Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University initiating an oral history interview with Dr. John Hubenthal. Today is the fifteenth of December 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building and John is kindly speaking to me by telephone from Massachusetts. Good morning, John.

John Hubenthal: Good morning Dr. Laura!

LC: I get that a lot. But I always let people have fun with it because it’s so easy to do. But it’s a great pleasure, obviously, to include you in the oral history project and we’re very grateful for your time. John, you were saying as we were speaking earlier—

JH: There’s an information point that I want to make that recently came to my attention. I’m in the process of filing benefit claims with the Veterans Administration. In the course of doing that I acquired as many official records of what my unit did and where it was during the course of my tour, the fourteen months that I spent in Vietnam. I was quite surprised to find that my very clear and still distinct memories did not jive with some of the stuff that I found in these records. Details about what my company did or did not do; what the battalion was doing or was not doing; where it was at certain times, things of that nature. So I’m going to tell what I remember. And just a heads up for any future researcher if you go and dig out, for example, the history of the 1st of the 327th Air
Mobile Infantry Battalion as written by then-Lieutenant Gresh—whom I remember and will not describe because I’d have too much fun—you’ll find discrepancies between what I remember and what he recorded. Speaking as a historian it bothered me when I came across this and it still bothers me. So my assumption, given those facts as a historian, would be that the official record is correct. Nonetheless, speaking as an eyewitness who lived through it, I don’t know what’s going on because I remember certain things that just don’t match, you know, the dates and names and numbers that are available through the VA (Department of Veteran Affairs). So I just want that on the record.

LC: I’m glad you bring up the point. I hope, John, that you’ll be able to deposit copies of documents to which you refer here.

JH: Oh, absolutely. We’ll mail them out ASAP.

LC: I think that would be great because we’ll make those available to the listeners and that’s part of the reason for doing oral histories is because at least two reasons. As you’ll know, John, not everything ends up in the documents and documents can be suspect.

JH: Oh, yeah. It’s not quite so bad most of the time as “historying” the lies of the winners.

LC: But that does happen.

JH: It’s a hard job. Hey folks. History is hard work.

LC: Right. Got to do some prep and also use some judgment. Actually, that’s one of the reasons that in our process at the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project we don’t just start off saying, “So, John, you arrived in Vietnam. What was it like?” You know, what we’d like to do with your permission is ask you a little bit about your background long before you came to the service as a young person. And that will help to establish in the minds of the listener who you are and what your experiences were both before you came to Vietnam in the service and also you observations about your service, which I hope to speak with you at length about later on. It puts all of those into context. So, if you don’t mind—

JH: Where, birth?

LC: I would like to start with birth, actually. What do you remember about that?

No, I’m just kidding!
JH: Well, there was a great light and—

LC: There was a long tunnel.

JH: —of a long tunnel and I saw my whole gestation flash before my eyes.

LC: For biographical purposes it might be interesting for people to know how old you are so you could tell us when you were born and where.

JH: I was born smack dab in the middle of the century, August of 1950. So I guess that makes me fifty-five now.

LC: Where were you born?

JH: I was born in Long Beach. *Soy California los de muerte* (sic; I am Californian to the death.) I love my state. California is for me what Virginia was for Robert E. Lee. It’s my country and I absolutely dislike living any place else and always will.

LC: And that must include Massachusetts.

JH: Let’s not go there.

LC: Okay.

JH: Up here in New England they refer to the residents of Massachusetts as “Massholes,” you know.

LC: Okay. Not going there because I probably have a couple of other people from Massachusetts who will probably listen to this.

JH: Oh, the people are great, it’s just—do you remember “Li’l Abner,” the comic strip?

LC: Sure. Sure.

JH: Yeah, yeah. New England is Slobovia. It is. It’s the most ghastly horrible climate, and the reason they don’t put up street signs and the roads are so confusing is if you could navigate everyone would leave.

LC: All signs would point: “This way out.”

JH: South and west!

LC: Out. What did your parents do? Tell me about being—

JH: I was the middle child of five kids, the only boy. My parents are wonderful people, in my opinion. Growing up, of course, we had our ups and downs. And particularly my father and I had—well, we were basically on the outs for something like
ten years from early adolescence through to my late twenties. And then we decided to
kiss and makeup, so to speak, and we’re fast friends now.

LC: That sounds perfectly normal.

JH: Yeah. Well, it was a little extreme because through much of that time I was a
communist and he was a Nixonian Republican.

LC: There were some politics involved.

JH: Oh, there were definitely some politics involved.

LC: We’ll talk about that I hope.

JH: Oh, absolutely. Whatever. My father—when I was asked this when I was
younger I would simply say, “Well, he’s a business man.” You know, or “He’s an
executive.” I mean that is what he did. He is a tremendously bright guy. He’s one of
those kids who got bumped two or three grades, I think, coming through the public
education system. Finally, took a degree in chemical engineering from the University of
Washington. And ended up working his way up the corporate ladder from, I think, he
started as something like a draftsman and ended up right there in Texas, as a matter of
fact, as the CEO of a company that built and designed cooling towers. And then
branched out into brick making, of all things, because you needed good bricks for
industrial cooling towers. So near as I can tell, as from my own observation, he was
tremendously well liked. He had all the political skills, obviously, and apparently was a
very successful manager, as well. Had a good career. He had been a naval officer during
World War II—served on a destroyer escort. He had the unusual distinction of being an
officer on the very first boat, American military boat, to sail into Tokyo Harbor at the end
of the war. Among other things, he’s got great tales to tell.

LC: You know which ship that was?

JH: I can get it to you. It was also one of the first boats to be used as a base for
UDT (underwater demolition team) divers, the frogmen.

LC: Am I right in thinking, then, that he was if not present on the *Missouri* he was
at least in Tokyo Bay?

JH: Oh, he was in the harbor. Oh, absolutely. Yeah. As I say, he was the first
American ship to sail in there.

LC: Wonder if he’d do an interview.
JH: I’ll talk to him. Absolutely. He probably would. He just had a bunch of medical stuff done—hip replacement and stuff like that. He’s actually probably in better shape than I am at this point.

LC: Or me.

JH: Well, you sound all right. At least you can talk.

LC: Well, I sure can do that and I would be happy to talk with him if he had an interest.

JH: That’s right because you’re doing all of the Asian Wars.

LC: Well, we are trying to and we have a focus on Vietnam—

JH: I’ll speak to him today.

LC: —but it’s a critical moment in American history and he was present for it and we sure would be interested.

JH: Oh, yeah. He’s got great tales. He’s got good stuff. Oh, wow! Two generations of us. Well, listen, if he’s going to be in the archive—I’ve never forgiven him for this. He named me and made me a junior.

LC: Oh, boy. Okay.

JH: Yeah, and I’ve never forgiven him. I don’t use my middle name precisely because that allows me to not use the junior. So if we’re both going to be in the archive you’re going to have to work around that one somehow.

LC: We’ll assign that to the higher thinkers in the acquisitions department who name the collections. We’ll let them handle that one. Tell me a little bit about your mom.

JH: Wonderful gal—stay-at-home mom. She got her degree in art from UCLA, I believe. And to give you a sense of what my mother was like, all my life her college degree was hung in one of two places—either over the washer/dryer in the laundry room or over the stove in the kitchen. For a very long time she had all five of our birth certificates hung over the head of the bed and I asked her once why and she said, “It’s the only form of birth control that works.” That’s my mom.

LC: She sounds great.

JH: Wonderful sense of humor. And another pop literature reference here, better than “Li’l Abner.” Did you read Vonnegut’s books?
LC: When I was much younger. Yes.

JH: Well, I use this because it describes my parents so beautifully. Now I can’t think of the damned name. Bokononism was a religion that he invented and I believe it’s in *Cat’s Cradle*, and Bokonon is its prophet. And Bokonon preached that human beings are organized into teams called karasses. And you may or may not know who is on your team but out there in the world is this whole team that you’re a member of, a cooperative team. And there are special varieties of these karasses, of these teams of people that God has set up. One of which is the perfectly matched couple where they are a universe unto themselves. They’re a two-person team and my parents are one of those. We always knew when we were kids growing up the emotional hierarchy in the family and it started with Mom and Dad madly in love. I can remember them well into their forties, even fifties, disappearing in the middle of the day to “go take a nap.” I mean, you know, that’s obviously they were still sexually active. Just right through their lives. I’ve had moments where I thought they pulled a really dirty trick on us because I grew up looking at this perfect marriage, this love affair, this lifelong love affair. I mean I’ve never seen them be cross with each other, literally, in my entire life. I’ve never seen them raise their voices except to get their attention. No arguments. It’s unbelievable. And I grew up thinking that’s what moms and dads are like and that’s what marriage is like. You can imagine my shock when I went into the real world and started having relationships. It was startling, to say the least. “What? It’s not like Mom and Dad? Oh, no!” She’s very witty, very funny. She is a dyed-in-the-wool, New Deal Democrat. So they’re interesting as a couple in that regard, as well.

LC: Sounds like it.

JH: Yeah, and still have this, you know, fabulous relationship—joke about it and get into heated discussions but not arguments. No hostility or anything like that, but just very strong beliefs on both their parts. And I think it says a lot about both of them that they have been able to deal with—it’s actually kind of trivial—but to deal with their political differences and still have the relationship that they have because their both pretty fierce in their beliefs.

LC: How did they meet, John? Do you know?
JH: The story as I heard it was my mother was on the campus of the university there and my father walked by and what my mother told me, as I recall, was, “I set eyes on this guy and there was nobody else. Didn’t even know him yet and set eyes on this guy and just knew.” You know? “That’s the guy.” The very interesting thing is that that’s exactly the experience that I had the first time I saw my wife Wendy. Exactly. She walked into the room and it’s just like, “Ba-dong! That’s the one!”

LC: You just knew.

JH: Yeah, all the way down to my marrow and basically never looked back.

LC: How lucky are you?

JH: Well I won’t say it’s been as harmonious and lovely a marriage as my parents had. We’ve certainly have had our ups and downs, most of them my fault, probably. But yeah, how lucky am I? Oh, I’m so lucky! I’m the richest man in the world. For almost fifteen years I got to wake up every morning and think, “All right! I get to go to work.”

How rich is that?

LC: I know how you feel.

JH: Yeah. It’s a rare, wonderful treat, you know?

LC: It sure is, and people who’ve never had that probably think we’re both out of our minds.

