period of three months.

RV: Were you gaining more and more confidence as you went along?

JB: Yes, yes.

RV: How much classroom training did you have to compliment what you did in the air?

JB: It was half and half. You'd fly in the morning and then you would go to class for three or four hours in the afternoon.

RV: Did you ever have any accidents?

JB: No, not a one.

RV: Anybody in your class have any accidents?

JB: Yes, we had one that the guy went up for his solo. We used to solo in autorotation, which meant you come down without power. He was on his second time around. His first autorotation wasn't too bad. The second time around he came in and they hollered on the radio because I was in another aircraft. They said, "Candidate Armstrong, shut it down". He said, "Why? Why? I just hit it a little hard". They said, "Look around behind you. You don't have a tail boom left". He took the tail boom off. He still graduated. That was part of training. We got into some tactical flying and black out flying, totally black, no light on the aircraft, except for your dash lights, cock pit lights. No lights on the ground except for land to a flashlight. That was little hairy, but it was fun. It got to be fun then. After I got through that I went into the hueys. The UH-1. We did instrument in that. That was another whole ballgame.

RV: What do you mean by that?

JB: You fly to get the flightiest thing. I feel really good and then when they put the hood on you, you're everywhere in the sky. All you're doing is flying off the instruments.

RV: You're talking about when they put the hood on you mean you have a cover and you can't see around you?

JB: They put a hood on your helmet and your looking straight at the instrument panel and that's it. They put a black cover over the chin bubble so you can't see out.

RV: Wow.

JB: Of course the instructor he's sitting there, he's looking around. He's clear. He's BFR. I went and got through that. I was the second one to finish my flight training out of the class. I missed getting my instrument ticket back then by an argument.

RV: Really? Can you explain?

JB: The check pilot had us in what they call the holding pattern before you landed to let other ones land ahead of you. They said all right extend your outbound leg and as you turn in bound you will be cleared for approach. Once I passed the one minute, because it was a one minute holding pattern I said, "I'm leaving holding pattern, descending". He said, "No, no you're not". He passed me, but he didn't give me my instrument ticket. He said, "You didn't leave your holding pattern, you we still on the right track". Yes, but I was past the one minute". It was an argument on a technicality. So then we graduate. Well, let me back up a little bit. In the process my mother died.

RV: While you were at Ft. Rucker?

JB: While I was at Ft. Rucker, yes. It was in September. I got a phone call from my fiancé. Nobody else had called me. My stepfather wasn't going to bother me until later. Well, she called me and told me what had happened. I said, "Alrigth well the Red Cross got me home". After the funeral of course I had to go back. I thought well I'm going to be recycled because I missed the escape and evasion night. It was where they put you out at night and you have to get through the enemy lines and all that. TAC officer called me in and said, "We're going to waive that for you. We're going to keep you with your class". So I didn't have to go through that. I went through survival and all that but not the escape and evasion. It was only a one-night thing. So, I graduated from flight school.

RV: When was that?

JB: November 23, 1965.

RV: At this point were you coached or were you told that you were probably going to end up in Vietnam? Were you guys aware of this?

JB: Well, at the time again it wasn't really the big push for Vietnam. The rest of my class went to Korea. I had put in for a compassionate assignment to Ft. Meade, when my mother was still alive because that's how far in advance you had to put in for things.

I got it. I was assigned to 11th armored cavalry regiment at Ft. Meade, Maryland. None of my class went directly to Vietnam. As I said that was in '65 before any of the build up. It was still advisory. The majority of them did go to Korea, some went to Germany. November 23 I graduated. Right after graduation of course we were released. I had bought a car down there. So my stepfather and my half sister came down for the graduation. She pinned my wings on me since my mother wasn't there. We drove on home over night and we got home on Friday, back here to Maryland. I was married Saturday. We'd had it all set up. So then I was stationed like I said at Ft. Meade. In March or April of '66 we got the word that we were bring built up to go to Vietnam, because we were at a skeleton force there.

RV: What were your duties at Meade?

JB: I was the property book officer for the air cav troop at Ft. Meade. Didn't realize how many thousands of dollars I was fighting for as a W-1. I was fine for it. We found it all. It was a good life there with the cav. We flew some very antiquated aircraft. We flew Bell H-13 had the old wooden blades on them. They were built back in the '50s because everything was being built to be shipped over seas. When I found out that we were being built up, all of a sudden all my classmates started showing up from Korea. They were cut short in Korea and sent to us. So a lot of my classmates were right with me at Ft. Meade until we went over in July of '66. We loaded the ships in July and then I went over in August as an advanced party. It took that long for the ships to get over that I didn't have to go. I was there a month before the ships ever got there.

RV: How did you get over?

JB: I flew over a C-141 out of DWI. It was actually Friendship Airport at the time. Troop seats all the way. Twenty-some hours, not a comfortable ride. We went to Alaska and from Alaska we went to Japan. Then from Japan on into Saigon.

RV: Tell me your thoughts at this point. You know going in to a warzone, how did you feel about that?

JB: I was very adamant. I said, "I could never shoot another human being". You know I was apprehensive like everybody else was. We were told that they knew we were coming.

RV: Meaning the enemy knew?

JB: Yes, we were told that the Viet Cong had sent our regimental commander saying we know you're coming and we're waiting for you. Again I was apprehensive. I was assigned to headquarters, regimental headquarters in the aviation section. I was in supply there, tech supply for aircraft supply. I was still a mission pilot. That wasn't a hundred percent that was an additional duty. When we got over there and we got on the buses and there's real small wire on the windows of the bus. We said, "Hey, what's all this for"? "So a grenade won't come through". We didn't know (laughs).

RV: This was in Saigon?

JB: Yes.

RV: What were you first impressions of Vietnam when you landed in county?

JB: Hot, it was miserably hot. We stepped off the aircraft and within 20 minutes we were drenched from sweat. They loaded us on the buses right away and took us out to an area called Long Binh, which was like a staging area for units coming into country. They said, "Well there it is right there". We looked and there was nothing but an open space with just mud. "Got to put your tents up here". "Lord". Well, we got the tents up. Like I said it was total mud. Then they took the pilots and they farmed us out to all out to different units for in country training. With a unit coming over, all the pilots were green as far as in country. So we had to get some in country training. So I was shipped to Bien Hoa. I flew with the Thunderbirds. There was 502nd aviation. It's been so long at something like that. They were strictly an airlift company.

RV: This was for your training?

JB: Yes for in country training. So I flew with them for two weeks, missions everyday. It was like the old Second World War movies that you'd see. The pilots would go out and they'd do their job and at night they'd come back and they'd all end up at the club. Well, that's basically the way this was. The unit lived in I don't know, they had a name for it. It was inside of a compound. Private rooms almost like a motel. Then they had their own club and mess shall. So I did that. It really stands out because I flew with this one guy quite a bit. A lot of the missions we did we re strictly admin missions, they go from town to town. It was like a one ship mission. This guy I was flying with, went into this one place, I know for three days in a row. The third day was my last day. I

found out just a couple days later that fourth day he went in there and didn't come out he got shot coming out.

RV: Really?

JB: Wow. The Lord was with me is the only thing I can say.

RV: He did not survive?

JB: He did not survive, no.

RV: Where were you flying into?

JB: It was just a small hamlet where Special Forces were and the ARVN, the Army of Vietnam. I just had an outpost. We'd just go in there to like resupply or take mail, stuff like that in.

RV: How did you do flying in country, your first training, these two weeks?

JB: I did pretty good. Like I said I felt really comfortable because I had been out of flight school for about nine months. I had flown quite a few different type aircraft. Before I went over, before we were even activated in February of '65 I was TDY to Bell Helicopter Company in Ft. Worth. I ferried hueys out to the coast to be shipped overseas. I'd done a lot of cross-country there.

RV: Right.

JB: No, I didn't feel too bad. I listened to them. I did what they told me. You take off running and then you just climb like a homesick angel. You get to 3,000 feet because there's nothing that can touch you above 3,000 unless it's a .50 caliber.

RV: Did you take any fire during these two weeks?

JB: Yes, we did take some when I was one some of the insertions. I went out on some insertions. Didn't get hit. The aircraft didn't get hit. We were taking fire.

RV: How did it feel for you to know that you were under fire?

JB: You know it didn't really bother me until afterwards. I think the adrenaline was pumping so hard. It was afterwards I'd start to shake. Not bad, it was like one more day down. That's the way we started counting.

RV: You knew you had 365 days.

JB: Yes we started short-timers counter as soon as we got there.

RV: Let me ask you a question sir, sorry to interrupt.

JB: No problem.

RV: Did you have any cultural training on the Vietnams people and culture and what did you know about why you were actually there?

JB: We were told we were over there to stop the Domino Effect. I'm sure you've heard that saying. Domino Effect was Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. They said the Communists were going to keep knocking them down. We were there at the request of the South Vietnamese government to stop the North. Well at the time it was just the Vietcong from wrecking havoc in the country. Again we were guests and that's what we were told. We were always told that we were guests. We were there because the Unite States had signed a treaty with SEATO, Southeast Asian Treaty Organization.

RV: Did you feel like a guest?

JB: At times, at times. I felt like somebody all they wanted to do was take my money. Very rarely did I ever go into town. I mean there was nothing there for me anyway. At times I really felt sorry for the kids.

RV: The Vietnamese children?

JB: Yes, they were rag tag. My God, we'd be somewhere and they'd come running up. We all just gave them if we had candy, we'd give them candy and stuff. If you threw it they were just like a pack of dogs going after it. I found that the Vietnamese women were very, very pretty when they were young. They aged, extremely fast.

