Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Ms. Jennifer Young. I am in Lubbock, Texas at the Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech University and Miss Young you are in Fenton, Missouri just outside Kirkwood, Missouri, which I take it, is close to St. Louis?

Jennifer Young: Right.

RV: Okay, great. It is November 7, Thursday morning, 9:25 and Jenny, I’ll call you Jenny since you told me that I could, Jenny could you start with some basic biographical information when were you born, where were you born?

JY: I was born January 16, 1947 in St. Louis, Missouri.

RV: And did you grow up in St. Louis or did your family move from there?

JY: [No], I grew up in the St. Louis area, Webster Groves, Missouri which is a suburb of St. Louis. We were not a real mobile family at all. As a matter of fact, I went to the same grade school and high school as my own father.

RV: Oh, wow a lot of continuity.

JY: Right.

RV: What was your childhood like, how would you describe it?

JY: I was the oldest of three children and the only girl. Looking back on it, it was a very, very kind of normal stable loving childhood where I did the typical things of school and sports with the preparation of going off to the college. Two younger brothers;
[I was] probably a little bit of a tomboy, but not too much, and again my father had his own business so he didn’t even change jobs. He wound up working the same place for sixty-fives year but I knew that I wanted to see the world. I knew from the get go that I would go off to college, leave home.

RV: Where did that come from, your desire to see the world?

JY: I don’t know. I would have to say maybe movies and TV shows, large influence from that standpoint.

RV: Did your parents encourage you or were they agreeable to your dreams and what you wanted to do?

JY: I would say they were agreeable and did not put up any obstacles whatsoever. The idea of going off to college was something that they believed in as well because each of them had done. So, from that standpoint and actually once I was in college and I chose Purdue University which was about three hundred miles east of St. Louis and I would take the train back and forth to school for the different holidays but they would take me there and pick me up each [year] time and they really didn’t bat an eye when I said I want to spend a year on the year abroad program I kind of like and I want to do it and they bat an eye. Then I decided to do that year abroad program my senior year at Purdue so I could have three contiguous years as a college student, sorority girl enjoying the Saturday afternoon football and then go off. I didn’t want to not be there for a year and then come back and try to pick up the pieces and figure out how to re-integrate myself into the American campus life. Actually it was that environment, when you’re in a sorority, one of the things you have to do as a pledge is memorize everyone’s name and their major and if their pinned, they’re boyfriend’s name. I remember having to do that. When I was coming back for my junior year everybody was abuzz with what Kitty had chosen to do and I said, “What are you talking about?” My gosh she went to Vietnam and I said, “Kitty went to Vietnam?” Wait a minute I remember from memorizing her major that she was not in the school of nursing, how could somebody who majored in ____,” and it was some academic subject, “how could someone like that go to Vietnam?” “Oh, it’s some kind of special program.” And I thought, man, if Kitty can do it, I want to do it. It was the Red Cross program called Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas, SRAO, and so I immediately started looking into that as a junior in college, knowing that you had
to be a college graduate in order to qualify. I’m probably jumping ahead a little from your
questions.

RV: That’s okay. We definitely want to talk about all of that, so that’s no
problem at all. So, basically going to Vietnam, doing all that, fit in with where you came
from as a little girl, just saying I want to do certain things myself that are different.

JY: Yes, right.

RV: What kind of business did your father own?

JY: Manufacturing.

RV: Okay, what was he manufacturing?

JY: He manufactured wire products, for example cotter pins that you see in
machinery, S hooks that you see hanging baskets. It’s really too an industrial market.
The products that we make go into products that other manufacturers make. He did not
serve in World War II because of a boyhood injury that prevented him from ever passing
the physical so I didn’t even have that kind of orientation although my father had, by
being a young man back on the home front. Back then ambulance services, like to get to
the site of an automobile accident, were actually provided by funeral homes. So he was a
volunteer ambulance driver when he wasn’t at work and he became a member of civil
defense. So I think serving however you can, or serving your country, or doing things for
the community was always there in what my parents did. Serving my country just made
a whole lot of sense and then if I could do it with [my college] major, in other words, I
didn’t major in nursing and I wasn’t a nurse and I didn’t really want to be a female
soldier, I didn’t want to be a WAC or a WAVE because that just didn’t seem like me but
here was an opportunity to serve my country in a capacity that I seemed to be qualified
for, so I kind of jumped on that.

RV: Did your mother work?