JH: Well, I can only feel sorry. You know? It’s like, “Oh you poor dears.” You know? What you’re missing—

LC: Keep looking. Keep looking.

JH: Yeah! Keep looking. Exactly! Exactly! Oh, I hammer away at my students. I give them that Joseph Campbell line. Follow your bliss, man. Find something you like to do and do it. Anyway, my parents dated for a while. At one point, actually, my mother did dump my dad before marriage, or maybe he dumped her. I don’t know. Anyway, at one point they sort of said, “Hey, this is going too fast,” or something like that and dated other people. But not for very long and then got back together again.

LC: That was just the verification process, probably.

JH: Yeah. Just test. Do a taste test to make sure. We moved around a lot, I thought. In retrospect I guess it wasn’t all that a mobile an existence. But my father was a corporate climber and he went where the paycheck was. So I was born in Long Beach
and probably within a year, certainly two, of my birth we all packed up and lived in Oklahoma for a couple of years. Then moved again to Illinois, to a little town called Barrington just north—north and near the lake. God, I hate not being able to talk.

LC: That’s all right. We’re rolling with you. So, north of Chicago?

JH: Yeah, north of Chicago and not right on the lake but close. A little town called Barrington, and lived there until I was in something like second grade and then moved back to California. Another similarity between my mother and I—my father describes my mother getting off the plane on her return to California and literally kissing the ground. Neither of them were born in California. They were both born in the Midwest but my mother will never live any place else. She and I are peas in a pod in that regard. You know, she loves her state. Anyway, we moved back to northern California, Santa Rosa, and lived there, well, second grade for me to ninth grade. And then we moved to southern California, Ventura—just south of Santa Barbara—and lived there until I went into the military. And after that I never lived at home for any lengthy period of time after that. Never more than a week or two, something like that. I was out on my own after the military. Let’s see—facts about my upbringing and family. I recently lost my kid sister. I have a complicated vocabulary since I have so many sisters. I have my oldest sister, my older sister, my kid sister, and my baby sister because I’m right in the middle, as I said. And my kid sister, Leslie, died just last year, or no, this year. I’m sorry. She had a massive brain aneurysm, rupture, and was basically in a coma for several months and then died finally. It was quite a tragedy. She was the darling of the family. She was the one kid that everybody loved.

LC: I’m sorry, John. That’s very hard to take. I haven’t been through it but I can only imagine.

JH: Yeah. It was a rough year because my father—well, first it was my diagnosis, which was late last year. Then immediately, not immediately but soon after, my father fell. In the course of figuring out his hip fracture they discovered that he had massive heart disease. Oh, gosh. When was it? It was in April, April Fool’s Day as a matter of fact, my kid sister Leslie was in a convenience store and just dropped like somebody pole-axed her. Just literally fell over. This thing blew out in the back of her brain and my first aspiration—we’ll get to that later—but my first aspiration as a career was to go
into medicine and as a consequence I did two years of pre-med way back when. So when
they described what had happened, unlike the rest of my family, I knew what the
prognosis was. There was no doubt in my mind. Of course, I kept my mouth shut and let
everybody hope, and there’s always that chance for a miracle. But once I got a good
anatomical description of the aneurysm, where it was, how large it was, there was no
question.

LC: And there was no warning?
JH: No warning. None whatsoever. It was like my cancer. There was no
warning. It was a total surprise in both cases.

LC: Hearing these kinds of stories should make every person grateful for every
day.
JH: Oh, please!
LC: Really, and I mean I’m no Mary Sunshine, let me tell you, but really truly
that.
JH: Yeah, yeah. Well, you’re a historian. How could you be?
LC: Yeah. That’s right. I know too much.
JH: Exactly! You know where the bodies are buried.
LC: Well, at least some of them. But it does sound like a tough year.
JH: It’s been a very tough year. And by the same token, you know, what my
doctor told me when he gave me the diagnosis—I did the hokey, you know, “Give it to
me straight, Doc.” And what he said was thirty to sixty days. “Go home and put your
house in order.”
LC: And this was the end of 2004?
JH: Yeah. This was December 23 as a matter of fact was the day, right before
Christmas. And here I am coming up on another Christmas.
LC: Well I think that makes you a hero right there.
JH: Well, I don’t know. I hear that a lot and I don’t think it’s the appropriate
word, but I’m a survivor anyway.
LC: Well, we’re about to find out. We’re about to find out. And now reader, read
on.
JH: I have been many things but I don’t think I’ve ever been a hero, but anyway.
LC: Well, let me ask you a little bit about being a young person going to school in California, in Santa Rosa.

JH: There were five high schools in my county and I got thrown out of four of them.

LC: You got thrown out?

JH: Of four of them. (Laughs)

LC: That’s quite a record. How did you manage that, John?

JH: Let’s see—deep breath, compose my jaw. Those pauses are speech problems. I already told you that, but I’m a little self-conscious about it. I can’t remember—oh, fighting! I got in a fight and got thrown out of the first one, as I recall. Second one was, I think that was the possession of marijuana. The third one—there was one where they wouldn’t even let me in. I didn’t actually get thrown out of that one. They wouldn’t let anybody throw me in is actually what happened there, and I can’t remember the fourth one.

LC: They saved themselves the trouble.

JH: Exactly.

LC: Shortcut.

JH: They looked over my record and said, “Uh, no.”

LC: What kind of a student were you?

JH: I was not. I was a terrible student. I had horrible grades. I was diagnosed by a therapist when I was fifty as an ADD (attention deficit disorder) person and was certainly undiagnosed then, and just hated school. It was just painful and stupid and couldn’t connect. Always had grades, oh, Cs or worse. Played hooky at every opportunity. Never connected. Didn’t have much, really, of a social life. I was quite a loner as a kid. What I remember is, you know, we’d move from town—you know when I would talk about living in Oklahoma, then Illinois, then northern California and southern California, you know, those are just the states. There were maybe two or three houses in each one of those states, you know. So it wasn’t just big geography. It was different neighborhoods and sometimes different schools. And I remember pretty much always feeling like either the weird kid or the new kid or both. I was not much to look at. Very skinny, geeky, Coke-bottle-bottom glasses, you know, a nerd. An uncooperative non-
scholarly nerd, so I got all the jokers in the deck. I wasn’t even one of those A student nerds, you know. So my childhood, my memories of my childhood, are not particularly pleasant. My favorite memories are, in fact, when I could get out into the woods alone and just observe nature. I used to spend wonderful hours when the weather was good looking at all the little critters in a creek or a pond or something or watching the arboreal life, if you will. You know, the birds and squirrels and whatnot. Following snakes and watching clouds and how they moved and built up and blew apart. Stuff like that. Those were my happy memories, not my social memories. I was also, which was odd given my scholarly record—more than once the other kids in the neighborhood would tag me with something like “The Professor” because as they would put it, “I talked funny.” I used big words. I don’t know why or how. I did like to read a lot, but it was all, you know, adolescent fiction for the most part. Although I did like some histories. My mother kept an appropriate library of adolescent literature that included American Heritage Series on American History, for example, and absolutely enjoyed that. I can’t say I read it in any systematic fashion, you know. But I would sit with a book and read a chapter here or a paragraph there and just kind of bat around in it and look at the pictures. Apparently the vocabulary rubbed off on me or something but it was one of my odd features as a kid, but not very social. No memories of, “Oh, boy. That old gang of mine.” Quite the contrary. It was like, “Oh, here’s that old gang. Where’s the door? Get me out of here.”

LC: Right. “How fast can I get away?”

JH: Exactly. It got better in high school mostly because from age fifteen through to going in to the military I did most of my recreational chemistry experimentation and everybody looks great when you’re stoned. So it got a little more social then. I became really a hippie. I hesitate because I’m not sure what a hippie is or was.

LC: Nor am I. It’s like a peasant. You know one when you see one. Defining it is a little difficult. Did you self-define like that?

JH: Well, I certainly self-identified with people that I recognized as being counter-cultural, I guess would be the best word. And since I already was not particularly enamored of my time and, you know, peer group, the thought of being a social critic came pretty easily to me. So counter-culture was quite attractive, and it was attractive in the film right, too. You know, who can resist sex and drugs, and rock-and-
roll, and peace and love all rolled into one package? You know, I was a believer quite frankly. We were going to build Utopia. This was our cultural revolution. So I ran with those kids through high school and in the course of that became politically active and, you know, and I don’t know if you want to start talking about that now or stay with the other stuff.

LC: Why don’t I just ask you a question or two and then we’ll take up the politicization later, maybe tomorrow. How easy was it to get hold of illicit drugs in Ventura, California, in 1966, ’67 as a high school student?

JH: Pause for jaw alignment. Not hard at all. I have another odd distinction in that I’m the only person I know in my generation who was not turned on, so to speak. I heard about marijuana and decided that knowing no one who had any contact with it and decided that I was going to try this stuff. And so I spent, oh, a couple of months roaming around looking for people that I thought in my innocence were pot smokers. And finally met a couple of SEABEES (construction battalion) from a nearby naval base in Oxnard and they agreed to sell me some joints, as I recall, and loved it. Got stoned the first time I smoked it and then loved it. Just was absolutely enamored of it. And then gradually turned on a couple of friends of mine and the network or my contact with the network of various drug supplies just sort of grew from there. But I found it very easy. I mean there were times when, you know, the whole damn town was dry but usually it was not a problem. It was always around. And hard drugs, what are commonly called hard drugs—you know heroin and methamphetamines—were a little more difficult to get a hold of. But the popular drugs of the day, the organic psychedelics like mushrooms, psilocybin, and things of that nature and LSD and marijuana and all of the varieties of hemp products—you know, hashish and oils, and things like that. Those were all readily available and, as I recall, cheap too. Some people grew their own but they were very rare because we were all kids living at home and it was kind of tough.

LC: “What’s that in your closet?”

JH: Exactly.

LC: “Uh, it’s a chemistry project.” John, let me just ask one more question. How important, if at all, was music to you during this time?
JH: Tremendously important as a kid consuming it. I never played an instrument myself. But it was important for me not only for the aesthetic experience of the melody itself but also for the poetry, the lyrics. I wrote poetry avidly from about fourteen or fifteen right on through into my twenties and aspired to be a poet. So good lyrics were very important to me and, frankly, served to reinforce my political and social views, given the music that I listened to. You know, a lot of Bob Dylan. I started off musically at a very tender age, probably in the late fifties, as early as that, you know, when I was like nine or eight. And started really listening to popular music, not just, “Oh the bear went over the mountain.” You know, not the car songs and that family songs and that stuff but really listening to what was being played and realized that I just hated it. It was the most god-awful, ghastly, “Itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, yellow polka dot bikini,” kind of crap. Or it was the music of my parent’s generation, which to my ears sounded like—bad one. Hang on. You wouldn’t want to see my face right now. (Laughs) My jaw is going like a paint shaker. Either it was Alvin and the Chipmunks, which was awful, or why would anybody want to sing about being drunk and broken hearted? You know, which was a big lounge-lizard kind of music.