RV: Why do you think that is?

JB: I don't know. I really don't know. You would see a girl at 18 or 20 years old she could be on a magazine cover. Ten years later she looked like she was 60. Whether it's the hard life, because it was a very hard life. I remember seeing their homes built out of beer cans. They would flatten the beer cans, open them up and that would be the siding and the roof of their home. Things like their culture was totally foreign. You'd see them going down the road, if they had to go relieve themselves, it was right there on the side of the road. I told my wife and she said she still can't believe this. They would use a rock to clean their selves with. She said, "You've got to be kidding". I said, "I'm serious". So it could be some of that. The hygiene was non-existent. The rivers over there, I never did see clear river. They're all mud. I'm sure it was all from sewage. It had to have been. Even when we were in the dry season it was still brown water. It could have been that. War had been going on there for hundreds of years, always. This

was nothing new to them. It wasn't where we were going to stop it all. They probably thought they're here for a while, then they'll go and it'll be back to normal again.

RV: How much contact did you actually have with the Vietnamese?

JB: Very little. Our regimental commander would not allow them on base. He was very, very strict about that. A lot of the units they would come in and they'd have the house girls take care of it. No, not us. We didn't like it at the time, but probably it was a good idea. The only, I don't want to call them foreigners, because we were the foreigners. The only ones that were not American that were on post were Koreans. They ran our PX.

RV: What was your impression of the Koreans?

JB: They were ok. Of course they had some combat people there too. They had the White Horse division, which was really a crack division. They were never beat. They were never beat. Again a story I don't know if it's true, but probably it is. Can you hold Richard I just got a beep? My wife is out there and I don't know where she is. Hold on.

RV: Absolutely. I'll pause it. Ok, go ahead.

JB: The White Horse Division as I said they never lost a battle but we had heard at one time that they did have a really rough time. The division commander brought, this one company did, I'll put it that way. He brought the company commander and the first sergeant up in front of the whole division and I heard they shot him. That was going all over. It wasn't just that I had heard it from one person. They just didn't take any stuff. We never had any operations with them. We didn't get into any combat with them. They were pretty upstanding people. They didn't take any crap.

RV: Did you ever work with any of the Australian or New Zealand troops?

JB: No, I talked to them on the radio because we would fly through their area. Their area was kangaroo controlled. When we were leaving our base camp to go down to Bung Tao to take a re-supply run we would have to go through their area. That's the only time. Ran into them a couple times in the clubs. They're pretty decent guys.

RV: What were your impressions of the ARVN of the South Vietnamese forces?

JB: Worthless.

RV: Why do you say that?

JB: We would take them out in the morning on a search and destroy mission and drop them. We'd pick them up at 5:00 that evening. They'd all have dead chickens hanging over their shoulders. It was a big game to them. I remember one time we had an insertion and this guy wouldn't get out. Now that scared us. He ran back and forth from side to side in that aircraft and we had to take off because the whole formation was going. I pulled out my .45 and turned around and the other guy was flying. I said, "Next time in", because we had to go back and get another load. He didn't speak English but I made sure that he knew that he was getting out the next time, one way or the other.

RV: Did he?

JB: Yep (laughs). We didn't know. He could have had a satchel on him. We don't know. Because during the day they were your friends, at night they were the VC. That was not a comfortable ride back to pick up the other ones.

RV: When you finished your two-week training at Bien Hoa did you go back to Long Binh?

JB: I went back for a few days and then they shipped me to a maintenance unit in Phou Loi because I was going to be in maintenance and tech supply.

RV: How long were you there?

JB: I was there for about two week. The day I got there, the company commander they were having a cook out because he was going home the next day. Made me feel great. Here I was brand new and he's going home. That was strictly like I said maintenance. That was upper echelon maintenance. They would take the aircraft that were wrecked or crashed and rebuild them right there. Their call sign was Pipe Smoke. We did a lot of recovery missions.

RV: Going out and getting the wrecked choppers?

JB: Getting the ones that were either wrecked down or crashed.

RV: Would you fly out whit Chinooks?

JB: The Chinook would come out and take them, but we'd go out there and get them rigged. Put the straps on them and everything. The Chinook would not land. They'd come in and we'd hook the strap to it. Once we were clear, they'd just take of and go. Then we would follow them back.

RV: You've been in country about a month and a half now at this point, or about a month.

JB: About a month, about a month.

RV: How did you feel? Did you feel more comfortable the longer you were there?

JB: Yes, I did. I felt a lot more comfortable. I felt I hadn't really seen any hard action. So I was ready to get back to my unit. Like I said we were at Long Binh but once the whole unit got in and off loaded off the ships then we were given our permanent base camp, which was Xuan Loc. That's X-u-a-n L-o-c. Again I was just in the middle of the jungle and we had to take the engineers in and do everything.

RV: Was that your permanent base?

JB: That was our permanent base, yes. Called Black Horse. We had to go in and just clear it all. We had to build a runway. We had to build the revetments for the aircraft to sit in. We had to fix our tents up as much as we could.

RV: Tell me about the base. What was it like? What were your quarters like? Your chow hall?

JB: I lived in a tent for a year. The only thing I had was a plywood floor. Screens on the side of the tent. They had a kit they called wabtoc, that was wooden frame that you would put up and then the tent would go over it. We didn't even have the wooden frame.

RV: Wow! How many men to your tent?

JB: There were four of us. With officers we were four to a GP large. So we each had a quarter of a tent. Had a wall locker, but of course we had our bar. Everybody had a bar over there.

RV: Inside your tent?

JB: Yes, and it was for all the officers. We just happened to be the ones to get the bar. Right outside in front of the tent was our water stand. They'd come around every morning and fill the GI cans with water that was our washstand. Showers were just wooden stalls with old fuel tanks from the jets on top. They poured the water in their in the morning and believe it or not by the evening the water was hot because of the sun.

RV: How about your chow hall?

JB: It was strictly for headquarters regiment. Each squadron had their own. It was ok. We had fairly decent food. The only thing that always stuck my craw was reconstituted milk. We never had fresh milk. That's where I learned to drink coffee without sugar because the sugar would turn rancid it was so hot. As far as meals, they were ok. Nothing to write home about. They weren't like going to Outback or something like that. They were passable.

RV: The whole left cav was located at Xuan Loc?

JB: Yes. Again that was a base camp. Most of the time, one of the squadrons was gone out on operations. Each squadron had their own aviation section. They might have just a couple of aircraft in the section but we also had an air cav troop. That was strictly gunships. They were for aerial support for the squadron.

RV: What other facilities did you have on base there that you could go to?

JB: Well, we had a PX. We had an officers club. Again they were all tents. That was it. We had some shows that would come over. I guess somewhere they had movies. Again we never went. Once we were finished flying we were all exhausted. We didn't want to go anywhere.

RV: What was your typical day like?

JB: 6:00 in the morning, started out going to breakfast. Then I'd go down and make surer my clerk was doing his job. The pilots who were on missions that day would take off and do their thing.

RV: Would you have to attend a briefing?

JB: Yes, there was a daily briefing every morning and then there was one every evening. A situation where you found out what was going on where. But the missions a lot of them were re-supply missions for the squadrons. Like we'd have to carry out the ammo. Headquarters in the one that had the slick aircraft, the troop carries for supply aircraft. We'd take ammo out. We'd take mail out to them. We'd take clean laundry out, just to keep the morale going.

RV: How far out would you go? Was there a limit to your range or would you just pretty much go wherever your mission called for you to go to?

JB: Whatever our mission called is where we would go. Of course we had to watch our fuel.

RV: Of course.

JB: There were days that I would strap on and we'd come back every two hours to refuel and I'd go every 10 hours and we never shut down. We would hot refuel. Get out stretch our legs, one pilot stayed in all the time. One would get out, stretch out, relieve himself, the other one would get out.

RV: So was your typical day a 10-hour day?

JB: Close to 12 hours.

RV: So you would basically fly re-supply missions, whatever was needed you'd take it out?

JB: Yes, re-supply. We did some night psyops, psychological warfare with the speakers and all that.

RV: Can you describe that to me?

JB: Well, we'd be out with a huey with the speakers on and behind us would be a Jolly Green Giant, no. Puff, I'm sorry Puff. The C-47 with gattling guns on it. If we would receive any fire then he would come in and take them out. That would be a couple hours every night. It wasn't every night. Really that was run by intelligence corps.

RV: Right. What kind of things would you broadcast?

JB: Well, it was all Vietnamese I don't know what they were saying. "Give up. You're fighting a losing battle. Your leaders are dirty dogs". Stuff like that.

RV: How many days on and how many days off did you have?

JB: We were seven days. Flight surgeon would watch us for hours. Once we got up to like 90 hours in a month then he would pull us in and ask us how we felt. Normally he would just clear us for another 30 or something like that if we needed it. Very rarely did he say, "No, you're off for a week now". They did have what they call crew rest. That was like you had to have eight hours off. That was it but you were still seven days. It was no 9-5 Monday to Friday bit. Because we also supported other units. We supported the 1st infantry division when they had an operation. We supported the 25th infantry division. As far as being there at the base camp not a whole lot. A lot of times we were out on these operations and operations last two or three weeks.

RV: What typical things would you carry? You said laundry, mail, ammunition, you did some troop carrying.