JY: No, she was a schoolteacher until she started having a family but she; actually
she used to do volunteer work for the Red Cross bloodmobiles. I used to see her put on a
Red Cross uniform and say well, I’m going off to, [for example] Anheuser Busch to sign
up blood donors, I was a competitive swimmer so I used to teach swimming lessons for
the Red Cross in our local pool, so to hear about a Red Cross program, I thought oh, that
makes a lot of sense to me. Red Cross has been part of my life all along.
RV: So it did influence you then?

JY: Yes, I think so.

RV: So, in St. Louis there you said you went to the same grade school and high school as your father, what were your high school years like?

JY: I was probably more into studying real hard and sports. I was involved in a lot of different activities and had a lot of friends but I really think that my female friends were still -- and this was not voiced, I never remember [their] saying this, but it was like, “oh, when you go off to college you do it with the idea that at college you will meet the man that you’ll marry.” When I went off to college I quickly realized, “wait a minute there’s too much to see and do after college before settling down.” I would say it was a very traditional high school upbringing, the “rah rah” of Saturday afternoon football games. I was in sports, but I was what we call pre-Title IX, so sports for women, we weren’t really expected to go on and do great things [in sports] beyond high school.

RV: Right, what sports were you interested in?

JY: Well, I’m tall (actually my height kind of made it interesting for me in Vietnam. When you’re a six-foot woman in Vietnam you really get noticed. The locals there knew that the American men could be big but all of a sudden they saw a few women, its like whoa.) My sports were volleyball, basketball and field hockey. I was a competitive swimmer but I did not compete at the high school level or even at that age. I think I stopped competitive swimming when I was about fifteen.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in high school?

JY: Spanish, which eventually was my major. Spanish and then I did take Latin. I haven’t been asked about what my favorite subjects were, I can’t even think now beyond maybe just Spanish. I did well, but I was somebody who always probably tended to over study, in other words I’d study so much, being afraid that I’d flunk. This even carried over into college; study hard because I don’t want to flunk and then I’d wind up getting a real good grade but I’d spent a whole lot of time studying. In retrospect I kind of envy the people that know how to study just enough to do very well but then they free up their time so that they really do a bunch of different other things. I was okay; I did a lot of extracurricular stuff even in college.

RV: So when you get to Purdue, did you enjoy college life?
JY: Yes, I was somebody that applied to [only] one place and I never laid eyes on the campus until it was [time] to move in. I’d always heard about Purdue. I went to a large public high school, [my] being what I call a leading edge baby boomer, so therefore there were a lot of us graduating at the same time.

RV: What year did you graduate high school?

JY: ’64, high school, college, ’68. I didn’t want to go to a college that was the same size as the high school I was leaving behind so I thought okay; I want to go from a big high school to a big college. But I don’t want to go with the rest of the hoard to University of Missouri; I’ll go the other direction and look for a school that looks like that. Also I did not want a college or university that emptied on the weekends, I didn’t want a commuter [college], I wanted a campus life, I wanted people to be there like I was and you make friends and you do things and you enjoy what’s going on for weeks and weeks at a time and then you all go home for Thanksgiving and you all go home for Christmas.

RV: Well, do you have any really good memories of Purdue, things that stick out in your mind?

JY: Yes, I was thrilled to pieces with the [football stadium] card section. Because I liked sports I used to watch college football on Saturday afternoons on TV before I was college age and I would see some card sections that I thought were just super. I go to Purdue and I find out that they’ve got one. It was for freshman and it was in the end zone. I just thought it was so neat and then as a sophomore you don’t sit there because that’s for the new freshman class, but I was able to apply to get on a committee that coordinated the card section. You had to get the packets of cards together and you had to coordinate the flashes so that seat sixty-two knew to flash a green card for flash number fourteen, so I did that. Then my junior year I petitioned to head up the committee that I had served on my sophomore year and that was the Instructions Cards. This was before the days of computers so you actually hand stamped the colors on a grid card that went in the packet that went on the seat. They said, “Here’s your box of instruction cards,” and I’ll never forget, it was in a big wooden box with a padlock on it. They said you do not give this combination to anybody else because earlier they’d had trouble where somebody got into the box, changed one of the flashes and so what they thought was going to come up in the
Jennifer, you get this guard this with your life, and it was okay, yes I will. And that was the year Purdue went to the Rose Bowl. Purdue hadn’t been to the Rose Bowl in decades and sure enough, the very year that I was down on the field helping with the card section, seeing how things were going was the year that we went to the Rose Bowl, so I signed up for a trip out there to the Rose Bowl.

RV: Wow, so you got to go to Pasadena.