LC: Sure. Dean Martin.

JH: Yeah.

LC: That’s exactly what I was thinking.

JH: Frank Sinatra. I’ve actually, in later years, learned to appreciate that a lot. Some of it is great stuff, but then it was just horrible. And my first musical experience that was really music that I could identify with, that I could listen to and go, “Oh, yeah. That’s my music,” was—damn it. What’s the name of the TV show? It was a breakthrough folk music show. “Hootenanny.” You might not have seen it.

LC: I’ve never seen it but I have heard about it.

JH: Yeah, yeah. “Hootenanny” and I loved it. The Limelighters; Peter, Paul, and Mary, and some of the older singers—Pete Seeger and people like that. Woody Guthrie songs and new stuff and just loved it! It was, “Oh, my God! Good music!” You know? That led me later on into Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, that kind of music. And only after that when we got into, you know, Beatles and Rolling Stones did actual rock-and-roll start to appeal to me. The early rock-and-roll that I recall was either sort of crass, irritating,
rock-a-billy stuff you know, Elvis Presley, stuff like that. Or it was, you know Paul and Paula sappy, saccharin teen love songs and obviously manufactured celebrities. I can’t think of the names—Bobby V. You know, I mean this is obviously a robot.

LC: You just put the same song in, hit the button, and he chops it up and spits out another—

JH: Exactly. Change the hairdo, you know, call the robot Ricky Nelson. I mean it was just horrible stuff. But later on when rock-and-roll started to be a little more my kind of stuff then I became a huge fan. But essentially folk music was my first, you know, musical identification.

LC: And it sounds like an important one.

JH: Oh, it was; then. I don’t listen to much music lately, well and especially this last year. I just have stopped. No reflection on that or explanation for it.

LC: Has that happened at other times in your life when you just kind of let go of it for a while?

JH: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And there were times when I would be just too damned busy, you know? Because I’m not the sort of person who will turn on the music and have it playing while I’m doing something else. When I listen to music I like to listen to music.

LC: To the exclusion of—

JH: Pretty much anything else. Really concentrate. Now, that wasn’t so true when I was younger but as I’ve gotten older that’s very much the case. I can’t remember when I stopped listening to music in the car, for example, but it was a while ago. I couldn’t really listen. So—

LC: Let’s take a break, John.

JH: Okay.
LC: This is Laura Calkins at the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Dr. John Hubenthal. Today is the sixteenth of December 2005. I’m in Lubbock and John is speaking by phone from Massachusetts. Hey, John.

JH: Yeah. I was going to do the—can’t remember his name—the old radio announcer thing of, “Hello Mr. and Mrs. North and South America and all the ships at sea.”

LC: And it sort of feels like that sometimes.


LC: Winchell. Yeah. Walter. Yes. Well, I haven’t scaled those heights yet. I think probably never will that occur, but this is really your show rather than mine.

JH: Well, let’s hope that I can talk coherently. I’m afraid it’s a maddening experience for me because I’ve made my living for quite a while now as a public speaker and not to be able to talk—and enjoyed it—and not to be able to talk is truly maddening. But I’ll do the best I can.

LC: Okay. That’s all we can ask, and I know it’s an effort.

JH: I’m trying to remember where we left off yesterday.

LC: Well, let me help you, let me help. We had talked a bit about your growing up and going to school and music and some interesting interactions with chemical substances. We talked a little bit about that.

JH: Recreational chemistry.

LC: Indeed. And I was sort of getting to the point where I was going to ask you a little bit about the development of your early political views and anything you can pitch in about that.

JH: Oh, right. Yeah. It was a typical sort of adolescent mash. You know, starting out with the social connections and then through the social connections becoming more aware of the wide world, I guess, beyond my little teenage universe. Of course, there were girls involved, but I don’t think that that aspect of it was so important. It wasn’t, “I’ll join any movement to get the girl.” You know, it wasn’t quite that bad. But
that was, you know, there was an element of that. But, as I was exposed to, you know, things like the local anti-war movement and started looking into the history of the conflict—excuse me—my interest got sparked and sort of took off.

LC: Do you remember when you first heard anything about Vietnam? Was it on TV at home?

JH: Yeah, yeah. TV, at home, and I think that was the case with most young people, I would think. Probably very, very early—you know, twelve, thirteen, something like that or the last days of my childhood before going into adolescence. I’m pretty sure that I did what most kids do. What Mom and Dad said was the gospel. And my father was not a particularly—you know, it wasn’t an ax that he wanted to grind but his views about the war were mainstream.

LC: Did he make them clear to you?

JH: No. He was an odd duck. When we were all young, when he was in his child rearing [householder] days he didn’t communicate with me much at all. I gathered that he talked with my two older sisters, you know, often and sometimes deeply. But he and I had very little contact that I remember of any substance. It was all, you know, “It’s bedtime,” if that. But of course I heard him talking to other people and heard his comments, you know, running commentary if I was in the room and we were watching television and watching the news. And it was pretty clear to me, or as I recall, it was pretty clear that he supported the war. But again, not in some particular, you know, sort of personal identification with it, not in that sense but just, you know, “Well the country is there and war is always a mess.” Not as bad as “my country right or wrong,” which by the way has always intrigued me because nobody ever completes the quote. Which is something about, “May she always be right, but when she’s wrong I have a responsibility to correct her.” Right? But in that sense he was a supporter of the war. And it was only as I wandered farther afield in adolescence that I started to get exposed to different ideas. And I had the good luck, I think, to tie in initially with basically a local anti-war group that was headed up by a local, you know, hedge professor academic type at the local community college. At least there was some kind of community college connection there. So I got exposed to legitimate materials.
LC: John, can I stop you just for a second and ask if you recall the name of the
community college?

JH: Well, it would have had to have been Ventura Community College. Yeah,
yeah. And I don’t remember any of the names—one thing you have to understand here
about my oral history—I already made my comment about discrepancies between my
memory and what I found hardcopy. But also you have to understand that I do have
PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and that for most of the last thirty years I have tried
to forget that it ever happened, basically. You know, I’m not one of those guys walking
around with buttons and my old camies—quite the opposite. It was painful and I would
never give up the memories or the experience. They’re priceless. They’re treasures,
however painful they may be, but I didn’t want to remember this stuff. I didn’t want to
dwell on it. I didn’t want to get all nostalgic. I mean it was bloody and terrifying and
ghastly, you know? I don’t want to hang on to that stuff. So there are going to be voids,
you know? I’ve never tried to maintain contact with the people I served with. Can’t
remember their names. And the same is true pretty much for the anti-war movement, too.
I remember what I did but I can’t remember, for example, the names of the people in the
Ventura Peace Committee. Wow. I can remember that was what it was called and I
remember that I was struck, even at the age of fifteen, by the sort of textbook feel of the
materials that were being passed around in this particular little group. You know, it read
like real history, not like propaganda. And I’m grateful for that because I feel like I got a
good grounding in how the war started and what it was all about sort of officially, if you
will. Later on I encountered lots and lots and lots of propaganda. Fortunately, I was able
to recognize it as such because of what I had first been exposed to.

LC: And when you say it had a textbook feel to it, can you give an example?

JH: Well, it cited sources. Names and dates were used. No hyperbolic modifiers.
Not “yellow running dog lackeys of the capitalist pigs,” you know. None of that kind of
language. It was, “The State Department did this in 1940,” whatever. It was very dry
and factual, and the sources were cited. So they would cite State Department documents
or books that had been written by this or that author. You know, it just had an honest feel
to it. It didn’t feel like propaganda. I didn’t really know that until later. But it may
actually have been part of my earliest affection for history. I think I mentioned yesterday
that my mom kept those juvenile American Heritage Series history books around the
house and I really enjoyed those and this was just another element of that. You know,
later on a little more independent. But I do remember really enjoying learning about the
subject. It was enjoyable to educate myself that way, which was unusual for me because,
as I pointed out yesterday, school was nightmarish for me. I did not enjoy the experience
and I was not a particularly good student.

LC: And, John, it also sounds like this way of encountering the war set the entire
framework up as something serious that you had to understand.

JH: You know, I think I was precocious because I can remember my peers at the
age of fifteen being almost completely oblivious to the war—you know, most of my
peers. And as soon as I understood the situation, which was about the age of fifteen, I
realized that, one, there’s a war on; two, my country’s doing it; three, there’s a draft; and
four, I’m a target. I better get up to speed because this is not playing cowboys and
Indians in the backyard. You know, at the age of eighteen—I realized at the age of
fifteen—I’m going to be called upon to go out and go into real blood and bullets combat.
Holy shit! I better figure out what’s going on. I remember very clearly. It wasn’t like,
you know, an epiphany. It wasn’t, you know, Paul on the road to Damascus or anything
like that. But over a comparatively brief period, call it a month or something, it dawned
on me that I was playing in the real world now and would be in three years. It didn’t
seem like a very long time at all. And I suppose that I could just as easily have sort of
fallen under the influence of an Army recruiter but for various reasons and circumstances
I ended up in the anti-war movement. In retrospect, I’d have to say if I had fallen under
the influence of an Army recruiter I probably would have ended up in the anti-war
movement anyway because I did think critically, and again, I think I was a little
precocious. As best I could I tried to, as I say, think critically what am I reading here and
what are these people saying that we’re supposed to do—the anti-war people, that is. I
can remember resisting the temptation to just go party-line knee-jerk on this.

LC: Which would have looked like what?

JH: Oh, your cliché sixties, you know. The trope of, “America is the source of all
the evil in the world.” I think that’s probably the shortest way I can say it. The capitalist
butcher of the Third World, you know.
LC: Neo-colonial—

JH: Oh yeah, and I’m sure we both have the vocabulary. But the basic idea is that, you know, America is the evil empire and that communism is the Utopian solution to everything, pretty much. I will say this, too. At the same time that I was active in the anti-war movement I looked into Marxism. I tried as best I could do read *Das Kapital*. I got about half way through it and finally threw up my hands and said, “I’m too young,” or something like that or, “He’s too old,” or whatever. You know? In any event it’s obviously not a first language text or something like that. God!