JB: They tried to get them a hot meal once a day. We would carry out the thermites with hot meals in them. Re-supply for parts for the armored vehicles. They'd just go into the jungle and they'd clear out a spot. Of course they weren't aviation minded so they didn't give us enough room really to come in. We would come in and these trees were like 150 to 200 feet tall. We would just circle coming down. We'd land, but then when we'd go out, we'd have to go out the same way. We'd have to circle to get enough speed up to get some climbing power because it was so hot over there and they would load us down so much. There was many times I came back with leaves in my skids, coming out just topped it and lowered the nose and took off.

RV: Are there any incidents that stand out in your mind in these supply missions?

JB: Yes. One time I had rotor blade, a main rotor bade. It was a spare part I had to pick up at Phu Loi and take it back to our base camp. Well, I couldn't very well sling it and we were flying solo some of these trips.

RV: Was it normal to go out with two at least?

JB: Most of the time on a mission, you always had two pilots on a combat mission. I was dropped off up there with a tech inspector and a crew chief and a door gunner to pick this aircraft up that had some work done on it. Up there at Phu Loi that unit that I was with for a couple weeks. They had a main rotor blade. Those were about 25 feet long. We stuck it through the cabin and it was sticking out either side, like 10 feet. I picked it up and it hovered good. Had a good balance. I took off and I couldn't get over 40 knots because it acted as a wing and it wanted to keep taking my nose down. It was lifting my rear end up. I came all the way back at 40 knots. It was daylight when we took off and we had quite a ways to go. It started to get darker, and darker and darker. All of a sudden I see these red things coming up, tracers. Thank God we were high enough. We got it back. That and a couple other missions I was on were quite memorable. I did a lot of medevac.

RV: I wanted to ask you about that, some of your dust off missions? Can you talk about that?

JB: Yes, it doesn't bother me. We had a policy in our unit that there wasn't a crew standing by for medevac. Whoever got to the aircraft first, went. Because speed was of the essence. There was a certain whistle that blew that we knew it was medevac.

We'd get our instructions once we cranked up. They'd tell us over the radio where to go. The first one I did was they hit our unit, one of the squadrons was out just on a search and destroy mission. They were on this road and they were taking fire and taking some casualties. They called us in and their tanks had pulled off of the road facing either side of the road. We landed on the road in between the tanks. They told us to come on in, they put out plenty of fire. We picked up about three.

RV: Was this your very first one?

JB: That was my very firs one. I was in country maybe two months when that happened. We took off and I was on the radios. This young man, I think I might have told you about him. He had a pressure wound. Of course we had to get up to 3,000 feet to stay clear of any small arms fire. As we went up, the pressure was building up. He started clawing at me, he was in such pain. I just turned around and I held him in my arms all the way back. Because the gunner and the crew chief, they were busy. We got him back. I don't know whether he lived or not. I'm sure he did because he was conscious. I'd often wondered that throughout the years.

RV: What was that experience like for you?

JB: It was kind of eye opening. There but for the grace of God, I was alive. That's the way I used to look at things. I'm not an overly religious person. I believe that there is a higher power that has his hand on certain people. I was shook up, but the adrenaline was another factor that kept you going. Once you got back there was always something else going on. That passed.

RV: Did you talk to this soldier?

JB: Yes, I kept telling him, "You're going to be ok. You're going to be ok. Just hold on to me. We're going to get you help. We're going to get you help".

RV: Did he say anything back to you?

JB: No, tears in his eyes. He was holding on tight. I'm sure he was in a lot of pain from the pressure. Like I say we got him back and every time we got back of course you've got to wash out the aircraft because there was blood all over the place. The pilots don't do that, the crew does that. Then at night it was unwind. You had to unwind. You couldn't keep it in.

RV: What would you guys do to unwind?

JB: We'd just sit around. Well we didn't have TV over there. We had radio and have a few beers. Just totally become loose. If you would have kept it in day in and day out you would have been a basket case.

RV: Did you take about it with your fellow officers?

JB: Yes, we talked about it. I was telling the guys about how this guy was and everything. That was our outlet talking to each other. We didn't run to the chaplain or the flight surgeon for everything. Because hey we were there to do a job. Our job was to fly those aircraft. If we let every little thing bother us, we wouldn't have been any good to anybody. Then I had another one. I got the air medal with "V" out of that one.

RV: Tell me about that.

JB: That one I told you about. That's the one they awarded me the air medal with "V" for valor. Then I was out on Operation Junction City. I don't know if anybody's ever talked to you about that.

RV: I know about it. Yes, sir.

JB: I think that was 1st division. The cav was supporting them. It was the very first morning. We were all out, had our maintenance area set up. Like I said I was still in maintenance. My boss was a major and he and would always tent together in a small tent. Out there they used an artillery round, they'd just bang on it. Didn't have whistles or anything. Ran to the aircraft. Here we go again. Again we didn't know what it was. I cranked up. We had an alert aircraft, we didn't have an alert crew. I cranked up and we got what was going on. They told us it was a medevac and where it was. We started in and we were radio contacted with the unit and it was ground fog. We were like hovering at 20 miles an hour. We couldn't get any speed because we were going right up in a rubber plantation. Rubber plantations would have a whole bunch of trees and then there would be a swatch almost as wide as a football field. That was for them to get into, to get the rubber out of the trees to take them back out. We were going up through this swatch and there are trees on either side. We were in radio contact with a unit that had been hit. I said, "Can you hear us"? Finally he said, "Yes, I can hear you now". I said, "Alright go ahead and pop smoke". Two columns of smoke came up. One straight ahead of us and one 90degrees to our left. I said, "I see yellow to my left". He said, "No, no, no". I said, "What about purple"? He said, "Come on in". The VC had popped a yellow.

RV: Wow! They were listening to you.

JB: Yes, they were listening. That's why we always identified the color. A couple times we'd have people say, "I'm going to pop red smoke" and there's two red smokes. No, no we don't do it that way. So I went in and picked up, there was only one wounded. He was pretty bad from what I understand. Again I was concentrating on flying then because of the weather. I had to make and instrument take off out of there. I came up through 200 feet of nothing but fog. So I finally broke out and we took him back to Long Binh to the medevac, the evac hospital. Don't know anything more about it. Like I say we went out there to do the job and then we had something else we had to do. Then we came on back and that's when I got my Distinguished Flying Cross for that.

RV: For that one?

JB: Yes.

RV: Were the dust off mission the ones that meant the most to you or the ones that had the biggest impact up on you?

JB: I felt like I was doing something. I felt like I was contributing. I mean these supply missions, yes I was doing all right. I was taking mail and I was taking food and stuff. But these guys were running around, but they were healthy. The ones that I was picking up were the ones that needed help. Don't get me wrong I wasn't in love with a flying ambulance. It was something I felt as though I was doing that was worthwhile. That's the two real medevacs that I had. Let's see Junction City. There was another one I can't even remember the Operation name it was with the 25th division. Then a lot of days were just pure boredom.

RV: Of not flying at all?

JB: Well not flying or just ho-hum, type flying. I was always fortunate. I was always somewhere else when my unit got hit.

RV: Really?

JB: Again that's a guy sitting on my shoulder. I was out I think I was over at An Khe. There were people back at the unit, most of the unit was back there.

RV: This was back at Black Horse?

JB: Yes, back at Black Horse. I didn't know anything about it. I came back the next morning and they said, "Man we got hit last night". In fact one of the captains took

an aircraft off that was still in maintenance. He just lifted it, got it out of there. None of the gauges worked or anything else, but he saved the aircraft. So I went up to my tent. God, almighty what happened to our washstand? Well a mortar shell had hit our washstand, which was six feet in front of our tent. Went inside and my wall locker had holes in it from shrapnel. I had my dress uniform in there for R&R. That shrapnel went right in between all my uniforms, didn't shred a thing. It was lying on the floor, the shrapnel was of the wall locker. It just seemed like every time I was off doing something for the unit and they'd get hit.

RV: Right. Did you ever experience mortar fire?

JB: Yes, I experience it. But as far as anything coming close to us, no I didn't.

RV: How often were you mortared there at Back Horse?

JB: On average twice a week.

RV: What would you do when that would happen?

JB: We were so far inside it that we'd just keep n partying, turn the lights out.

RV: You wouldn't go to a bunker?

JB: No, in fact our bunkers weren't even built. I mean there was a hole there, but they hadn't done anything else to it. We hit the ground running when we were over there. When we started improving the base camp was when he had the time. (dog barking). Mia will you hush? In the evening we'd go out and fill some sandbags or something to start working on it. To show you how far. I went over there in August of '65.

RV: August '66 you mean?

JB: '66. I was promoted in May of '67 to W-2, a lot of us were. Like I said a lot of my classmates were there. So we had a party. All of us threw a regimental promotion party. Coming back we all got back to our tents and I hear this guy moaning and groaning. One of my buddies was so bombed out he fell into the bunker.

RV: He had injured himself?

JB: There were no covers. That was in May. We'd been there nine months and we still hadn't gotten covers over the top of the bunkers.

RV: So you guys weren't that concerned with mortar fire?

JB: No.

RV: Obviously.

JB: Because we were so far in. Like I said the one that hit my water stand that was a lucky shot.

RV: Tell me about taking fire out in the field and in. You mentioned the tracers that one time. How often would you take fire going in? Obviously that depended on where you were going.

JB: Depending on where I was going and also depending on what I was concentrating on because that's what my gunner and crew chief. They were there looking out there. My job was to fly that aircraft, get it in and get it out. I would say I probably took fire about a dozen times, is about all.

RV: Were you ever wounded?

JB: No, no.

RV: Were you flying the UH-1?

JB: Yes.

RV: How was that as an aircraft? Describe that to me.