JY: Yes, I’ll never forget when I got the ticket to the Rose parade I looked at it and [the] ticket [cost] was $6.50 and I remember thinking at the time, oh, look at how expensive this is. Can you imagine paying $6.50 to go watch a parade? Well, years later I lived out there, out that way and I went to a parade and by then the tickets were sixty, seventy-five dollars, the real good bleacher seats. I got out of college exactly, I would say, what I wanted. I got the right distance from home, back and forth on the train, a lot of school spirit, card section, sorority, Rose Bowl and then a nice year abroad program, so I couldn’t ask for better.

RV: What sorority were you in?

JY: Delta Gamma.

RV: Now, you said, now Kitty, she was in Delta Gamma as well?

JY: Yes.

RV: So she’s the one who went to Vietnam first?

JY: Yes, I was just probably a little pledge to her. She didn’t realize that when I heard what she had done, what influence that had.

RV: Now, this is let’s see 1968, is when you decide to go, or is that, that was ’67?

JY: Let me think a minute. I was moving into the sorority house in the fall of ’66 when I heard what Kitty did. So here I was starting my junior year, so I immediately contacted the Red Cross because I knew that my senior year I would be gone. So I wanted to line up the Red Cross job before I even left for my senior year abroad because I wanted to know that I had a job to come back to. If the Red Cross didn’t want me, then I was going to stay in Europe. As I told somebody, I was going to wash dishes in a German castle somewhere or something, do something kind of funky but my real desire was to do the Red Cross. I have to stop and think. I lined up the Red Cross job, and the woman
who interviewed me, and fortunately the Midwest headquarters that was doing the recruiting was in St. Louis, so I could interview and touch base with them the times that I was coming home anyway for a school holiday and she said to me, she said [The woman who interviewed me said] “You know this program requires somebody to have finished four years of college. You have to be a college graduate and you’re just a junior, you have another year and a half to go.” I said, “Yes, but my senior year I’m not going to be around to have these interviews. I’m going to be across an ocean.” And she said “You mean to tell me that you’re about to leave your home for a whole year overseas as a student and then you want to turn right around and join the Red Cross and go to Vietnam?” and I said “Yes.” And she said, “Well, we will accept you into the program, but you are not under any obligation. I will well understand if you say, “Oooh, two years away from [home], out of the country, you’re right it is too much.” I said “Well, I appreciate you’re being that flexible, but I know I’m not going to change my mind.” There was no hesitation and no homesickness, and I knew what my destination would be when my year in Europe was over.

RV: It sounds like you were very much a go-getter in college.

JY: I guess so.

RV: I’m imagining a young sorority girl saying okay, I’m going to go overseas for a year abroad, which is not terribly unusual but to go into a war zone for a year right after that. You don’t hear of many sorority girls taking up these challenges like that and doing it.

JY: No, and to me it was just the most logical thing in the world.

RV: I’m not trying to stereotype sorority girls at all, but that’s very interesting.

JY: Its interesting that you should mention the sorority aspect because it was important to me. It was because I was in a sorority and had to memorize the major of an upperclassman as a pledge, that I put two and two together about Kitty and [thought] hey, I could do that too, you don’t have to be a nurse, you don’t have to join the military itself, so that’s why I mentioned the sorority aspect. In the year 2000 the cable network Lifetime had a show called Beyond Chance and on kind of a bet I sent in something that occurred at the Wall in 1984. They used it and they featured me on the show and then took the two Marine veterans that were reunited as a result of this little event [to D.C.]
Part of the script that they luckily ran by me before [airing] was something about Jenny, a sorority girl, and I said you know that sounds a little bit too much like Susie Sorority goes to war and could we possibly change it? [While] it was important, but in the script it just sounds – so they changed it to something like college coed or college student. For this purpose here, I feel like I’m able to explain that [sorority] aspect. I know it’s not going to be made into a Hollywood production like the Beyond Chance thing was.

RV: So the sorority was important to you but it did not define you. It sounds like you very much knew what you wanted to do, knew yourself well.

JY: I tell you, when you’re in a sorority, your sorority sisters are getting lavaliered and pinned. Then you have the pinning circles where if somebody got pinned that night they’d tell their sorority sisters in a special little ceremony and I mean, I would enjoy that, but I would think who in their right mind would want to tie themselves down because I was getting closer and closer to finishing up, leaving my junior year, finishing my junior year and going off. [I was] thinking boy, I’m glad it’s not me that somehow got sidetracked by being pinned to somebody.

RV: What did you know about the Vietnam War at this point?