LC: And did you find your way to that book and to Marx on your own, or kind of on a suggestion or was it on the wind?

JH: It was, you know, part of the committee meeting banter, which really was a pot-smoking and drinking party for the most part, you know.

LC: And where would these committee meetings happen?

JH: College kids’ houses. Yeah. Now, what I realized at some point was that, yes, however arrogant it sounds now, what I presumed was, “Yes, I am at least a cultural revolutionary and probably a political one, too. But if I’m going to ascribe to a revolution I’m going to ascribe to a revolutionary doctrine that appeals to me and that I can support and that looks like it’s going to work.” And that meant for me not the Soviet revolution because when I looked into that it was like, “Oh, my God!” If you’re not one of the cadre it’s not, you know—

LC: Not a good thing.

JH: Not a good thing! So I became an American revolutionary—Tom Paine, Jefferson, Franklin. Those were my hippie revolutionary heroes.

LC: I was going to ask you who your heroes were because this is quite interesting. And would you just find a copy of *Common Sense* or something and read it on your own?

JH: Yeah. Like that. It was more that I was reading, you know, secondary sources and descriptions and things like that, and of course there was some exposure in school. Not much though, I have to say. I do recall reading through the Constitution at one point and reading through the Declaration of Independence. I was also very influenced—I was madly in love with Thoreau. Carried a copy of *Walden* with me.

Truly, I did.
LC: I hope we have photographs of you deposited here at some point.

JH: Uh, I hope not. I certainly hope not. (Laughs)

LC: I’m trying to picture the fifteen year old trying to do the beard thing and, you know.

JH: Yeah. Couldn’t do the beard, tried to do the hair. But, yeah, I was madly in love with Thoreau and of course he’s our great cranky scold of American literature. And there’s the whole, you know, “Henry, why are you here? Waldo, why are you not here?” Which appealed a lot to a juvenile protest-mentality guy like me. And I think actually my sense of an American revolutionary consciousness probably came more from Thoreau than anybody else.

LC: That’s really very interesting, and also tells you why the public schools don’t—

JH: Don’t teach Thoreau! (Laughs) Oh, no!

LC: It’s dangerous territory.

JH: Oh, yeah! Henry David had some things to say. I mean he was kind of addlepated in some ways but, by golly, you know. He said great stuff for hippies. “Change the clothes when you change the man.” I mean that one was just like, “Oh, well, yeah!” You know?

LC: But it’s really interesting because it sounds like you were kind of carving out, clearly with some influences, but your own kind of course of study, what it was that you wanted to read. It wasn’t that you didn’t want to read and it wasn’t that school held nothing for you. Education clearly was important. But you wanted the self-education. You wanted to find your own depth in a way, it sounds like.

JH: Well, it is probably less flattering than that.

LC: I think you’re modest, John.

JH: Well, it felt unavoidable to me because I apparently—damn—have attention deficit disorder and so the classroom environment was terribly difficult for me.

LC: It’s a killer. Yeah.

JH: Yeah. And so it was the only way I could learn anything was to sort of go off on my own tangent. There wasn’t any sense of being the heroic pioneer. I mean of
course there was that sense, but it was as much posing as anything else. I mean, come on, I was fifteen to eighteen age range. There are no boundaries on that age male ego.

LC: Right. There may have been some vanity going on there.

JH: Oh, yeah. I think there was a substantial amount, desperate vanity in my case. But in any event it had this feeling of necessity. It was the only way I could learn, and again, it wasn’t real conscious. It wasn’t like, “Oh, well. I can only do it this way.” It was like stumbling along, this works, or—

LC: Kind of fell into it.

JH: Yeah. Exactly. And no program or any sense of, you know, I’m going this way, no compass. It was just doing it.

LC: What did, if you can offer an observation—this would be interesting—what did the guys and gals at the committee meetings who were probably a number of years older than you make of you? Do you know?

JH: Well, I was always the youngest.

LC: That I believe.

JH: Yeah. I was always the youngest one there and I think it ranged from sort of, “Here is our shining young Baudelaire,” you know, sort of attitude. “Look at this! We’ve got this intelligent fifteen year old and isn’t he wonderful!” Sort of like lap dog.

LC: That’s cool! That could work.

JH: Oh, yeah. Older girls? Come on! You know? I loved it. It ranged from that to, “Shut up and sit down kid.”

LC: A gender divide there would you say?

JH: No, actually not. We were pretty liberated. I got the same range from both spear and distaff side, you know. So it was pretty uniform. It was also very warm and supportive. I remember that. There was this real feeling of community, I guess. We were all in it together on the outside and so we’d get together at somebody’s house and, you know, everybody supported everybody else. There were, of course, the inevitable, you know, soap operas going on. You know, boyfriend-girlfriend stuff and things like that. But overall it was us against the world, you know. And I hesitate to use the word solidarity because it’s so clichéd, but that’s really true. There really was a sense of
solidarity. We’re going to support each other and help each other out and protect each
other, and that was wonderful. That was irresistable for me.

LC: I can imagine.

JH: Yeah.

LC: John, can you sketch any of the characters from this group that you might
remember?

JH: Oh, I could have so much fun.

LC: Now, you can lampoon them, as well.

JH: Oh, yes I can!

LC: And that would probably be fun, too.

JH: Yes, I can. This is a horrible situation for me because my primary tool is
impaired. I can’t talk. It’s like, “Oh what fun I could have,” but I can’t make the words
come out. Oh, Lord! Well, let’s start with the real egotists in the crew. You know, there
was—and it really is a stereotype. The twenty to twenty-five year olds who know how to
play the guitar and can spew musical ethnology bologna. Who would sit with great
pretension talk about the chording of Huddy Ledbetter. You know, would never call him
Leadbelly. And would accept the favors of his swooning female admirers with a kind of
disdain. R. Crumb did it much better than I ever could and he was dead on the money in
his caricature of the counterculture of the day. But, yeah, just go flip through some old
Fab Comics and—

LC: You’ll see them?

JH: —you’ll see them. You’ll see them all.

LC: But you know what, we’re having fun. But there’s also, as you pointed out, I
mean there was an authenticity to the feeling that was created.

JH: And the lampooning is not solely a retrospective phenomenon. We were
doing it at the time.

LC: That’s interesting.

JH: Oh, yeah. Telling tales on ourselves and each other and poking fun.

Generally pretty gentle and affectionate, not always. But yeah, there was not very much,
or a very acute self-awareness, but it was there. And some of our more extreme members
of our merry band would be laughed at behind their backs. I’m sure that was happening
to me, too, you know. But it was okay. I mean we were very, very innocent. We had
read the blood-curdling tales of atrocity and all of us had cut our teeth on those old black
and white newscasts of “Bull” Connor and, you know, the Civil Rights Movement. So
we had a sense of fear along with divine mission, if you will, although none of us would
have said divine. Well, maybe one or two. But we were terribly innocent. We really
believed our own press. We thought we were going, in fact, to have our sort of impact on
the society around us. At least I did, and maybe because I was so much younger but I
was a believer. Yes, we may fumble along and it’s going to be tough, but by God,
there’ll be a better nation and a better world and peace and love will triumph. I believed
it. You know?

LC: Those aren’t bad aspirations.

JH: Oh, no. Oh, hell no. And it kind of hurt to grow up and get cynical. But I
think everybody has their equivalent experience. It’s just part of—it’s the name of the
game.

LC: That’s interesting, too. I was just thinking in terms of periods in modern
American history when there have been these moments of—

JH: Profound idealism.

LC: Yes. And believing in change and trying to put that forward in policy terms
too. Not a complete disconnect from the world, quite the opposite.

JH: And it comes in all flavors ranging from, of course, the Abolition movement
to the Spanish American War. There’s a wide variety of true belief. If you’re going to
talk about Thoreau you have to talk about, you know, the McCarthy period, too, because
both include their dewy-eyed believers.

LC: Even now. I think I would put that out as a period that people may look back
on and think, “That was the period when ideas were at the fore,” that’s what people were
arguing about.

JH: Well, we’ll talk about the present.

LC: Good enough. I look forward to it.

JH: I would disagree with you. I think this is a particularly apathetic and self-
involved time. And as prima facie evidence, I give you voter turnout.

LC: Uh, yes.
JH: Less than half the people bother.

LC: But was it different in the sixties?

JH: I don’t know.

LC: I mean, we can refer this to the people who will listen later. Hey, get back there and check out the Ventura County voter registration and turnout levels. But do you suspect as you think back on the people that you’ve been describing and that you remember, were they going to vote?

JH: Oh, yeah. I’ve never missed, and it stems from those earliest days. And one of the big issues for me was that I was going to be called upon to risk my life in service of my country before I could vote. Because it was twenty-one back then. And that was a big deal for me. It was like, “Well, what the fuck?”

LC: Well, that certainly became the crux of a lot of those kinds of comments and arguments as time went on and of course, as you know, is what forced the change. It really, really is.

JH: Yeah. And we’ll talk sometime, I hope, about the wisdom of letting eighteen year olds vote. (Laughs) Having raised a couple of young men myself I sort of wonder, kind of sort of wonder, you know.

LC: Well, was there fear in the room when you talked about the draft? Do you remember? Or what was in the room? Let me not characterize it.

JH: Let’s see. What was in the room? Yeah, fear. There was, you know, more a kind of—I want to call it bravado. “I’m not going to die in this filthy war.” That’s a kind of bravado. “They’re not going to get me. I’ll be the one that gets away.” That was one theme, I guess I’d call it. And then, of course, there was that tried and true standby of—oh, I had the phrase just a minute ago—universalized outrage. “How dare They do this,” with a capital T. For me, though—I really can’t speak for the other guys in the room—for me, though, it was somebody’s going to shoot me. I mean that really was the bottom line. It’s like, “I don’t want to go off and get shot.” Good God, you know. And as my—let me start over. Those are three very, very important formative years—fifteen to eighteen—I think for everybody. You’re really sort of exploding into your adult physical form. Excuse me. Do my burps go on the tape? (Laughs)

LC: Only if you insist.
JH: I do, I do, yes. Historical voracity. Veritus eternitas. Oh, my. What was I saying?

LC: You were talking about the periods in anyone’s life between fifteen and eighteen.