JB: It was a beautiful aircraft. It wasn't built for that type of weather over there though. The aircraft would hold 225 gallons of fuel. We could only put like 175 on it because of weight restrictions. We would go out if we took American soldiers out for an insertion we could only carry six at the top. Then we were bleeding off power to get off the ground because of the destiny altitude. That's with the heat and the humidity was so high it was like taking off from 10,000 feet. So many times I told my co-pilot to turnoff the low warning light. We operated at 6,600 RPM. I was usually down to 6,000 getting off the ground, but you did it. You had to, it was a mission. We could carry six GIs and eight Vietnamese because they were smaller. As far as flying the aircraft, it's still a Cadillac in my eyes. I loved that aircraft. Very dependable. It could take a beating. Like Timex, take a lickin' and keep on tickin'.

RV: Why don't we take a break just for a moment?

The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with John Ballweg
Conducted by Richard Verrone
May 19, 2003
Transcribed by Shannon Geach

This is Richard Verrone and I'm continuing my oral history interview with Mr. John Ballweg. Today is May 21, 2003. I am again in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room. Mr. Ballweg is in Bellcamp, Maryland. Sir, we finished the other day we talked about some of your missions and you more memorable missions, your dust off missions etc. I wanted to ask you is there any other missions or incidents that stand out in your mind about your tour there in Vietnam? What do you think of besides the ones that we talked about?

JB: Well, the one was a mission that a classmate of mine was involved in. We used to call him Junior Evans. He was the youngest pilot on the Army at the time. He was only 18 years old. He was in the air cav troop and he was a gunship pilot. He was out on a mission with his aircraft commander who was captain and I can't remember his name, but they had finished the mission and were en route back to base camp. He started receiving fire from just one individual on the ground. The aircraft commander said, "Let's turn around hand get him". He turned to him and said, "Look, all we've got is one door gun left. Everything else, we've used all our ammunition". He said, "We can take him out with a door gun". He said, "Ok, you're the boss". As he turned and rolled in for the run, a round came through the windshield and got him in the head. He died about 11 hours later. When I found out what had happened they had to hold me back because I was going to go and take care of this captain who should never have turned to return fire from one little Charlie running around. That happened about four months before I rotated

back to the States. I never talked to the man after that. I would have just torn him apart, literally. That's how upset I was. There was no reason at all.

RV: You have had no contact with him sense?

JB: None.

RV: Why would he give such an order? Did he have a reckless reputation?

JB: No, he was career minded. He wanted to go up the ladder. From what I understand, he never got past captain.

RV: Do you think he wanted a medal or he wanted to be recognized?

JB: He wanted a medal and he wanted the recognition and that would help toward promotion.

RV: Did you see a lot of that over there in Vietnam?

JB: Career-minded people?

RV: Yes, sir people trying to obtain medals, trying to obtain that recognition while they had the chance in the war zone to further their career after the war?

JB: There were one or two that I did see. There was a very young major. In fact he was a captain when he went over. He made major over there. How do I put it? His nose was where it shouldn't have been? From what I understand he did climb. He climbed quite rapidly. I believe he ended up with a star. I'm not sure. He was totally, totally looking out for his career track. A lot of times I just didn't fit into that. I was there to do a job, did a job. I mentioned earlier about that Distinguished Flying Cross, I didn't know I was going to get it. They just came in and said, "We're putting you in for it". I didn't go out there to do that. I had no desire. It looks nice pinned on my chest but that's about all it does. That was the big incident. Also was the one about that major I told you.

RV: Yes, sir. Did you think the leadership in Vietnam was adequate? Not at the larger level, at the top level, but just at your unit level, the 11th cav regiment level? What were your opinions of the leadership there?

JB: In general it was quite good. Of course, this was their first taste of combat also. But in general we had good leaders. We didn't have any problems with the exception of the couple that I have talked to you about. The rest of them, they did a good job. I felt comfortable with them. Let me take that back a little bit. There was this one

major who had just transitioned in the helicopters. He was a fixed wing pilot for years. Well, the only thing is he tried to fly the helicopter like a fixed wing, which just didn't work. In fact as a W-1 I had to take it away from him one time.

RV: Really?

JB: Yes. It was he was getting the aircraft into a situation where it wasn't the safest way to fly it.

RV: How did you go about taking the aircraft from him?

JB: I just said, "I've got it sir".

RV: You were actually flying with him?

JB: Yes, I was his pilot. He was the aircraft commander. I just took it away from him. He was like diving. You can dive a fixed wing, but you can't dive a helicopter. You do to a certain extent, but not the way he was. He had our nose headed right to the ground. "No, we don't do this".

RV: Could you make any comments about the overall leadership in Vietnam, military leadership?

JB: I think the military leadership, the upper level was too political. No one was allowed to do anything without permission as far as firing on anything. We did have what they call free fire zones. But they were few and far between. The leadership was, for lack of a better word, too milk-toast because the politicians were running that war. It was being run from Washington.

RV: Is that what you thought at the time, or is that looking back?

JB: I didn't really think of it at the time. Then after I got home and listening to some of the other pilots when I was assigned to flight school, they pretty much saw it. The military just couldn't run the war. It was not done the way that a military action should be. Granted it was different type of war. It was a guerrilla type war. But we could have changed that ourselves and we didn't.

RV: What kind of different tactics do you think that you could have done differently as a helicopter pilot or your unit could have done differently?

JB: I remember back in 1964, when Barry Goldwater was running for president. Everybody laughed at him when he said, "The only way to control Vietnam is to start at the South China Sea, with our backs against the sea and just put a line out from border to

border and march forward. March north. Anybody in front of us were the enemy. Anybody behind us were our friends". Everybody laughed at him, but that is a classic war. Everybody said, "It can't be done there. It can't be done there". But in retrospect it would have been over in two years.

RV: What about the Vietcong who could blend into the Southern population?

JB: Well, they looked like they were teenagers. They would be our friends during the day and then at night they were the ones that were shooting at us. They blended very well. They never wore what you called uniforms. They wore the black pajamas. So many other ones wore them too. You just couldn't say, "Oh, there's one". Unless he was carrying a rifle you wouldn't know it. It was just a situation that you just couldn't know who was who.

RV: Could you make some general comments on the enemy? You just talked about the Viet Cong, what about the North Vietnamese Army?

JB: Never had any real, real contact with any of them. In the early days it was strictly Vietcong. Of course the North Vietnamese were supplying them. As far as being combat units, running into any of them, our unit never did.

RV: When you were flying what kind of rules of engagement did you have?

JB: We could fire if we were fired upon if we could catch them in the open. I never ran into this. Again, being the type of mission pilot I was. Some friends of mine said they were receiving fire one day and they turned to go after them and these guys ran into a warehouse. Right then they were not in the open. They had to call back and request permission to fire onto that warehouse. Their unit had to call Saigon and speak to the MACV advisor who in turn at a desk right across from him was the Vietnamese counterpart. He would have to ask him and it was turned down. It was later found out that the Vietnamese counter parts cousin owned that warehouse. We weren't allowed to fire. That was quite frustrating when you have things like that. But as far as just being able to go out there and if you see something, fire. No, you couldn't.

RV: When you were actually flying, what kind of weapons did you carry? Did you have a side arm with you?

JB: I had a .45 caliber automatic that I never fired. I used it more for protection. Pilots were sort of vulnerable because none of our aircraft, none of them were bullet

proof. We would put a flak jacket in the chin bubble. We would sit, even though we had armored seats, we would still sit on a flak jacket. My .45 went between my legs. That's where it was used mainly.

RV: As protection?

JB: Yes.

RV: And you had a door gunner or did you have two?

JB: Yes, they had the M-60s.

RV: How effective were they as weapons when you were flying?

JB: They were quite effective. They could put out quite a burst of fire. If we received fire from somebody on the ground and we started opening up to them, they would back off. That's one thing.

RV: What weapons did you most fear from the ground?

JB: .50 calibers.

RV: Why?

JB: Well, they could reach up above 3,000 feet. That was the big thing we had to watch out for. If we were above 3,000 we were out of the range of small arms fire. But .50s could reach us. That was the one thing that we all feared.

RV: Did you have everything that you wanted as far as weaponry or was there something that you wanted but did not have or could not obtain?

JB: I think we were pretty well equipped as far as weapons go. The only thing is I felt like a.45 was inadequate. Over 30 feet, forget it. They've go to be right on top of you. What they were saying was you fire all but one and you save that one for yourself. A lot of pilots did carry other side arms, carbines things like that. Maybe I just couldn't find one. They weren't issued. Let's put it that way. They would get it one way or the other by hook or crook.

RV: Let me ask you about flying in general. How much nighttime flying did you do?

JB: Let me see. I had close to 4,000 hours total. Of which, I'd say 25% of that was nighttime. About 1,000 hours.

RV: Can you describe the differences between flying day and night? Obviously you could see better during the day, but what is it like to fly at night, especially in a war zone.

JB: Over there it was dark as a pocket. Very few lights, especially flying over jungle there was nothing. On cruise it wasn't bad. Coming into an unlighted area could get really what we would call, hairy. We came back to base camp one night and came in blackout conditions. We landed to a little red beanbag light. We came in and it was the dry season. As we came to a hover, we were totally what we call brown out. It was total dust. We couldn't see the ground. We knew we were near aircraft because we were near the revetment area of the other helicopters. We just pulled straight up and got out. When we found out where we were, we were like 10 feet away from colliding with the parked aircraft.

RV: Wow!