JY: Actually, very little. I was thinking about that. They described the war as coming into one’s living room and being on TV and yet when you’re in college, I didn’t watch TV. We had one TV in the sorority house and it was in the basement in the TV room and nobody watched TV. You didn’t have time to watch TV, I didn’t think and so it was not something I was seeing on a daily basis, plus Purdue was conservative and had a huge ROTC program so you didn’t have the protesting and the look what’s happening now type of thing going on. If anything I was in class with guys that were in ROTC so it was like well, this is just something that we have to get behind us and do and get over there and get the mission and get it accomplished. At the time I thought it was just, hey we’ll do the job and we can all come home.

RV: So it didn’t intimidate you, obviously.

JY: No.

RV: But you still, you say you weren’t that well informed of what was going on over there?

JY: No.
RV: How much did you know about American policy in general that was
diplomatic?
JY: Probably not much at all, not much at all. I just knew that American soldiers
were being sent over there and some didn’t want to go. There was the draft and when
you’re drafted, you didn’t have a choice but you go because your country expects you to
and that was about it. I mean at the time and because my father had not been military at
all, I didn’t know a Sergeant from a Colonel. You could have said, “What’s the
difference in rank between” and I would have said, “I don’t know which is higher?”
RV: Where did you go for your year abroad, tell me about that?
JY: University of Madrid, Spain.
RV: And what did you do there for that year?
JY: You got grouped together with a lot of Americans and then attended the
university classes on the campus. Some [classes] tended to be all Americans where the
professor was of course lecturing in Spanish but you looked around and everybody in
there looked like they were a foreign student. Other classes you kind of mixed in with
the Spanish people. I lived in a pension with, kind of like a woman that took several
floors of an old building and decided to rent out and provide meals and places to sleep
and bathroom and bathtub facilities to young women, whether they’re students or
working. I lived there in a room of four, a large room with wooden floors and high
ceilings and doors that opened out onto little tiny balconies with three Spanish girls.
RV: Did you enjoy your time there in Madrid?
JY: Yes. That was in the days of Franco, when student protesting was not really
permitted and there were student protests against Franco. He would bring in [forces] to
quell the student, these were usually the Spanish. They would spray the students with
green dye, I remember walking out of the building, ([afterwards] we were told to stay
inside) and seeing puddles of the green dye. That was to mark the protestors for later
arrest. Once again, as naïve as we were, we’d kind of laughed about it. We’d talk to our
Spanish friends about “Gee whiz,” and they’d say, “Shh, keep your voice down.” It was
much more [of] a repressed society. We Americans were naïve enough to think, “Well
sure you can speak up about what you think and who’s going to, I dare anyone to tell me
I can’t say what I want to say” and it’s like, whew, [they’d respond], be careful, but it was great.

RV: Good, that’s good and obviously the two years going abroad didn’t bother you because you came back, and did you come back in the spring of what, ’68?

JY: When my year was up at the University of Madrid I had already preplanned to join a sorority sister [who] was on the same program only she was in up in Strasbourg, France. I said, “let’s get together and travel the entire summer using a Eurail pass.” Now, in June of ’68 France went on the blink. [Now when] I talk to people I meet from France and I [tell them] I was trying to get into your country in June of ’68 and everything was shut down. The workers and the students got into a coalition where they shut everything down, the mail service, transportation, trains everything stopped and a lot of them say, oh man I remember that. And I had to get to, in Spain you’re landlocked, the only way to get out with a Eurail Pass is through France and I couldn’t do it. So I thought what’s the shortest distance [to fly], so I flew from Barcelona to Milan and then took the train up and hitchhiked into where she was in Strasbourg, France, which was fortunately right across the river from Germany. She wasn’t really in the interior of France. Then she and I traveled for the entire summer. I, knowing that I’d be coming back to head to Washington DC in October, and she still had another year of college. She was one year behind me. She took the typical junior year abroad, whereas it was my senior year. So I came back to the States in about, it was around Labor Day of 1968, knowing that I needed to be in Washington DC in October.

RV: Had you heard anything about what was happening in Vietnam at this point, ’68 was a very tumultuous year there?