JH: Oh, yes, yes. By the time I got to eighteen I can sincerely say there was a part of me that felt like—I can remember saying to my girlfriend at the time, she was asking me, “Why?” Now this is right before I volunteered to be drafted. She was saying things to me like, “Don’t do this, wait. Maybe they’re going to put in a lottery. Maybe you’ll get a high number, don’t go.” And I would say things to her like, “Look, this is the late twentieth century. We’re getting much more civilized. This may be the last war.” I mean, imagine that statement. “And this is my last chance. This may be the last chance anybody will have to see what war is all about.” So my thinking went through that sort of evolution over the three year period. Not that I supported the ideas or the strategic goals of the war. It was more a kind of thrill seeking really, and I can remember feeling like that. Frightened certainly, but frightened in the same way that I would be frightened when I drove a car too fast. It was kind of a daredevil exhilarating kind of fear. Boy, I got over that one real quick. (Laughs)


JH: Once I got there. Oh, my goodness. But that was the arc. You know, those are the two endpoints, if you will, from being a terrified fifteen year old to being a thrill-seeking eighteen year old.

LC: Did you hook into any of the literature about, you know, first hand accounts of experience in war, or did you watch All Quiet On The Western Front, or any of that?

JH: No. I wasn’t that sophisticated. Just the news.

LC: Any of that stuff? Red Badge of Courage? Just the news. That was quite a lot to take in.

JH: Yeah. Just the news. That was it, really. By the time I got to the end of my high school experience I really had lost my earlier habit of reading, I guess I would call it. I really didn’t read much by the time I got out of high school and was almost anti-intellectual in many ways. I can’t really say why. It’s too easy to say, “Oh, I was brutalized by the faceless public education system.” I’m not going to go that route.
because it’s too easy and it’s probably wrong. But in any event by the time I was eighteen I was almost incurious, and that’s not right because I was very curious about the world. But I really had lost my habit of reading anything besides my own poetry and my beloved Thoreau and comic books, I guess. It had kind of deadened out by that point. My earlier investigations of poets—Whitman, and the Russians, and some things like that had pretty well stopped. It’s funny.

LC: Well, John, let me ask one more question. Had you been able to keep track of or chart the development of the war?

JH: Of the war itself? Only in the sense that I had this feeling that it was getting bigger and that it was probably going to go on forever. That’s sort of how I felt about it. I just couldn’t see any way that it was going to end. I didn’t follow, you know, individual battles or troop movements or anything like that. But I did have a very clear sense—of course we’re talking 1965 to 1968. So this is during the buildup. This is on the way to having half-a-million troops in country. So there was this sense of every week there was a call for more troops that was answered. This unit or that unit—I can’t remember details, you know. But more people were being poured into the conflict. And I can remember this sense that there was a kind of phoniness to political calls for more troops. You know, a few more troops and we’ll have enough to finish the job. And then next week there’d be another identical statement. A few more troops and we’ll have enough, you know, and there was this sense that it’s never going to stop. You can’t get enough troops. And yet they’re going to just keep doing it, which probably reinforced my feelings of the inevitability of my own participation. I was like, “Well, they’re taking everybody man. The press gangs will be coming around for me soon enough,” you know? You know, it was just a matter of time in any event. I had that sort of sense of the conflict.

LC: John, just as a marker, when did you graduate from high school?

JH: Sixty-eight.

LC: And did you graduate in the spring as we might normally think?

JH: Oh, yeah, yeah. I was on track. Mostly they got rid of me.

LC: Bye-bye.
JH: Yeah. Exactly. For my senior year I recall I only had two—no, I had to go to physical education and they made me take a biology class, which I actually tried to enjoy. And all of my other classes were independent study Theater Arts.

LC: Sweet!

JH: So I was required to go into this beautiful old overbuilt high school theater. It wasn’t an auditorium. It was a true theater with a loft and wings and dressing rooms below and a balcony and lighting bank. It was a WPA (Works Progress Administration) overbuilt project, right. And in this little town called Santa Paula, just to the east of Ventura. And it was mine. It was my toy and I spent hours every day. You know, I’d go to my two classes and then I’d wander into the theater and I went in and, you know, I was something of a tempest in a teapot as a high school actor. Stumbled into it quite by accident early on in, I think, my freshman or sophomore year and did a few high school theatrical productions and loved it. And so I would play in the theater and write my own one- and two-act plays, light up the stage, and wander around it and imagine the blocking and the sets that I would use. You know, things of that nature.

LC: Well, and you had this it sounds like absolutely palatial theater in which to—

JH: Oh, yeah. Small. It probably seated, you know, total seating was probably maybe three hundred.

LC: Yeah, but I’m sort of getting a picture of it.

JH: Oh, yeah. It was delightful. I mean it had a counterweighted loft so that you could fly flats up and down for backdrops. You know?

LC: Fabulous!

JH: Oh, just utterly fabulous. Just loved it. Great toy. And all of the accumulated wardrobe and costume and makeup trash of decades of high school productions down in the dressing rooms. So it was great fun. Everything from nose putty to, you know, the basics of a knight in armor. (Laughs) I had a wonderful, wonderful time.

LC: Yeah. You could take your imagination out for a ride.

JH: Yeah. Exactly.

LC: Sounds great. Let’s take a break there John.
Interview with John Hubenthal
Session 3 of 11
December 21, 2005

LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Dr. John Hubenthal. Today is the twenty-first of December 2005. I am in Lubbock and John is in Massachusetts. And, John, if you don’t mind I’d like to pick up some of the threads from our last session last week when we were talking about your recollections of early 1968. I wonder if, first of all, you actually were a member of Students for a Democratic Society at this time, or did that come later?

JH: I believe I joined earlier than that. I started associating with people in the anti-war movement, to my recollection, oh, pretty early on around ’65 I’m thinking, probably late 1965.

LC: When you were very young, fifteen or sixteen.

JH: Yeah. And I believe I was sixteen when I went to an SDS organizing meeting with my then-girlfriend who was a little bit older than me and had access to a car. So we drove down to I think it was the UCLA campus. And there was a big student housing—you know, one of these commune-type houses—and they were having a big organizing meeting there and that was when I joined, actually signed up. And that was when they were all astonished to find out I was sixteen years old and joining the SDS because—there actually was a little discussion about whether they could actually let me join. They finally decided—

LC: “Oh, to hell with it.”

JH: Yeah. “To hell with it. It’s another troop. Let’s sign him up.”

LC: You remember much about that trip, John?

JH: Mostly that they had really good pot and they let me drink beer, which I discovered at that time anyway I didn’t particularly care for, and I think my girlfriend was flirting with some other guy or something. I don’t know. Nothing of political consequence. It was a lot closer to the stereotype of, you know, “I’m going to join the movement to get laid” kind of scene. I mean obviously I was already hooked up with a girlfriend but it was much more, you know, “Hey big party. Big party in LA!” You know, because we lived north, about 150 miles north. So it was a trip to the big city. It
was not a very sophisticated moment for me. And subsequent to joining the SDS that
granted me some cache with the local peace committee.

LC: Ventura Group.

JH: This is the Ventura Group, yeah. And I capitalized on that as long as I could,
but as far as being actively associated with or organizing in any real sense with the SDS, I
was very passive. Basically my name was on the membership list and that’s about as far
as it got, mostly because of limited resources on my part. I couldn’t get around that
much. I think I was tootling around on a little Honda 50 Step-through. That was my
transportation. You know, little moped-type thing. And, of course, hardly any money
and geez, I was sixteen. You know?

LC: Right, with other things going on, too.

JH: Yeah, yeah. A few other things.

LC: Well, John, let me ask you a little about 1968 in the spring, the early part of
that year before you graduated. Do you remember paying attention or knowing about the
Tet Offensive?

JH: Yeah, I did. The Tet Offensive and I believe the business in the A Shau
happened just shortly either before or after that. I think it was the whole, you know—I
can’t remember exactly when the Hamburger Hill incident happened. I actually did walk
over Hamburger Hill once later on when I was in-country. But, yeah, I was very much
aware of the Tet Offensive.

LC: Do you remember what you made of it at the time?

JH: At the time it looked like we were getting our asses kicked. And that largely,
I think, was a consequence of the presentation of the battle on, you know, the news
media. Because later on I went back and looked at what actually happened and that was
not the case at all. But it was a classic case of “pump it up to two inch headlines and
make a lot of noise.” I wouldn’t quite call it a victory of any kind militarily for the NVA
or the Viet Cong but it certainly was politically hugely successful. Because what I recall
is this feeling like “Oh, my God!” You know? And of course that fired up the anti-war
people because immediately on the heels of the Tet Offensive, as I recall, there was a big
push for further mobilization and more troops, and you know that drill. Throw more men
and money at it. Which, of course, always had consequence in the anti-war community because if the president called for more troops, then you can see how that goes.

LC: Sure.

JH: And so all the anti-war people would get all fired up about not sending war troops and around and around we went.

LC: Do you remember anything about President Johnson’s response and, for example, his speech that he made or have you seen it too many times now?

JH: I remember that he made a speech. And since we’re on the subject, just for the record, in later years my feelings about the war—20/20 hindsight sort of phenomenon—changed really quite dramatically in some regards, anyway. And one of my attitudes that I found changed hugely was my opinion of Lyndon Johnson. Because at the time Lyndon Johnson was the source of all evil or some damned thing. He was the bad guy causing the war, you know. But in retrospect looking back at Johnson, he was a damned fine president, especially compared to some of the jokers that have followed him. I mean he was an arm twister but pretty much played fair. I mean he was a politician so he’s got his compromises, to use a nice euphemism. But, boy, I mean the whole, you know, War on Poverty and Civil Rights Act—I mean he did some damned fine things. And I’ve always regretted some of my earlier feelings about Johnson because he was just, “Oh, God. Terrible man, terrible man.” Nothing good to say about him at all and in retrospect I found that, “Well, wait a minute. I was out of line on that one.” Since this is going into the history books I want to get that one on record personally. But as far as his speech after the Tet Offensive, no I don’t recall much in the way of details. And again—just make this point again—you have to remember interviewing me that I really have devoted a big chunk of my energy for the last thirty years trying to wipe those tapes. You know?

LC: Understood.

JH: I’m not a particularly—most of my life, at any rate, I have not been—I’ve pretty much lived in the present tense. And so that sort of facilitated things, but I’m sure there’s going to be just mountains and mountains of details that I am not going to be able to help you with here, Laura. (Laughs) I’ll do the best I can but most of my recollections will be personal, I’m afraid.
LC: That’s okay. Well, and I think that’s what we’re after. And I wonder if another big event that spring left an impression on you and that would be the assassination of Dr. King. I mean did that kind of thing hit you?