JB: That was when we were fairly new in country. You learn really fast when you do come in at night like that, you go right to the ground. You don't come to a hover. That's what this guy did. He came to a three-foot hover and it just created a sand storm. We had to use strictly, we had few instruments to fly by. The instruments we did have we had to fly strictly by instruments. We could see the horizon. We could visually fly. However, going from point A to point B, you had to use the beacon because there was hardly any landmarks to pick up because it was so dark. Here in the States, you could see. Well if I was 30 miles away from Lubbock I could see the lights. I could just head for it. Over there you just didn't have any. You had nothing to give you any idea of which way to go.

RV: But you all adapted to that?

JB: Yes.

RV: Let me ask you a question on behalf of those who have never been in war, never been in combat, never experienced anything close to that and they might be listening to this interview at some point in the future and wonder about your mental state as far as flying everyday in a combat zone, did you think about the risk you were taking? I know you've commented that this was your job. Is that how you approached it

everyday? How much did you think about tactually being shot down or being shot at or actually being killed?

JB: You know I really didn't think that much of it. A lot of times it would cross my mind as we were making an approach into some place, maybe is this going to be it? Or something like that. Only one time I really had a problem I was bringing an aircraft back from where they were out on an operation. This guy was having trouble with this one aircraft. I was in maintenance I told you that. I took it around the traffic pattern. I said, "This thing's not running right". It's an H-23 with a six-cylinder reciprocating engine. It just didn't have the power. I told my boss I think we ought to take it back. So he said, "Alright we'll follow you with the huey". I couldn't get over 500 or 600 feet. There was just no power. Couldn't get it over 50 or 60 mile an hour with it. We had quite a ways to go. So we're flying along and he said, "How are you doing"? I said, "ok". I was down nearing what they call dead man's zone. I stayed over the highway but it was still going through my mind. Oh man what am I going to see around the bend and all this and that? So, he started running low on fuel. He said, "Look we're going to have to head back to get fuel. We'll keep the radios on". I ended up landing it took me about two hours to get it back. When we tore it apart we had what they call a blown jug, which means instead of six cylinders I only had five cylinders. The other one was totally blown. You could replace just one, what they called jug. It was a cylinder, just like a car. You could take the whole thing out and just put another one back on. That's why I didn't have any power. I was sweating that one time. That was about the only time I really had any if you want to call it fear, that was it.

RV: Did your unit, or the guys in your tent whomever did you talk about it? Your fears or anything like that once you got back and landed? It was after hours and you're resting. What kind of chatter was there about this?

JB: Really after the fact we would joke about it.

RV: Really?

JB: I did have a pilot that did take a round into a transmission in a huey. He got it back. All the lights came on. He got it back to the base camp. Once he shut it down, it froze up because he had lost all his oil. As long as it was running, it was ok. You know he said, "Man, oh man I'm glad we didn't have an engine failure". Things like that I

think you just kidded around about it to relieve the tension. I almost bought it today, things like that.

RV: Did you all have access to counselors if you really wanted to talk about something?

JB: Just the flight surgeon.

RV: Just the flight surgeon and the chaplain if you wanted to. Our chaplain he was a lieutenant colonel. He was a Catholic priest, he loved to go along and fly gunner.

RV: Oh, really?

JB: Yes, he was a really neat guy. Yes, you could talk to him. He would sit and talk to you about it. Then again you always had that fear, if you say too much you're going to be grounded.

RV: Oh, yeah. So were you all warned or was that kind of the word in the unit that you just didn't say too much?

JB: It was kind of an unspoken. You could walk by the flight surgeon and he'd say, "How you feeling"? "I got a little stuffy head". "You're grounded". So you didn't want to go any further than that.

RV: Were they that strict?

JB: Not so much over there, but Stateside they were. They needed the pilots, they needed the bodies. As long as you got your rest and you were healthy as I said earlier. After like 90 hours you went in and talked to the flight surgeon. "Hey, how are you doing"? I said, "Doing fine". "Ok, we'll give you another 30 for the month, until the end of the month".

RV: Tell me about the relationship you had with the other men in your unit?

JB: It was pretty good. Of course I'm not a holier-than-thou type person or anything. I didn't believe in going on and looking for the girls and all that where a lot of them did. When I say a lot of them, I'd say maybe four or five. Our unit was so small. We only had like a dozen pilots. We always kidded around with each other. None of us had any problems with flying with each other, none of us did.

RV: Was that unusual or typical do you think?

JB: I think it was pretty typical unless you had one that was just so out of it, when I say out of it, I don't mean mentally. I mean that he shouldn't have been there to begin

with. He shouldn't have been flying. He shouldn't have gotten his wings. No. I mean we all relied on each other and we trusted each other.

RV: You talked about some of the things you guys would do to unwind. When you would come back, you would discuss your mission that day, how much drinking how much card playing? What was going on as far as just your basic entertainment?

JB: Pretty much we'd have a few cold ones. Majority of the time was writing letters to home.

RV: Really? How often did you write?

JB: I wrote everyday.

RV: How often did you receive mail?

JB: Just about everyday.

RV: How important was that to you?

JB: Very, very. It was our link to the real world.

RV: Were you ever able to make any of the MARs phone calls?

JB: Yes, I made about six of them.

RV: Really? How were they?

JB: Well, it was astonishingly clear. Except for getting used to saying, "over". They would patch us through from there thee we'd be patched through relay with a Hamm operator in the States somewhere. That was the only charge we had was from there to wherever we were calling. It was pretty neat because the only reason we had to stay "over" was they knew when to throw the switch. A couple out of Saigon and a couple around Xuan Loc.

RV: Were you able to keep u with news from the United States while you were there?

JB: Yes, we did. We got pretty good. Richard this phone keeps buzzing. Can you just hold on and let me try to get this?

RV: Absolutely. So you were able to keep up with news from home?

JB: Yes.

RV: Was alcohol use any kind of a problem that you saw?

JB: At the time I was over there, no. I understand I think starting around '68 is when it started to get bad. Again drugs, I never saw them. Like I said I may have been

totally naive about it, but I never saw them. Again I think in '68 is when that drug use started to get pretty rampant.

RV: Did your unit have any pets?

JB: I had a monkey.

RV: You did, really?

JB: Yes.

RV: What was his name?

JB: Mama John. No, Baby John because we had a crew chief that we used to call Mama John. It was a little Rhesus monkey.

RV: Where did you get him?

JB: I think I inherited him when we first got over there somebody gave him to me, her. I had her for I guess about three months. She got loose in the jungle and she never came back.

RV: That was it?

JB: Yes.

RV: Would she stay in the tent with you all?

JB: We pretty much tied her outside. She liked to make a mess. She got loose one night and got into the officer's club and just tore it to pieces. The colonel was looking for the owner of the monkey.

RV: Did he find you?

JB: Nope (laughs). Warrant officer's have a way of disappearing.

RV: How about any experiences with wild animals or anything of that nature?

JB: I didn't have any personally. I know a couple of the guys said they shot a couple of elephants.

RV: From the helicopter?

JB: Yes. I never saw any personally.

RV: Were you able to attend any USO shows?

JB: Yes, I saw Martha Rae. I saw Hank Williams. I saw Nancy Sinatra. Those were the three that I got to see.

RV: Where did you see them?

JB: Right there at our base camp they came in

RV: How was that for you? Was that helpful? Was it fun?

JB: It was fun. It was really enjoyable.

RV: How about R&Rs?

JB: I took one in country R&R to Vung Tao for a weekend. Vung Tao was considered the French Riviera of the Orient. Then I took a week in Honolulu.

RV: Were you able to see your wife?

JB: Yes, she flew over. That's when I told her I was going to Texas. That's when things started to fall apart.

RV: Meaning you ere going to Texas, after you finished your tour?

JB: Right.

RV: What was Vung Tao like? Did it live up to its reputation?

JB: Yes, it did. They had some great French restaurants. It was right on the China Sea. It was beautiful.

RV: Do you want to talk about Hawaii at all?

JB: It doesn't bother me. I spent five days there and thought everything was fine. Saw a lot, then after she got back to the States, the letters started to get less and less. She never mentioned anything about me coming home then. The big thing was she didn't want to go to Texas.

RV: How difficult was it jumping out of a warzone, going to Hawaii without any depressurization, if you will?

JB: That really wasn't bad. I waited like nine months before I went on R&R so that wouldn't have that much time back. The worst time I had was when I returned. I'm in dress uniform and waiting at the helipad and my unit's aircraft landed and they unloaded six KIAs. Before I could get on they had to hose the aircraft out. That was worse. I had no problem over in Honolulu.

RV: How did you deal with that death that you could see almost daily?

JB: Ere but for the grace of God, go I. That was the only way I could think of it. Before I went into the service, I worked part time for a funeral home. So death, I was used to being around it. It was overwhelming to see there at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, it was practically a full hanger that was nothing but mortuary. They worked around the clock, the embalmers. You could hear them as you walked by. You would see the

caskets all stacked up outside, the silver, metal caskets. With the exception of a friend of mine that was the one that hit me hard. The other ones I didn't know them. It wasn't personal. With him, it was. Then again, it was a matter of survival and you just had to keep going.

RV: How much did your spiritual beliefs change or how much were they altered by your experience in Vietnam?

JB: Well, I was born and raised Catholic. I took it into Vietnam with me. It stayed with me throughout my tour. I would never miss mass on Sunday, even then unless I was on a mission. It didn't hurt my spirituality at all.

RV: Did you ever experience or see or witness any racial issues while you were there?