JY: Actually, no. I wasn’t keeping up to speed on what was happening in Vietnam because too many things were happening in Europe. Russia invaded Czechoslovakia. Martin Luther King [and Robert Kennedy] had been assassinated back in the States. You know, when you’re overseas and something like that happens -- Jill and I were in Yugoslavia and we were told that President Johnson had been shot and we kept waiting for the English language newspapers to come [out] because we were being told this. People were coming to us how sorry they were about Johnson and its like “Holy smokes what’s happening?” because see Robert Kennedy had just been shot. The French
loved the Kennedys so they, in addition to being shut down as a country were in mourning about what had happened to Robert Kennedy. I was really too busy enjoying myself as a student, traveling and then trying to make sense of what I was hearing about what was happening at home with the assassinations. Then [there was] what was happening in Europe. Because my friend Jill is of Yugoslavian descent, (her parents immigrated over from Yugoslavia) so we visited Yugoslavia. At the time, Yugoslavia was sort of a satellite of Russia and we were thinking, if it was Czechoslovakia [how] is Yugoslavia next? [so our mind] Other than just knowing I was going to go there, I did not make a conscious effort to keep up with what was happening in Vietnam. Plus back then the English language newspapers were often times a week old by the time you found one. I was just; I was not very well informed. I don’t think I even knew about Tet, I can’t remember though, the Tet of late January ’68.

RV: Did the Europeans say anything about Vietnam; did you hear any talk about the Vietnam War?

JY: No, the Spanish girls, [well actually the Spanish girls] I lived with were convinced (now this is when Lyndon Johnson’s daughter was dating George Hamilton and then all of a sudden she starts dating Charles Robb who was a Marine veteran and a Vietnam veteran) and these Spanish girls thought [that because] George Hamilton was so good looking, well they thought well obviously Lyndon Johnson’s daughter’s only reason [that she would have in her right mind] to leave George and go with Charles is to help her father politically by marrying a Vietnam veteran, real convoluted logic. I remember his resignation, LBJ’s resignation and thinking, well that shoots their theory about why Lynda Johnson married Robb because [now] her father doesn’t [even] have a political career. If anything, the Spanish girls that I was with were a little bit more interested in the racial strife back in the States more than the war in Vietnam.

RV: What did you think about all that racial strife that was going on?

JY: I didn’t agree with the racial aspect of things. Growing up in Missouri I had cousins from Arkansas, which is where my mother grew up. My mother never mentioned, never voiced, did not have the “southern” mentality. So when my cousins would come and visit me as a child and we’d go to the municipal pool and they would see blacks and whites in the same swimming pool they were shocked. To me that was like,
oh, well we all live here so why wouldn’t we be in the same pool. Then because I was in sports, a lot of my teammates were black and I remember there was one tournament that was in the southern part of the state and I had volunteered my mother to drive the team down. I remember her thinking “Oh,” she said “I hope we don’t run into problems with where we would need to stop to get a bite to eat” and I said “What are you talking about?” She said, “Well we’ve got to think about that the farther south we go.” And I was just like, “Whoa!” [So, I could not justify to these girls, but of course] Again these Spanish girls that I was chatting with, to them it was like I knew the solution to America’s racial problem. [I asked], “What’s that?” “Well, just send them all back to Africa, that’s where they probably want to be anyway!” I thought they don’t realize, but we were young. We were nineteen years old, twenty years old.

RV: Okay, so when you get back to the States, did you go back to St. Louis and see your family?

JY: Yes.

RV: And then you were going to go to Washington a month later, in October?

JY: Yes.

RV: Did you spend that month with them there in St. Louis?

JY: Right.

RV: How were they receptive to your idea of the year abroad, then home for a month and then a year in Vietnam?

JY: They were fine with that. I don’t remember them saying one thing or another. They were helping me unpack and I don’t really remember their saying, “We think this is the greatest thing in the world,” nor do I remember their saying, “Please don’t do this.” It was very supportive. Its like well, our daughter’s grown up and she’s lined up all these things to do and we can’t put our foot down. I think they were supportive. Actually, they were probably okay with it and maybe even proud that I was heading off to do this. Again, my father [had] wanted to go to war but he could not, in World War Two.