JH: Oh, hugely. You have to remember there was a tremendously apocalyptic feel to that particular—that year in particular, in fact. Nineteen sixty-eight. I mean usually we rattle off the assassinations—King, Kennedy, and then of course in ’63 Kennedy the first. It seems like anybody that I could look up to or admire was getting killed. Then you had the whole, you know, fiasco in Chicago with the riots and whatnot. That was also the beginning of a more violent faction, wing, whatever, of the anti-war movement. That was when we started to see, as I recall, the Weather Underground and people like that popping up with the bombing of that research lab in Madison, Wisconsin. Yeah, Wisconsin.

LC: That’s right. Yeah.

JH: I always get those confused. I think it’s in Michigan. You know, it looked like the world was coming unglued to an eighteen year old—seventeen year old actually. I mean there was as I say a very, very apocalyptic feel. And when you couple that with a sort of Utopian, change-the-world approach to life that was so prevalent in my generation it was a pretty amazing dovetail there. It was an exciting time in some sense, but it had a real scary feel to it. I mean after a while, I know from experience, it’s amazing what human beings can adapt to as “normal.” I think we both have something to say about that, but after a while it did feel normal. You know, this is the world. The world is coming unglued. You’ve got everything from the Cultural Revolution to God knows what. Who’s going to get shot next? And anything was believable. J. Edgar Hoover was killing people, and for all I know he was killing people. To this day I still have my doubts about that guy. Everything seemed very precarious and the war just fit right in with that.

LC: Well, how did all of this, you know, kind of turmoil on the national scene fit with your own thinking about what your future would look like as you were graduating from high school and then that summer—?

JH: I didn’t think about future.

LC: Not even the draft?
JH: Well, yeah I’d already pretty much made up my mind at that point. I don’t think I’d really told myself yet. But I certainly made up my mind that was going to try and get conscientious objector status. I had also at some level—I mean I don’t recall talking about it actively too much. But my recollection is that I had also made up my mind that I was not going to try and get a—one—I’m sure you know all the draft designations. I was not going to go for a 1-O. I was going to go for a 1-AO.

LC: For someone who doesn’t get that reference can you just go over it real quickly?

JH: Oh, yeah. Well, there are draft categories ranging from 1-A down to 4-F, and 1-A, of course, is prime material. Then there are two conscientious objector statuses that were available at the time. One of them is the 1-AO status. Now, that’s slightly easier to get. But what it says is that you are willing to serve but you will not carry a weapon. And then there’s the 1-O status, which says you’re an objector. You will not serve in the military. I believe the latter was originally designated or designed for people like Mennonites and Quakers and that sort. I’m not sure the history of the 1-AO category but that was what I applied for. And I have to say, it’s been a life-long source of really patriotic pride for me that because I am—and I’ll just go ahead and get, whatever, sloppy or whatever about it. I really am at heart very much an old-fashioned patriot kind of guy. I could wax rhapsodic about this country and I say that knowing all of the history, not just the fairy tale history. Just the idea of the country and the founding documents—and I think I talked about this earlier about what kind of a cultural revolutionary I was as a kid—just impressed the hell out of me. I just cannot take more pride in what this country is all about. I’m a real whole-hearted participant in this American Revolution thing that we’ve been trying to do for the last two hundred years. And it was a particular source of personal patriotic pride that I lived in the one country that would let me serve honorably without compromising my beliefs. That was hugely important to me. It was just, you know, “Damn! How can you not like this place?” You know? That serving as a conscientious objector in uniform was impossible, to the best of my knowledge, anywhere else on planet Earth. It simply was not allowed. It was just unthinkable. They’d either throw you in jail or just send you away or make you carry a weapon anyway. And I have to tell you that just impressed the hell out of me. And to this day I take it as something to
be very proud about our traditions and this country. As I say, I can actually get pretty
sloppy if I let myself go.

LC: Well, John, rather than risk that—

JH: (Laughs) You don’t want me to go there.

LC: Let me ask you how you found out about 1-AO. Who told you about it?

JH: I was doing my own investigation. I think I may have mentioned that I was
about fifteen when I realized I saw the dominoes. Pretty much connect the dots and I
knew what was coming and not—as I said, even at fifteen, three years didn’t look like a
very long time at all.

LC: Which is really very interesting because most fifteen year olds are like,
“What’s for lunch? What’s for dinner?” That’s about it.

JH: Well, there was a lot of that in me, too, but when somebody says, “Guns, war.”

LC: You hearkened to that.

JH: Yeah, yeah. Maybe I got a natural paranoid streak or something. But there
was no, there was nothing ambiguous about this message. “You will grow up. You will
turn eighteen, and you will probably be drafted.” And the way things were going
throughout that three year period it looked more and more like it’s not “You may be
drafted.” It’s like “You will be drafted.” Plus, as I said, I was not going the route of
college deferment. I was not your sterling student candidate. I didn’t expect to go to
college, period. I had no idea what’s laying in wait for me. If there had been no war I
don’t know what would have happened to me after high school, to tell you the truth. No
serious plans, no career ambitions, except to be a poet, which is a great recipe for
starvation and an early painful death. You know, the whole idea of filing as an objector
one way or another certainly would have been bandied about in the anti-war folks that I
was hanging out with. And as I recall, I actually went to the draft board at some point—I
think I was seventeen—and got all the paperwork and figured out exactly what to do and
who to talk to and how to fill out the forms and all that good stuff.

LC: Did you go to the board in Ventura?


LC: Do you remember that at all?
JH: No. It was actually a very faceless experience. I always found it kind of humorous because a little anonymous looking, you know, glass window storefront in some strip mall. And you walk in and there’s nobody at the front counter and you ring the bell and some middle-aged gal comes out and says, “How can I help you?” I mean mostly it was a place to go and register. And I don’t know how people were selected for the draft board. To this day I don’t know how you become a member of the draft board. It’s probably some political maneuver of some kind—you know, county level politics or something like that—but I never met anybody on the draft board. I never spoke to anybody except this middle-aged gal who sort of took my papers and dealt with me that way. A receptionist I guess, secretary, whatever. I forgot what the question was.

LC: Well, I was asking about your actual trips to the draft board and what kind of paperwork you got hold of and—

JH: You know, it’s really funny. I went down and I said, “I’m here to register.” Well, let’s see—let me reconstruct. I was actually seventeen when I graduated, which would have been I guess May, June, something like that. Turned eighteen in August. In the time between my graduation and my eighteenth birthday basically I ran away from home, basically. I told my folks I was going to take my old Volkswagen. My folks had bought me an old VW Beetle and I said, “Well, I’m going to drive up to Big Sur and go camping and try to sort my thoughts out and figure out what I’m going to do after high school.” Which was a bunch of bologna. You know, basically I just wanted to get out of the house. And I got to Big Sur and looked around and said, “Well, hell, why stop here?” And my older sister was going to school in, of all places, Kalamazoo, Michigan. So I put my foot down and drove to Michigan and phoned my folks from there and said, “I’ll be back on my birthday.” And got some pick up work doing some construction jobs and spent a month or so in Michigan just hanging out. It actually turned out to be a delightful experience for me because my sister, as luck would have it, decided to go back to the West Coast. So I arrived at the apartment she shared with two other college buddies and basically ended up spending a month sleeping with two women. Which was, you know—

LC: That was working for you.
JH: That was working for me. Yeah. That’s fine. Sure. I’ll work construction. Had some fun and had some silly moments hanging out in Michigan. Then I guess a week, something like a week before my eighteenth birthday, hopped in my old Volkswagen and tootled back out to the coast. And bright and early on my eighteenth birthday walked down to the draft board and walked in and said, “Hi, I’m here to register. I’m eighteen years old and by the way I’d like to get the forms to file for 1-AO status.” No fuss no muss. “Oh, okay. Sure. Let’s see if I can find them.” You know, that sort of response. Finally rummaged around and found the appropriate paperwork and I took that home. Even though my objection to carrying a weapon in the Vietnam War was largely political because I’m not a pacifist in any way, shape, or form. What I wrote—and I doubt there’s a copy of it left—but basically what I said was I’m a pantheist. That means that I believe that God is in everything and so killing is necessarily immoral, and that’s pretty much it. I mean it was a very, very short paragraph as I recall. And brought that right back to the draft board, I think it was the very next day. And then had to wait for six months while they tried to decide if I was morally fit to serve as a conscientious objector because I’d been arrested for possession of marijuana. (Laughs) Which I always thought quite humorous myself.

LC: So they took six months to talk about this?

JH: To talk about this; to decide if I would be granted my 1-AO status. Well, actually they granted me the 1-AO status pretty much right off the bat, as I recall. But then they had to decide if I was morally fit to serve because I’d been busted for pot, which just destroyed me. I thought it was absolutely hilarious. And finally in January, December, January, something like that, they notified me that, yes, I was in fact not the terminal moral reprobate they were afraid I was.

LC: Darn!

JH: And decided that, yes, I was fit to serve. So I had my little nice little draft card with the 1-AO on it. And as soon as I got that I walked right back down to a draft board and said, “Okay, I want to volunteer. Take me now.”

LC: Let me ask you a couple questions, John. When you went up to beautiful Kalamazoo, Michigan—and I say that because I was born there.

JH: Oh, were you really? Oh, God. That’s so funny.
LC: And I have a bunch of Broncos in the family.
JH: I think you told me that. Yeah.
LC: A bunch of Western Michigan people in the family—
JH: So Sundays are a lot of fun.
LC: There’s a lot of post-mortems that go on there. But I want to ask you a little
bit about being, certainly that close to Canada with a car. Did you give any thought to
leaving the country?
JH: Not a thought. Never crossed my mind. This is my country. This is my
country. Nobody’s going to run me out.
LC: It never even—?
JH: Nope. Oh, it was talked about.
LC: Well, sure, but it didn’t appear to you to be a good option?
JH: It was not an option. Not even a good option. It wasn’t an option.
LC: Did you have—and I’m sure you must have at some point but whether you
recall them or not—discussions about this with people who might have been thinking
along those lines of getting out of the country?
JH: Oh, yeah. We were all over the map. My male friends were—you know, I
think I might have said, when I looked at the problem I saw four very clear options: go in
and serve, go to jail, try to be an objector of some kind, or live as a fugitive. Wait, that’s
right. It was go to Canada, go to jail, be a fugitive, or serve. And I made up my mind, as
I say, pretty early around seventeen. But my friends, my male friends, were all over the
map. I believe some of the guys that I knew actually did emigrate and end up and they’re
Canadian citizens now. I know at least one of my friends from high school went the
draft-dodger route as a fugitive.
LC: Do you know what happened to him?
JH: No. I met up with him very briefly after I came back from the war and
frankly was not very impressed. I was sort of wondering “Why was this guy my pal in
high school?”
LC: I’m going to take it that he was back in the States at that time.
LC: That when you saw him you were in the States as was he then. He had come back.