JB: One, we had a black major. When you were asking me I just didn't want to throw it out to you. He was again like I said this was in '66 still a lot of Marin Luther King and all that. This gentleman, he was a very, very good officer. However, I always considered him black first and then a man.

RV: Why is that?

JB: Just the way he acted. He came across that he was 'you don't mess with me because I'm black'. I never looked at anybody like that. Back in the '50s when I was just out of high school and working I worked with plenty of blacks and I just thought the world of him. This guy, he had a chip on his shoulder. He got into it with my boss one time. They were sitting around one night in their tent. I through the grapevine heard about it. My boss came right out and said, "Look you are one hell of a good officer and you're a man first, that happens to be black". He didn't see it that way. "I'm black". It's a shame, but that's still today up here. Down there you don't have the incidents that we do up here.

RV: Meaning up where?

JB: In the Baltimore area. It is a real shame. It's like we owe them. Well, I could say the same thing from what I've been through, I'm owed. But, no I just keep on plugging away. That's the way I look at things.

RV: Are you talking about the civilian population in general or the military population?

JB: Civilian, not so much military. They've come around as far as everybody being equal is good in the service. Civilian wise, no it's terrible up here. It's a shame. It shouldn't be that way.

RV: Going back to Vietnam, thinking back on it was there a particular humorous incident that comes to mind when you think back?

JB: Just the time when that friend of mine fell into the bunker. That was our promotion party and he had trouble getting back to the base camp. In fact he fell twice. You could get him back to the tent. At night when the PX would shut down, they'd have guards posted around it. On the way back from the club he fell into the ditch by the PX. He's moaning and groaning and these young troopers are, "Who there? What's going on"? He said, "I thought I was going to be shot on the spot". Then when he got back to our tent, he fell into the bunker and laid there all night.

RV: Just let him sleep there?

JB: Yes.

RV: You mentioned on your questionnaire an incident about flying out of Tan Son Nhut and…

JB: Yes, the little guy.

RV: Yes, sir.

JB: When helicopters came out of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, since it was a very active air base and there were a lot of fighters and cargo planes and the commercials were coming in and out of there, we had to stay low. We had to stay below 50 feet. Until we got clear of the control zone. I took off out of the helipad one morning. I guess I was about 25 feet. You move fast because you went full speed because you wanted to get out of there. First off, you're low and there's trees all around. You don't know who's out there. You zig zagged going out. You wouldn't be a good target because they wouldn't know which way you were going to be moving. I came around this cops of trees. Like I said I'm about 25 feet and I'm doing about 120. All of a sudden right in front of me is this rice paddy. This old papa san is sitting there fishing. I must have crossed over his head probably 10 feet above his head. Uh-oh, the gunner said, "Sir the guy is swimming". You couldn't here us coming, we were coming that fast. Once you got over them it was like woof. He just dove. He dove right into the rice paddy. That was kind of

funny. We laughed about hat all the way back. That friend of mine, I guess quite a few humorous things. Try to bring them all back now it's kind of difficult to do. Of course you would laugh at the least little thing because that kept your sense of humor going.

RV: Yes, I wanted to ask you, how important was it to keep your sense of humor?

JB: Very important. Let me try this one more time, hold on.

RV: Let me ask you about something that many helicopter pilots have said happened on a daily basis. Do you remember a particularly brave action that you witnessed while in country?

JB: Boy, the brave action that I can remember is that when our unit was under attack and this, he was a captain took his crew and put them in an aircraft that was still under maintenance and flew it out of there. He didn't know whether this aircraft was even going to fly. He went. The gauges were all down. He went strictly by instinct.

RV: He wanted to save the aircraft?

JB: Save the aircraft and get his crew out of there.

RV: Now you stayed for one year. You said you kept that short-timers calendar from the very beginning. I assume that you kept that the entire time you were there.

JB: Oh, yes. Everyday. Every night we'd "x" another one out.

RV: How did it feel when you started to rally get short? Did you curb your activities or did you continue?

JB: Well, we continued up to about a week before we left. That was our unit policy. That's the only thing we would do. That would be strictly safe, administrative missions. Another policy was that the rotating pilots that were going home were flow. Instead of having to take a bus we flew them back to the replacement depo. We gave them the ride of their lives, 500 feet all the way. Now, except myself. Since I was in maintenance I grounded an aircraft. I said, "That needs a test flight". Well, I was a test pilot. So, my replacement rode back with me to the replacement depot. I flew myself. Most of the other pilots, all the other pilots, they were in the back, going back. But I flew myself and I flew back at 5,000 feet until I got right over the replacement depot and then I just spiraled in. Nobody's going to get me on the last trip.

RV: How did that last trip feel for you?

JB: It felt great. It felt great. I got back there and less than 24 hours I was out of country.

RV: How did you process out?

JB: Well, we went into the replacement depot and of course we had our orders with us. We went into this office and signed in. We got our sleeping quarters for the night. We were just there over night. They told us what time to be at what place and that was it. The rest of the time we were on our own. Didn't go anywhere. Didn't want to go anywhere.

RV: Right. Where was the replacement depot?

JB: That was in Long Binh. Then they would bus from Bien Hoa air base and that's where we took off out of.

RV: Did you fly civilian air out?

JB: Yes, TWA.

RV: What was the flight like?

JB: Well, I'll never forget he take off. We were taxing out. I'm sure you've flown many of times where the aircraft gets out there and lines up on the runway and then they put the throttles to it. Well not there, you were cleared to go. We were probably rolling 40 miles an hour before we even turned onto the active runway. He just bored it. He held it on the ground for as long as possible. Bien Hoa was the longest runway in the world. It was like 13,000 feet. He held it on the ground. When he pulled that 707 off the ground it was like a rocket. He wanted to get an altitude as fast as possible to stay away from the small arms fire. Phu Loi was probably about eight miles away, which was where the 1st division was out of Binh Hoa. I'd say by the time we got over Phu Loi we were about 9,000 or 10,000 feet. I mean he was just going. After that it was uneventful.

RV: Did he make an announcement that you had left Vietnamese air space?

JB: Yes, he came across and then everybody cheered. Then we headed toward Guam.

RV: How did you feel?

JB: Big relief. Wanted to get home. Wanted to continue with my life. Little did I know that my wife at the time was going to tell me that it was over. It was a relief.

Didn't sleep at all, all the way. Went through two sunsets. Took off on a Saturday morning and landed in San Francisco Saturday evening, 5:30.

RV: What was it like at the airport, did you have any problems?

JB: Well, we went into Travis Air Force Base. We got there like I said at 5:00. We had to go through customs. They asked us if we were going to be permanent change of station or we were separating. Permanent change of station went in one line and customs didn't even look at anything. Separation they looked through everything. This other guy that I was with that I had met on the plane, we had to get to San Francisco we had a 7:30 flight. This was like I said, 5:00 on Saturday evening. We jumped a cab, we made it but we were running to the gate to get on the airplane. I brought back a Chinese Communist rifle that had been cleared. I did everything legal. The only thing I had to do was hand that to the stewardess and she put it up in the cockpit with the captain. It was an overnight flight back to Baltimore.

RV: What was it like when you got back to Baltimore?

JB: Well, we landed about 6:00 in the morning and my wife was there to meet me. Of course I was jet lagged. Then we went to church that Sunday, three hours later. I think I was out of it for two days though because of the jet lag.

RV: What was it like transitioning back to civilian life so quickly? I know you stayed in the Army for a while longer, but just getting back into the United States and being back here?

JB: I was very jumpy. If I heard a backfire or when I was in Mineral Wells they were blasting because they had a quarry. I'd go under the table.

RV: Really?

JB: I was very, very jumpy about any loud noises like that. I was told that's normal.

RV: How long did that last?

JB: About a month.

RV: Were there any other incidents that happened or anything that would trigger something for you?

JB: No that was pretty much it. I didn't have any temper flare-ups or anything like that. I pretty much just blended right back in. The only thing I had a problem with

was my wife at the time. In fact, I was even grounded at Ft. Walters. The flight surgeon said, "You can't fly. You're just too worked up". He even talked to her and it didn't do any good. I tried everything I could to keep it together, but it didn't work.

RV: So you got transferred to Ft. Walters?

JB: Ft. Walters, Texas.

RV: How much longer did you stay active?

JB: Fifteen months. Then I stayed there for another year as a civilian instructor pilot.

RV: What were your duties in those last 15 months?

JB: I was a primary helicopter instructor pilot. I took the kids that had never even been in one and got them through their solo and their primary one, test flight, check rides. That was it. We had it pretty easy. Five hours a day was all we worked.

RV: I'm sorry are you there?

JB: Yes.

RV: Did you discuss your Vietnam experience with other people? How much did they ask about it?

JB: When we first got back?

RV: Yes sir and then into those 15 months thereafter.

JB: The students would ask us what it would be like and things like that.

RV: Because they were going right?

JB: Yes, they were going. That's what they were being trained for. In fact, we were told that we could not even wash a student out.

RV: Really?

JB: Right because they needed the bodies so much. They had to resign. They could resign. The unofficial word was you go up there and scare the pants off of them and then they'll quit if you don't think that they're going to make it.

RV: Did that work?

JB: It worked with some, it did. With others they made it through and some of them were even sent back for additional training after going to Vietnam. They weren't good enough to fly over there. They pretty much left us alone when we were instructor pilots. It was like a five hour a day job. We didn't have any extra duties or anything.

RV: How much did you keep up with the continuing wart effort in Southeast Asia once you had returned back Stateside?