RV: Right. Did they say anything what had happened in Vietnam, in the previous nine months?
JY: No, because I don’t think they had any, I don’t think they knew what I didn’t know, in other words the fact that I was so isolated and away from it probably never occurred to them. They didn’t feel like they needed to bring me up to speed on anything. RV: Were they overly worried do you think? JY: I don’t think so, but I’m now thinking that maybe they were but they really disguised it. I had no sense of worrying my parents in going off. If anything I was so enthusiastic about what I was doing and they were not standing in my way that I just assumed that they were as enthusiastic as I was but in retrospect they were probably worried. RV: And you still felt fine obviously, about going? JY: Oh, yes. RV: Okay, so you go to Washington DC in October and what was, you say here in your notes that you went to an orientation, it was what, for one week? JY: I think it was actually two weeks. RV: Two weeks, what was that like? JY: That was interesting because there were, [maybe it was a group of] let’s say, twenty of us and some were designated to go to Korea. They had signed on for the exact same program but they did not want to go to Vietnam, they preferred Korea, whereas some of us were [definitely] Vietnam so we were all into what our uniforms looked like. Naturally the ones for Vietnam had the lighter Dacron and the ones going to Korea got the heavier coats and the jackets. We needed to learn more about the organization that we were representing. We were told some of the rules of the road regarding curfews, what was expected of us, dos and don’ts. Because our job was to do recreation programs you actually had to learn how to go through the planning stage of what your program was going to be, getting the props and materials to make the program, delegating and getting help from your coworkers at whatever unit you were assigned to help you with making this poster or this lettering or these flashcards or whatever. Then, how to road test it and then putting it on the road as a program that would go out to the guys. We learned about [more or less] project planning. We learned to expect some negative comments. They said, “you are going to run into military men who are still in the military that served in World War Two and they are going [to say] that the Red Cross made them pay for coffee
and donuts.”  [It was explained to use that people] What they don’t realize is that the American people in World War Two were so generous that the American Red Cross could have given away that stuff. They could have replenished through the generosity but because it was an Allied effort, the Red Cross of Britain and the Red Cross of the other Allies did not have that luxury. They were having to charge [their soldiers] because they needed the money, they didn’t have the funding and to be consistent and to keep the troops kind of all treated the same, the War Department specifically asked the Red Cross, for the sake of the Allied effort, “could you charge for your cards and coffee and donuts?” The Red Cross said this will be extremely hard for us to ever live down and they were right. They said, “Naturally you are not going to be able to explain this to a tough first sergeant that served in World War Two who had to pay for a cup of coffee, but here’s the reason for it. Just know if you can [explain] that’s good but don’t expect miracles at least you’ll know why the person is saying that,” so I remember that.

RV: Were your instructors, had they been on the ground in Vietnam?

JY: Yes, I think they made sure that at least one of the instructors had been there and done what we did but some of the other instructors were career Red Cross women who were quite a bit older, so it was kind of a mix.

RV: Did you feel like you received adequate training, orientation?

JY: I think so. I’ve read a lot where some of my fellow donut dollies thought that it was pretty pitiful and didn’t prepare them for the real world, but I think, given the circumstances it was, the whole situation was OJT. How could any orientation have fulfilled everyone’s expectations? I think for what it was intended to do, it was fine. It was sufficient.

RV: Was there a camaraderie there with the girls that were going to Vietnam?

JY: Oh, yes.

RV: Could you pick where you were going to serve in the country?

JY: No, that was potluck.

RV: And I guess potluck with whom you would serve, the girls?

JY: Yes, because actually you didn’t really expect to be assigned with very many, if any, of the women that you were going through orientation with because the units that were over there did not want a whole bunch of newbies. They could take a new one
every couple of months and so you kind of knew that you were going to be split up.

Every once in a while some of the larger units might get two or three from what they call “classes,” like I was in the November “class” because November was when I actually flew over. It was late October when I went to Washington so by the time the two weeks were up and you got all your shots and [were] fingerprinted and all this, it was November.

RV: Did you have a lot of contact with your folks back in St. Louis while you were in Washington?

JY: Well, of course it just had to be by letter, oh Washington. No, I don’t remember. When you go off to school like I did, and then go off to another side of the ocean to go to school, and you don’t have good phone contact, and you write letters then a lot of contact just wasn’t part of my need. I mean I was fine.

RV: Did they instruct you on doing civic action or was it just the recreational games?

JY: It was pretty much just the recreation.

RV: So, describe when you left the United States and went to Vietnam, where did you fly from?

JY: We flew from Washington to San Francisco and we did something with the Red Cross there, I do remember spending a night or two in San Francisco where we had to go to the San Francisco [Red Cross] headquarters whether it was to get our visas, I had a passport because I needed one for my other, there was some additional paperwork that was needed and there might have been even one more shot. Some of the shots were series, but you were in San Francisco, it seems to me we still had some shots, but I don’t really remember too much other than going to some meetings or something at the San Francisco Red Cross headquarters and then. That was regular commercial flying from Washington DC to [San Francisco], and once we got, we had to get our flight manifests and everything, I think I went in on Branif. I can’t really remember but that’s when the airlines were contracting with the military to just take planeloads and planeloads and planeloads of soldiers. Those that were designated for Vietnam got booked on our flight into Saigon and then we said good-bye to the ones that were heading off to Korea.
RV: Let me go back to your training, I have an important question. What kind of recreational activities were you actually planning to do for the guys?