JH: Yeah, no, he was a fugitive. He lived like a fugitive.

LC: Like underground?

JH: Underground. Yeah. Basically. I mean he had a job but—

LC: Off the books or whatever.

JH: Off the books and, you know, assumed identities. I’ll just cut to the chase.

When I went to visit this guy after I got back—I don’t like to pass judgment on people. I don’t.

LC: Fair enough.

JH: But what I met was a coward and there’s just no other word for it. This guy was just shaking in his boots all the time and I just couldn’t respect it. I mean it’s one thing to be shaking in your boots. Okay? I’ve pissed myself. But it was just creepy. You know? It was like, “Jesus Christ! Stand up!” I never saw him again after that. Never tried.

LC: You said that you marked on your papering in the paragraph that you wrote that you were a pantheist.

JH: A pantheist. Yeah. Yeah, I was a pantheist for many years.

LC: And so this was true?

JH: This is true. Yeah. At one point I had what I’m sure were the only set of official US Army dog tags with religious preference stamped out “pantheist.” I actually got that done. I was in some, you know, clerk warehouse someplace. Yeah. It was on my way out of country for my R&R (rest and relaxation) in Hong Kong, Kowloon. And I just happened to being processed and I noticed they had the dog tag stamping thing there. And normally it’s like Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, to whatever—they’ve got like four categories. And I said, “Can you type anything you want on that?” And the guy said, “Yeah, sure. What do you want me to type?” I said, “I want you to make me a pair of dog tags that says I’m a pantheist.” And he said, “Sure,” and punched it out. I kept them for years and years. My wife, bless her heart, lost the last one sometime in the ’70s. But it was one of my prized possessions.

LC: Well, we’ll forgive her for that.
JH: Oh, I’ve got lots of reasons to forgive her. She’s a pip.
LC: I’m sorry you lost those. Just to jump ahead and stay with your story, did the fellow raise an eyebrow? Did he know what the hell you meant? Had he ever heard of it?
JH: Yeah. He didn’t care. He was probably stoned.
LC: I guess if that was my job I might have considered escape.
JH: He’s in a warehouse in, where? At Tan Son Nhut or someplace, you know, typing all day. I can almost guarantee you he was stoned.
LC: That pretty much does suck.
JH: What, wait for the next 122 to come in. That only happens once a month.
JH: Yeah. Well, listen, no excitement has its uses.
LC: Well, in South Vietnam in ’69, yeah, that would have been all right with me.
Wow. Well, let me ask you if I can, John, another question or two about the draft.
JH: Oh, well, maybe one or two, go ahead.
LC: Okay. Here we go. The six months that the draft board took to respond, what were you doing?
JH: I skedaddled north because my real girlfriend, my California girlfriend, was working at the Christian Scientist old folks home up on 19th Avenue. I always get it confused. Avenue. Yes. Up in San Francisco. So, I decided that was my best chance of getting laid on a regular basis. So I went to San Francisco and started out, you know, arrived there—I think I had fifty bucks in my pocket and a backpack and a copy of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and my own poetry. Spent, oh man, a little while, close to a couple of weeks, sleeping with the bums in Golden Gate Park and ate out of a dumpster a couple of times and finally hooked up with a squat up on Golden Gate Avenue. It was pretty cushy, you know, and it was a condemned building and somebody bootlegged power and water. We didn’t have hot water but we had power so we could use an electric stove to heat up baths and stuff and toilet flushed. You know, there’s a big red thing on the front door that said, “This building is condemned. Do not enter.” But we just went around the back. It was a squat.
LC: How many folks in and out of there roughly?
JH: Oh, hard to say. Very floating population. I have some wonderful memories of getting up in the middle of the night buck-naked. My girlfriend’s asleep on some rickety old mattress and I had to get up and pee and of course it’s 1968, I guess. Yeah. Had to be. Sixty-eight, so, clothes? Who needs clothes? Walked down the hall to relieve myself, decide to grab a glass of water, walk into the kitchen. And here are four French sailors with their pants over their arms like maitre d’s waiting in line to—I guess one of my roommates was hooking down on Market Street—with the little hats with the pompons, you know? Standing in line jabbering in French, you know, and I walk in. “Hi guys! Bonsouir.” As I’m getting my glass of water and standing there looking at these guys and they’re looking at me, you know, obviously because I haven’t got a stitch of clothes on. Of course, they weren’t wearing their pants, so that was cool. As I’m looking at these guys another sailor comes in and the next guy goes down the hall. (Laughs) It was a scene. It was a hoot. Oh, my. We had the mixed-race couple at the end of the hall who raised and trained attack Dobermans. They were quite a pair. The lady who I assumed was hooking with the French sailors was actually a bank clerk at the Bank of America by day. She was quite a handful. Let’s see. Then there was me, and then across the hall from us were the gay couple who made their living by raising peyote.

LC: Now these are guys right?

JH: Well, yeah. Gay guys. Gay women generally had better accommodations than gay guys did. A little classier than that, and there was another sort of rabble down stairs but it was hardly a fixed population. I only named the ones that stayed more than, you know, a couple of weeks. But I lived there pretty much the whole time that I was up in San Francisco. I was making my living by basically selling—have you ever heard of a newspaper called The Berkeley Barb?

LC: I haven’t. No.

JH: Oh, okay. Well, it’s an old leftie rag that was published back in the day and what I would do is I would work about three days a week. I’d go and buy at, you know, penny on the dollar, damned near, several hundred copies of the Berkeley Barb and then I’d wander on down to Market Street and basically live on the street for two or three days just constantly peddling newspapers until they were all sold. And I’d dealt a little dope on the side but nothing—
LC: Nothing serious.

JH: Nothing serious because I didn’t have enough money to get serious.

LC: Right. You had no capital.

JH: Exactly. No capital. And I had more important things to do. I had to write poetry and stay on top of my girlfriend.

LC: (Laughs) Were you writing? Were you doing some writing?

JH: Yeah, I was. Yeah, I was. As a matter of fact, I actually submitted a volume to City Lights Bookstore. And was subsequently contacted by them and asked to come and read my stuff at an open reading for people they were considering publishing, and basically blew my one shot at fame. The guy who was reading—the two guys who read before me, one of them was just an insufferable academic bore, and you can spell that both ways.

LC: Got it. Okay. I’ll pass that along.

JH: His poem consisted of—the first quatrain, and it lasted forever, the first quatrain was nothing but the most obscure mythological references from the Western tradition that you could ever possibly imagine. You know? Impossibly obscure! And then the following quatrain would be all of the footnotes rhymed.

LC: Oooh.

JH: Just that same pattern repeated and he must have gone on for an hour, and it was like, “Will somebody shoot this guy?” Geez Louise! The next guy who read was a gay guy who in meticulous detail described how he would pull a warm bath, get into the bath, defecate, smear it all over himself, and then clean everything up. Right?

LC: Okay. That sounds a little problematic.

JH: Yeah. Well, San Francisco ’68, you could say anything you wanted. Well, I was writing—

LC: But in terms of the aesthetics of it.

JH: Well, you know, Picasso and Matisse freed us from the aesthetic of beauty. We can be as ugly as we want now. Anyway, so I’m up next and my aspiration was to be Carl Sandburg. So you can imagine it didn’t really feel like a good fit.

LC: Yeah. The prep had not been great.
JH: Well, it’s just I didn’t get a good lead act. You know? My opener was not good. I’m writing poems about little, you know, immigrant babushkas on the bus on Nineteenth Avenue. You know, I’m writing poems about the working guys that I see on the construction sites. I’m writing poems about dogs and cats, you know, and Buddhism, God help me. And it just, so I walked up front and I looked at my poems and I looked at—I probably could have carried it off, actually. In hindsight I think I actually would have been met with a huge sigh of relief by the audience. Because what I was writing were a lot closer to the popular songs in terms of meter and scansion, you know, that sort of stuff. It was a very vernacular voice that I had been developing. But I looked at them and I looked at my poems and I said, “You know what? It’s the wrong place. Sorry folks.” Walked out and didn’t read a lick. Big mistake. Big mistake!

LC: How’d you feel about it that night? Did you think—?

JH: I was just totally disgusted. I was offended because I took my poetry very seriously and I believed in poetry as a popular art form. You know, you have to bear in mind that one of the sources—I was reading Akhmatova and Yevtushenko and in the Russian contemporary poetry scene it was a very vibrant, very popular art. Political but still—and one of the great jokes on myself is I’m running around reading people like, you know, Bella Akhmatova but I’m reading her in translation into English. (Laughs) So I’m reading this English translation of a Russian poet as English poetry, which gave me kind of a skewed take. I mean all the music of the language just completely lost.

LC: Right. And you were aware of that at the time?

JH: No, no. It actually didn’t dawn on me until I got a little more sophisticated. It was shortly after the war. I went back to some of that stuff and thought, “Oh, yeah, let’s go read some of the old Russian poets I used to love.” And went and actually dug out some of the books I had owned at the time and opened them up and realized, “Okay, let’s see. Left page Russian right page English.” It was this epiphany. Sort of a dis-epiphany.

LC: Really. I was going to say. The curtain went up and damn!

JH: It was like, “Oh, my God. What a silly mistake that was.” Oh, Lord.

Anyway, the punch line here is that I really wanted to write a poetry not just for hippies and not just for poets and not just for thumb suckers, but for some guy working a
construction job, you know? You know, it really was not even Robert Frost. Sandburg.

You know, he was my guy.

LC: Yeah. Much more on the kind of proletarian edge. Much more on the popular vox populi kind of edge.

JH: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

LC: Did you keep any of that John? Do you still have any of it?

JH: The early stuff is all gone. I’m not much of a keeper, I’m sorry to say.

LC: Yeah. That’s kind of too bad. It would be interesting to see that.