JB: Just what was on the news. You know we would watch the news to see what was going on. "Yeah we were there", things like that. Most of the pilots were married and they had their own lives. They just went back into being a married guy. Of course I wasn't. After my wife left me I got a couple roommates. We used to sit around and talk. This one guy, Ed John he was up north and he was rooming with me. We would sit and talk about our war stories. Really it was the funny things we were talking about. We didn't talk about the bad stuff.

RV: Why not do you think?

JB: I don't know. Just didn't want to talk about it anymore. It wasn't that it bothered us. That's in the past; that was our past life. Now we're into this new life.

RV: What did you think of the anti-war movement that was going on around you?

JB: I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand it at all. I used to tease people. They'd say what are you going to do when you go back? I said, "We're going to go to Detroit and fly gun ships". I'm from the old school. My country, right or wrong. The demonstrations I think did more harm than good. They divided the country. They didn't help at all when it came to the prosecution of the war. Again when I came home, that was in '67 I mean sure I was called a "Baby Killer".

RV: You were actually called that?

JB: Yes. "You don't know what you're talking about". That's what I would say.

RV: Who told you that?

JB: These young peace-nicks. It just didn't do any good to have the guys over there hearing about all his that was going on back here. That's where a lot of them I'm sure got the attitude. "What am I doing this for"? Again I laid a lot of it at the feet of the politicians. They didn't want the military to run that operation. I'm not sorry I went. That's one thing to this day I don't regret a day of it. A lot of them come back and this post-traumatic distress syndrome, which I never bought into. I always thought it was a crutch. Richard, I have been through so much in my life, when I hear of people doing that, I told you about my wife. She left me after I came back. I waited five years I re-

married. I ended up marrying somebody that slept with everybody in the county. I didn't know it at the time. So that was another one. Then I married a girl and two years after we married she died. When I look back and I thought wait a minute. You get up everyday, you face everyday. I don't want to hear this stuff. I get very, very upset. Don't give me that, be a man. Like I said this is old school talking. I know that all these psychiatrists and psychologists are saying this now days, I wasn't raised that way and I didn't live that way. I have been down flat on my back so many times that I can't count. I pick myself up, dust myself off and keep on going. Now that I've gotten to the point now that I've retired. I made it. I have a very good friend of mine he said, "Ron, if I'd have been through half of what you'd been through I would have shot myself". I said, "I cant' even think that way". I'm not patting myself on the back when I say this Richard. I'm just saying life is too precious. To let something get to you and take away something that you can control, no. No, I don't buy that. Things you can't control, you can't. You have to accept.

RV: Right.

JB: I think I transitioned very well back even considering what I went through with my wife.

RV: No disabilities, physical disabilities?

JB: Nope. Some people call me an airhead (laughter). No, like I said I was very fortunate. All the years I flew I never scratched one, never got hurt. I feel blessed.

RV: What did you think of the media coverage of the war? You said you watched television.

JB: I think it was totally, totally slanted.

RV: Toward whom or what?

JB: Against the U.S. The reason I say that and this war in Iraq had actually reinforced how I felt because of the embedded reporters they had in Iraq. That was live. They couldn't change it. What they were doing in Vietnam is they would go out with us then they would come back and write their story the way they wanted to. Not exactly what happened.

RV: How often did you have reporters flying with you?

JB: I didn't have them that often, but I did see them. This deal with Lieutenant Calley and that My Lai incident. I just don't think the whole truth has ever come out on that.

RV: Really?

JB: Again you didn't know who was who over there. It was either you or me. Its' certainly not going to be me if I have anything to do with it. I'm not saying I'm blood thirsty or anything like that. Well there was one incident that didn't happen in our base it happened at another one. We go the word and his was one of the reasons why your commanding officer would not allow locals on the base. This little girl came and went, came and went. Oh for a month or two months she was cleaning up the tents for the GIs. She was getting paid for it. Then one day she walked in there and reached under her dress and blew herself up and a bunch of GIs. Because she was embedded there and she was told when you pull this, it will be a real nice surprise for your GI friends. She didn't know what she was doing. This girl was like 14 years old. When you hear of Lieutenant Calley and My Lai and all the children and all that he didn't know.

RV: Even the kids?

JB: You did not know.

RV: So you think the media basically had portrayed what the American forces were doing inaccurately?

JB: Yes we were animals. That's the way that it was portrayed. Then you know they reported that they shot up so many water buffalo, but they didn't say who was hiding behind the water buffalo. That's why there's only one channel that I'll watch news on now and that's Fox news. Especially when you hear what happened with CNN. They knew what was going on in Iraq years ago about the torture and all that but they kept quiet because they wanted to stay there. That's not true reporting. That's not reporting the news. Do it the way it should have been done. I don t think there would have been the demonstrations that there were.

RV: Did you think that the United States policy of Vietnamization would work? Did you think the South Vietnamese indigenous forces could actually defend their country without the United States?

JB: No.

RV: Why not?

JB: First off they were cowards. That might be a little strong. Maybe they weren't cowards but they depended on us too much. That we were the ones to go out there and clean up the mess. No I don't think it ever would have worked given the leader ship that the South Vietnamese had political and militarily. First off, they didn't have the drive that the North had. The Vietcong and the north they had an overwhelming passion about that. The south didn't.

RV: Why do you think the South did not?

JB: I think they were just tired. They'd had the French in there for eons. They had always been under conflict for the past 200 years. This was nothing new and they were just tired of it. You know let it go whichever way it goes. From what I understand now, you and I can go ahead and take vacation and go to Vietnam.

RV: Yes sir absolutely.

JB: Talk about funny incidents. There was one funny one. I went to a reunion one time. This gentleman from our old unit he got up and spoke. He also belongs to the VVA, Vietnam Veterans of America. He said, "We went back and we went back as a group. We had a major, a Vietnamese major was our tour guide. We told him we wanted to see where we had our operations and things like that. They were very open about it and very hospitable". This major was taking them around and so one day he said, "I wore my Black Horse shirt". This major looked at him and this major walked with a limp and he looked at that insignia and he said, "Black Horse". The guy said, "Yes, Black Horse, Black Horse" and he started pointing to his leg. Black Horse was the one that shot his leg.

RV: Really? Wow.

JB: They laughed about it. At first I didn't know how he was going to take it and then he started laughing. Everything was alright. No, I just feel like the politicians let us down there.

RV: What do you think the United States could have done differently?

JB: Let the military run the war. Just like George Bush did with Iraq.

RV: How did you feel in 1973, when the United States withdrew its forces?

BJ: I was disgusted. I can't believe that this is going on. Then in '75 when they airlifted I watched every bit of that on TV airlifting out of the Embassy. So sad the people that they did leave behind. It was just like what did we do it for? Was it all just a waste of time and money and lives? But again you just pick yourself up, dust yourself off and keep on going.

RV: Why do you think that other Vietnam veterans have not been able to do that? Not a majority of them, but some? I'm talking about really the mythology of the Vietnam vet that this individual is a disturbed, kind of troublemaker. Where the majority of Vietnam vets went on to live very productive lives.

JB: That's what I was saying about that post-traumatic stress syndrome. I think it's a crutch. I think it's gotten to the point, well not so much now since it's been so long. There for the longest time they had the impression, "You owe me. I'm going to do what I want and you're still going to have to take care of me". I just don't buy into it. I think they would have gone down the same road had they not been to Vietnam. That's just my opinion. Like I said I'm no pro at it. My boss at the post office, I told you I worked part time at the post-office, he's a Vietnam vet. He was Special Forces. You know what they were in.

RV: Yes, sir.

JB: He's just so laid back. He looks out for his. There's quite a few vets there at the post office and he looks out for them all. Like today he gave me a t-shirt. We have a bridge here in Baltimore it used to be called the Hanover Street Bridge. It's now the Vietnam Memorial Bridge. He gave me this shirt and it's got the bridge on it and this and that. In fact he wants your website because he wants to get a hold of you.

RV: Ok. I'll be sure to give that to you when we finish.

JB: He also said he may be posting it in the bulletin.

RV: Ok, great. I'll make sure I get that to you when we finish the interview.

JB: I just can't buy it. Like I said, here's a guy who was Special Forces and everything else and now he's a postman. Whether or not they had gone there, they would have probably ended up the same way.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about your individual experience in Vietnam?

JB: I would have gone over single. I wouldn't have wanted any ties back here. Mainly not so much that it's what happened to me when I got home, when she left. I would have waited to marry her when I got back. The way I went over I think was the best way to go with the unit. A lot of times I say, don't ever do that because the logistics is a nightmare. But at least you're with people that you know, that you've trained with. You go over there as a replacement, you're totally alone. I wouldn't have really changed anything, except for the going over thing.

RV: What do you think was the most significant thing that you learned while you were there?

JB: As a pilot, you have to have total trust in your co-pilot and your crew. I'll have to say crew, not just your pilot and co-pilot. Because we had to operate as a well-oiled machine together. Trust in your co-workers, it would have to be. Alone you couldn't make it. Working together you were going to pull through.

RV: Looking back on it now, how much do you think the war has affected your life and how do you think it has most significantly?

JB: I think the marriage was a big thing. I think that how can I put this? I think I'm a better person for it. I think the military- war or not- I think the military did me a lot of good. I think that I'm a better man for it, I really do. When I went in to the service I was a nerd. I'm far from a nerd now. In fact my wife says I can tell when you get upset because you're military voice comes out. I think it's made me a better man, more of a man. I went to a high school reunion back in February. The people could not believe. I hadn't seen some of these since 1958. Again I was a nerd then. They couldn't believe that I put 25 years in the Army. "Not you"!? You know? I just wasn't like that. One thing it did do for me and I don't know if it's a good thing or not but I cannot work inside.