JY: Well, the best way I can describe it was almost like presenting what you would see now as TV game shows. We made and did our own props and our own posters and we had to, big poster boards, if it was a game of Concentration then it was a big poster board with the different numbered squares on it. I say that Donut Dollies invented *Trivial Pursuit* before its time. We would do things with posters and flash cards and word games and we have them play relays with bouncing a ball on a muffin tin, I mean just making do with whatever the materials were. They were actual games but handmade by us. We were given plenty of nice material; lots of construction paper and colored posters and acetate to put over things to make a clear cover so that the ink wouldn’t run. I have one picture where one of our games was to have them fill out a questionnaire about themselves and then somehow we would incorporate the answers that they gave into a funny story and I had that particular game was out on the tarmac of a flight line, no tables, so I have a picture of the guys using each other’s backs, it was like a chain where you were writing on the back of the person in front of you as using their back and shoulders as your table, standing up and then somebody was using your back and they were filling out these little funny questionnaires or whatever it may have been. One [reinforced] poster board I remember had big holes in it and we had a foam rubber football and we had the guys toss the thing trying to [hit the hole] almost like carnival games or TV games. [If it were] Wheel of Fortune, however you could do a Wheel of Fortune, something you carried on a helicopter.

RV: What exactly did your instructors tell you your purpose was in Vietnam?

JY: To lighten up the lives of the able-bodied soldiers, who were probably homesick, bored, sad, trying to divert their attention into something that was fun and interesting. They decided it was morale building. In a word, “Build their morale and try to pep them up a little bit.”

RV: Did you have good expectations for this, that this would be successful?

JY: Yes, I bought into that. I thought, “Oh man, oh, yes, if I can do anything to build the morale I’ll just do whatever I can.” I think that was a little bit idealistic on my part but at the time it was like, hey, the military has asked for this. The military also had
the USO, you had USO clubs and the military had its own Special Services, but both of
those entertainment oriented organizations required a commitment from the military that
they would have this facility, a fixed building, and promise that they would be there for X
amount of time. Wherever they could, the military would say, “Okay, we could give you
a building and we’re going to be here for a while”, places like Cam Ranh, Da Nang,
Saigon. In the meantime they said, “Look, we need somebody that’s willing to just make
do with whatever. If we need a rec center and all we have is a Quonset hut and we don’t
know how long we’re going to be there. Or for sure the mobile programs to go out on
firebases and LZs, who knows [how long] they’re going to maintain the military be at a
firebase. You’re just going to fly people in for the day anyway. We need that. The USO
and the Special Services must have said, “Well that’s beyond the parameters of what we
can do” and the Red Cross came along and said “We can be mobile, flexible, resourceful,
and we’ll do it as supplemental recreation activities overseas.” Meaning supplementary
to, well, you know I really don’t know what its supplementary to, but I would think it was
the mobile aspect that they really wanted from us, [for us to] or make due [with]
whatever we can throw together for you with the understanding that there’ll be
[sufficient] security for the women.

RV: That makes sense. So, back to San Francisco, how long did you stay there
before you?

JY: I think only a couple of days.

RV: What was the flight over there, to Vietnam like, was it, were you there with
all the girls or was it a mixed flight with soldiers?

JY: Oh, it was mixed. We were definitely in the minority. It was a planeload of
ninety people and maybe fifteen of us were women, and I remember thinking well, my
job has started. I’m going to talk to soldiers and I’m going to be smiling and happy and
try to engage them in interesting conversation and wish them well, but I think we were
tired. There wasn’t a bunch of rah, rah stuff going on but I do remember [that]. We had
to land for refueling in Hawaii and the Philippines. That’s where you got off the plane
and you could stretch your legs and walk out on the [tarmac], maybe even into the
terminal. I can’t remember, both of those places and then finally on to Saigon. I’ll tell
you what, I didn’t think that much about it as far as the flight [went], “Okay, we’re about
to land in Saigon” and all of a sudden the plane went way down, fast and it was like “Oh, yeah, that’s what you have to do when you land in Saigon -- you’ve got to come in high and then land fast and down.” You can’t just kind of gracefully fly over land because the enemy’s down there and that’s when I though “Oh my gosh.” Then we were picked up by a bus, I guess that the Red Cross had rented and it was OD. It looked like a city bus but it was olive drab and the first thing I noticed was the chicken wire over the window and I thought, “Oh I wonder [why]” and someone said “That’s so somebody can’t lob a grenade in.” I thought “Oh my goodness;” my eyes were as big as saucers.

RV: What was your first impression of Vietnam when you stepped off the plane?

JY: Well, that’s funny. I remember, a lot of people say “Oh the heat and humidity just knock you over.” I tell people now [that] I hear that over and over again but I don’t remember, I mean I do remember it being hot and humid but I wouldn’t have said that just jumped right out at me. Now that I have moved back to St. Louis after being gone for thirty-six years, St. Louis is so hot and so humid in the summer. I did not realize it, [back then] but I was acclimatized to heat and humidity. I did not realize until moving back here after living in a lot drier climate, that. Oohh! No wonder people noticed that [the heat and humidity of Vietnam]. It’s hard for me to get used to the heat and humidity of St. Louis all over again after thirty-six years of absence. [First impression] - I would say it was the people, I noticed they were so little. Again, I’m six feet tall, so it’s like “Whoa” little people and the bare feet and the scurrying around and then not knowing which way to go and just being glad I was with a group. Where it’s like, “Okay, just kind of go with the flow here.”

RV: How did you feel, were you anxious, did you feel?

JY: No, I just was taking it all in, thinking this is really interesting. I didn’t feel like I needed to duck my head and the bullets were going to be flying around, I didn’t feel any of that. I just felt like it’s bound to be safe or we wouldn’t be here.

RV: Had you talked, on the flight over, had you talked to some of the soldiers?

JY: I’m sure I did but I don’t remember, I don’t remember at all.

RV: When you landed, did you have any contact, did they know why you were going there and then when you landed did you have any contact with any of the soldiers?
JY: I think we probably told the guys that we chatted with, but then they wouldn’t have any idea of what we were talking [about], because they didn’t know what to expect either. Then once you landed everybody went every which way. I don’t remember looking at some soldier thinking, you’re going off to the jungle and you may -- It was like too confusing as to where do we go, what do we do, good luck. It was a case of “maybe we’ll cross paths,” maybe we’ll see you once we get started in our work.

RV: What was your first week in Vietnam like?

JY: Well, that was in Saigon and they had us in a BOQ and I remember thinking there were sandbags stacked up on the sidewalk. You’d walk out the front door of the BOQ and you’d walk between sandbags because there were sandbags between the BOQ and the sidewalk and we were pretty well kept as groups, we didn’t stray off on our own too much. We had to cross the street I think and go across an area to a different BOQ that had eating facilities. Then we were bussed to the Red Cross Headquarters near Tan Son Nhut. That once again I think is where we became, there was still more training involved but I can’t remember what all it was. It might have been more along the lines of, here’s what you need to get as a flight manifest whenever you have to come down here for a meeting in the future, and here’s MPC. Money is different here or here’s your PX card and here are your papers. Because even though you are a civilian you have a GS rating of seven. In other words it was equivalent to a second lieutenant and this permits you to eat in the officers’ mess, or you can eat anywhere because this gives you officer status so you can eat an officers’ mess. Here would be your ID. But of course some of the areas you’ll be eating with the guys in their mess tents in which case there is no differentiation between officers’ mess and enlisted men’s mess. I think we just got our stuff there; we got our paperwork that sort of [thing].

RV: Did you have a chance to go into Saigon at all or did you basically stay on the base?

JY: I, you mean throughout the year?

RV: Well, no that first week there.

JY: Oh, the first week, oh into the city. I do remember driving through. Well, yes we were, that’s right, we were able to eat out. We went to a great French restaurant and then the Continental Hotel, I remember eating there and they had a veranda kind of like
thing. Where street kids would come by and sell you things if your table happened to be
close to the veranda. Now, when I went back to Vietnam in 1995, I looked for that same
atmosphere but they enclosed the veranda so they could air condition it. That was the
Intercontinental Hotel and I remember thinking oh, gee the tropical aspect of what I
remember, open air, fans, seeing the people on the street walk by, all of that is gone when
they enclosed it. But I do remember traveling around, whether it was in the bus or I guess
we could walk around a little bit, must have been secure because we were going to
restaurants.

RV: Right. Okay, so after that first week where were you shipped off to?

JY: My assignment was Dong Ba Thin, D-O-N-G, one word, B-A, second word,
T-H-I-N, third word, and it was on the mainland side of Cam Ranh Bay.

RV: And how long were you stationed there?

JY: More or less two months. I found out later that they sent me there knowing
that I would be involved in relocating the entire unit to a different place. In other words,
the military had kind of wound down the troops strength. And Dong Ba Thin was not
what it had been when they first needed the unit, and you know “flexibility, mobility,” so
I was there and its like okay, we’re going to do this and this and in a couple of months
we’ll finally get word as to where we move. How to get all this stuff associated with
what the Red Cross had to wherever we were supposed to be next. So I was only there
for about, close to maybe two and a half months and then we pulled up stakes and the
Red Cross left Dong Ba Thin.