RV: What do you mean?

JB: I could never sit behind a desk. I would go out of my mind. I have to be outside. I think a lot of that is the military because I was always outside. I feel very cramped if I'm stuck behind a desk.

RV: Does that have a lot to do with your helicopter flying?

JB: I think that had a lot to do with it. I get very bored behind the desk. Right now I'm in my office. I come up here to write bills out and man I want to get out of here. I don't like it. Sitting and talking on the phone is a different story. Sitting behind a desk and dancing through paperwork, no not me. I used to be a bookworm. I still read a lot, but I used to be able to sit and do work at a desk for hours. No, not anymore.

RV: Have you read any books on Vietnam?

JB: Oh, yeah. What was that one? Oh, my God. It was about a helicopter pilot. I gave it to somebody to read and never got it back. The guy's in Florida and I know that. Really, really, really a good book. A lot of it I've read is fiction. I'll be honest with you.

RV: You do read about the war?

JB: Yes.

RV: Do you think the war has been covered adequately in literature since the war ended?

JB: I think they've done a pretty good job. In fact I think things have turned around now where the veterans are getting more respect than they ever did. When I first got back you didn't go in to the 7-11 in uniform.

RV: What would happen to you if you did?

JB: Just snide remarks from the peace-nicks and stuff like that, "Baby killer". That type of thing. They told us don't stop on the way home. Go home, change your clothes, then go back out.

RV: Do you think that's changed today?

JB: Yes.

RV: How about for Vietnam veterans?

JB: Yes it has. It's amazing the young people that ask me about Vietnam now.

RV: What do you tell them?

JB: Pretty much what we've gone over. Hey I was there to do a job. My son, he's 30 years old. He is so proud of me that I was in Vietnam as a helicopter pilot. He tells everybody. My wife, she is again so proud of me that I fought in a war and came back and then went on with my life. She considers me a hero. I just did my job. This office she decorated. She's got my discharge. She's got air medal certificates on the

wall. My diplomas from flight school and she had a picture I gave you. She had that made for me for Christmas.

RV: Yes, sir.

JB: I've got a wall downstairs in the family room that's got a picture of the Vietnam Wall. I don't know if you've ever seen that picture. It's about 118x13 high. It's beautiful, beautiful picture and that's hanging there. She's got my Black Horse stuff there. She said "that's yours". She's got a model helicopter down there for me too. You know very much accepted now.

RV: Let me ask you about the way the American public kind of learns about Vietnam and how they view Vietnam today. A lot of it is done through Hollywood, through the movies. What do you think of the movies that have come out on the war?

JB: I think there's only been one or two that I've seen that were anything near realistic. One was *Hamburger Hill*. *Platoon* was a joke.

RV: How so?

JB: To me, the way it happened they put a year in two hours. The only thing you saw was Charlie Sheen going out there in one big operation and then he was going home. It went on. *Apocalypse Now* was a joke. I don't know if you've seen it.

RV: Yes, sir.

JB: With that cavalry officer standing there with his sword, get off my back, he never did that. *Hamburger Hill*.

RV: Why was *Hamburger Hill* good?

JB: It was pretty much true from what I understand, true story of actually what happened there. That was what the movie was for was just fact. It wasn't to show a guy doing this and that. There was another one that I saw he doesn't act anymore. Michael J. Fox.

RV: Michael J. Fox, right. *Casualties of War*.

JB: Sean Penn was in it. That made me sick. Again I wasn't on the ground. I never heard of them raping girls and all that. *Hamburger Hill*. There was one other one and I can't think of the name of it that was fairly realistic. My wife doesn't like to watch those kinds of movies with me because I just shoot them down. "That never happened. That was never that way". I'll tell you one I really like and that was *Good Morning*

Vietnam. That guy really was there. He was put out. I remember that coming on the radio in the morning, "Good Morning Vietnam". What he did as far s going out, looking for this and that I don't know how true that is. There was an Adrien Gronower. *Green Beret*, I guess it was fairly accurate the way those forward operations operated. They did, they would come in like that in rows then they'd pull out during the day. There was one that there were two personalities. There was an American colonel or a major and a North Vietnamese and it was about a little kid. I can't remember the name of it.

RV: When did it come out?

JB: Oh, my Lord.

RV: Approximately?

JB: I guess five years ago.

RV: Really?

JB: It was where the North Vietnamese said at the end that he did respect this gentleman, the American. I can't remember the name of the movie. It was pretty good.

RV: How about the latest one, *We Were Soliders* with Mel Gibson?

JB: That was very good. That one I liked. That one was realistic.

RV: In what way?

JB: Just what they went through over there. That was I think the 11th air assault. That was the four runner of the 1st cav. That was more to actually what went on over there. I know it was a lot of dramatization with the women waiting for the cab driver to pull up with Western Union. See, I always thought an officer would bring it. Somebody from the military. No, that was a very good movie. My wife and I went to see that and we totally enjoyed it. I really did. I don't know. I think a lot of Hollywood, of course they trump it up for selling purposes too. *We Were Soldiers* was very good. That's one that I didn't think of. I think that might be the one that I'm talking about.

RV: They did portray it from the North Vietnamese side as well, briefly throughout the movie. Let me take a break just for a moment. Let me ask you about your perception of Vietnam today. What do you think about the country today?

JB: I don't really see much of it with the news being everywhere else in the world. It seems as though it has quieted down. I do have to say one thing in the

Vietnamese favor. That was when they went into Cambodia, the killing fields. They went in and they got rid of that guy. Can you hold Richard, I got a beep.

RV: Go ahead, you were talking about Vietnam, Cambodia.

JB: Yes, I do have to give to their credit they went in there and got rid of Paul Todd and cleaned that up. It's been quiet. You don't hear a lot about human abuse or anything else over there now. Pictures I have seen it doesn't look like it's changed much.

RV: Would you ever want to go back?

JB: I wouldn't mind going back to see what it's like.

RV: What would you do if you went back?

JB: Well depending on the freedom of movement you had, I wouldn't mind going to see if the old base camp was still around. I'm sure it's not. I'd rather take my wife over. This is where I was. Not that I left anything there. Just to go, education for her.

RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?

JB: Not really. We have so many Orientals up here Richard. We have Koreans. We have Vietnamese. But as far as, no. I'd say no.

RV: Tell me about your experiences at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. Have you been?

JB: Yes, I have. It's very moving. It's very somber, very quiet, solemn. I found a buddy of mine, Junior Evans on there.

RV: The 18-year-old pilot?

JB: Yes, he's on there. It's very tastefully done. I think it's how would I put it? As far as memorials go I think it's got everything in Washington beat. The way they built it so the politicians couldn't see it. I think it was a great idea. It's like walking on hollowed ground. Where if you see the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial and all that "Ok, they're there". But these were real people that in our lifetime... It meant quite a bit when I went over there.

RV: How many times have you visited?

JB: I've only been there once. I hosted a reunion of the Black Horse here in Baltimore. I arranged for the bus trip over there.

RV: How about the rest of the men in your unit? How did they react?

JB: They were all just about the same. There were tears in everybody's eyes. It brought back a lot of memories. It brought back a lot of pain.

RV: How do you think the U.S. government has treated it's Vietnam veterans over the years? Have they been taken care of?

JB: They're starting to take care of them now. Of course I have no disabilities but I am eligible for the veteran's hospital. I did an Agent Orange screen back in the '80s just in case. My boy was born with a heart murmur and my daughter was born with ear problems. I just did that to protect them more than anything.

RV: What were the results?

JB: He's fine. She's fine.

RV: Your tests there was no detection?

JB: No there was nothing. They just said that I had been under a lot of stress. I am in their files. That was the big thing I wanted to do. As far as, well I can't just say the Vietnam veteran. Military-wide I think the government has let us down. They have taken so much away from us. When I went in we were promised if we spent 20 years, free medical care and all this and that. Well it's not happening. Of course I get it for a lot cheaper. I pay $400.00 a year. I have all John Hopkins doctors. John Hopkins is premier. I can't complain. It's little things like that. It doesn't get under my craw, but a lot of them it does. I have full benefits on post. I'm close to two military posts here. In fact, my boat is going to be tied up over at Aberdeen Privy rounds. I had it at a civilian place for $2,000.00 a year and I'm going there for $182.00.

RV: That's not bad, not bad at all.

JB: As far as, besides the medical the retirement's nice and the benefits that we get are ok. We can go anywhere in the world for free. You know they do keep in touch. I have to say that. We get newsletters, *Army Echoes* as to what's happening and things like that. I guess overall it hasn't been bad.

RV: You stayed in, after you got out in '68 you took a couple years off and then you went to the Army National Guard. Why did you choose to go back in?

JB: Well, to begin with I loved to fly and I missed it. It was extra money at the time. I could just see down the road that if I stayed I'd have a retirement check. I enjoyed the camaraderie. I really missed the service. I'm sorry I ever got out.

RV: Really? You stayed for 19 more years until 1989.

JB: I'm sorry I ever got out of active duty. I wish I would have stayed active.

RV: In the National Guard what did you do on all those weekends?

JB: Believe it or not I was on maintenance there too.

RV: Really?

JB: I was a test pilot and did a lot of training missions.

RV: Well, Mr. Ballweg is there anything else that you would like to discuss to day that we have not discussed in our two sessions?

JB: No I think we've covered it all. I've relived quite s few years.

RV: Ok, well we'll go ahead and officially end the interview with Mr. Ron Ballweg, than you very much for your time sir.

JB: Ok.