JH: I have tons and tons of stuff I wrote later. I got back into it in the ’80s, you know, dabbled. And I still—well, actually I can’t remember the last time I tried to write poetry—but yeah, to the best of my knowledge the early stuff is all gone. I probably had a fit of pique one day and just threw it all out. I think some of it might have stood up. I think some of it might have been good. I always thought the best poem I ever wrote was also probably the shortest one. It’s only four lines and it goes:

The rose I never gave you is still there on the dashboard
Made of silk and plastic shaped with heat and glue
It looks just like a real one but it will last forever
Smell industrial only ruined by the dew

Uh-oh. (laughs)

LC: I’m going to have to hit rewind and listen to that again. When did you write that?

JH: Let’s see, that would have been ’85, ’86 when I was going back to school to get my baccalaureate in the arts.

LC: Did you start writing as kind of a way to be more in touch with yourself?

JH: You know, I don’t know why I wrote. Yeah, I guess. I just had to do it.

LC: It’s interesting because you’ve described kind of coming into these periods and then clearly there was a lapse and then you came back to it and I just wonder if it’s served these deeper purposes.

JH: Probably. Probably. I can be an amazingly shallow fellow sometimes.

LC: See that time in Kalamazoo where—

JH: Exactly. Fond memory. (laughs)
LC: That’s okay. Tell me, John, because I’m really dead curious, the Berkeley Barb, had it been around for a while?

JH: I don’t know. Probably yes. I think it went back to at least the Free Speech Movement. You know, Mario Savio, I think was his name, I don’t know. The entomologist at Berkeley who started the Free Speech Movement, who I got to meet once.

LC: Did you?

JH: Yeah, after the war. I was visiting a friend who was attending Berkeley at the time and we were going up the stairs and he was coming down and he said, “Oh, John, I want you to meet this guy.” Poor Mario probably got hit with that a dozen times a day and it was kind of, “Hi. How are you?” He actually had a butterfly net over his shoulder and was going out to do some fieldwork and just scampered away as quickly as he could. Seemed like a nice guy.

LC: Did you have an awareness of the politics of the paper or was it—?

JH: Oh, absolutely! How could you not? This was, you know, “Kill the yellow dog running lackey pigs.” “Death to the pigs! Support the Panthers!” You know, it was hardcore stuff but it also ran all the prostitute adds. That was one of their big sources of advertising revenues. They would print anybody’s ad and my best gig—and I don’t recall doing it more than a couple of times—but have you ever heard of Big Al’s in North Beach?

LC: No.

JH: It’s the original topless bar that Carol Doda—

LC: Oh, gosh. Okay.

JH: Right. Pole dancers, you know, this was the original. This was the first topless bar. And Carol Doda was a silicon sister that, you know—she would arrive before her face would.

LC: Utterly amazing.

JH: The utterly amazing, lighter than air, no cantilever, no visible means of support, packed tight, don’t stand close to the radiators.

LC: Flammable. Right.

JH: Or they might melt anyway.
LC: Dow Chemical strikes again. Anyway—
JH: That’s exactly right. Well, that spawned a minor industry in North Beach of
topless and bottomless and XXX and, you know, strip clubs. And the way I worked my
route is I would start on the south end of Market and work my way up Market and
eventually end up in the North Beach area at night. Because I was basically following
the traffic flow, wherever the most people were, trying to sell this silly newspaper. I had
a lot of fun with it, too, because I had done theater work in high school. I did some
acting. Loved it. So I would put on a show. I had a milk crate and I’d stand on my milk
crate and hawk my papers at the top of my lungs, and put on a good show.

LC: Like what? Can you give me an example?
JH: I doubt I could do it now. What’s that old line from—I’m sure you’ve
watched the Ken Burns Civil War. Yeah, well there’s that scene where the Confederate
daughters—Daughters of Confederacy ask an old veteran to give the Rebel yell and he
said, “Well, I’ve got a mouthful of false teeth and a full belly and you had to do it at a full
run anyway, so I can’t do it.” You know?

LC: This is an interesting thing that you were selling these papers. Would the
same kind of people buy them? In other words could you kind of spot—?
JH: It was amazing who would buy them. Suits, secretaries—
LC: No kidding!
JH: Yeah.

LC: Excellent.
JH: I mean it was amazing. A wide demographic was buying this paper.

LC: That’s very interesting.
JH: Well, this is San Francisco.

LC: Sure. Right.
JH: So try to do this in certain parts of Chicago and I don’t think you’d get quite
such a—

LC: Or Lubbock.
JH: Or Lubbock. Yeah! Right! Watch them unload the rifle racks real quick!

LC: I’ll take a hit for that one later probably but—
JH: Well, that’s okay. You’re tenured right?
LC: Well, to be discussed later. So you would get this interesting—you couldn’t
tell really who was going to—

JH: Who was going to buy and who was going to tip. You know, you just never
knew. Most of the raggedy-patch-pants hippie types would just wait and find one in the
park and read it if they really wanted to read it. But you know, that was true also. I mean
you’d go into the Haight at night and some of the activities there—the weird movie
theaters—yeah, it was a fun place to be, San Francisco in ’68.

LC: I can only imagine.

JH: Oh, yeah. It was quite a hoot. It was pretty wide open, and you would get
your Sunday hippies and your freak show gawkers and you’d get your people who hoped
to God that the wife didn’t know they were gay or that the boss wouldn’t find out they
were smoking pot. So you’d get a lot of short-hairs and very, very straight people who
would, you know, put on the bell bottoms and face paint and go wander around in Haight.

LC: How far was your squat from that area? You said it was in Golden Gate.

JH: Yeah. It was on Golden Gate Avenue so it was probably just a handful of
blocks. It couldn’t have been more than ten or twelve blocks at the most from the whole
scene down there. You know, I had to cross the panhandle. I had to walk across the
panhandle and up the hill a little ways to get up into the Haight. I would end up in North
Beach on my paper route and I hit on this great routine one night just by accident. I’m
standing out in front of Big Al’s, right, and here comes the four visiting firemen. The
out-of-towners from Des Moines and they’re just gassed. I mean they’re just three sheets
to the wind and they’re just coming out of Big Al’s looking at these cantilever breasts and
they’re hooting and hollering, right? And just on a hunch—just one of those weird
things—I flip the paper open real quick to all the whore adds, right? And when these
guys come walking by I jump in front of them. “Berkeley Barb, sir. Care to get the
paper? All the latest news.” And they look and, you know, “Cherry wants to talk to
you.” Take it from there, and these guys look at this and their eyes pop and they go, “Oh,

LC: “Perfect!”

JH: And they’re drunk, right? So they grab the paper and they just hand me a bill,
which just happens to be a twenty. Okay. So I watch this happy foursome and I could
almost count the steps. After I did it three or four times I could count the steps. About
ten to fifteen steps and all of a sudden they get this sheepish sort of glow even in the back
of their heads and they’re thinking about Mom and Aunt Sara and the kids at home. “Oh
no we can’t do this!” And they throw the paper on the street and grab a cab and
disappear. And I walk over and grab the paper and clean it up and straighten it up and
wait for the next one. I sold one copy of *The Berkeley Barb*, which normally went for
twenty-five cents for almost two hundred and fifty dollars one night.

LC: Off of some guys outside of Big Al’s?
JH: Just catching the drunks coming out of Big Al’s. “Hey, look at the whore
adds.” And they’d throw me bills, a five, a ten, and just kept doing it. Same paper.

LC: This is pretty good. You’ve got your girlfriend, you’ve got the squat, you’re
paying almost nothing, you’re making two hundred and fifty bucks once you figure out
the game.

JH: Well, I only did that a couple of times, I have to say. Usually I was so
thrashed by the time I hit North Beach and I had enough money and kind of went, “Who
needs money?” I was a hippie. Remember?

LC: What did the money go for?
JH: Food, of course, since I wasn’t paying rent or utilities or telephone. (Laughs)
Yeah. Food and pot. Like that.

LC: And what about your girlfriend?
JH: Oh, she was a very upstanding young lady. Sweet gal. She “Dear Johned”
me when I was overseas. You know, she was working in a hospital. And she was a wild
child don’t get me wrong. But not—she hadn’t jumped the fence.

LC: Got it.
JH: And actually a fairly devout Christian Scientist, which meant that I got really
good at—how should I say it—timing, right. Because there was no contraception,
nothing like that. So—let’s not go there.

LC: Okay. I think we’re all already there going, “Hm, okay.”
JH: Exactly. You can scrub that part of the tape okay?

LC: If you want me to.

JH: No, no. I don’t care. I’ll be dead. (Laughs)
LC: John this is really great. Let’s continue tomorrow. Would do you say?
JH: Works for me.
LC: All right.
Interview with John Hubenthal
Session 4 of 11
December 22, 2005

LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with John Hubenthal. Today is the twenty-second of December 2005. I am in Lubbock and John is speaking by telephone from Massachusetts. John, I want to ask a little more if I can about your interface with the draft board. Yesterday we were talking about your kind of salad days in San Francisco. And it sounded like a riot, really, but you said that that period came to a close when the draft board approved you, despite your—I don’t know if you were convicted but you were certainly arrested.

JH: Oh, yeah. That was a juvenile offense.

LC: Okay. And they had seen fit to look beyond that and rubber stamp you as okay for service.

JH: Right. Morally fit.

LC: Morally fit. Right. Well, anyway, what was your next step when you got that news? How did you find out about it, first of all?

JH: I believe my parents contacted me. The draft board had written to my house and as I recall I told my folks to go ahead and open it up to see what it said. And so I got the information that in fact yes, you know, I was considered fit. And basically just immediately, pretty much immediately, I just went right back down to Ventura, you know, back from San Francisco back down south. And again, once I got home, pretty much immediately went down to the draft board. And this is where the terminology gets tricky because as a conscientious objector you cannot enlist. You cannot enlist as a CO (conscientious objector). But what I could do to expedite going in was to volunteer. Now, this was just in the final days before the lottery had come into effect, as I recall. And I forget what the actual selection mechanism was. It was something probably comparable to a lottery but I don’t recall it being public. It was, you know, you got your notice or you got the letter or you didn’t. But you did have the option of going to the draft board and effectively volunteering. Saying, “Look, I’m squared away. I’m ready to go. All my paperwork is in order. Bump me to the head of the list.”
LC: Had this been your plan?

JH: Yeah. Oh, very definitely. My feeling about it was: “If I’m going to go do this, let’s do it while I’m,” you know, “let’s not put it off a couple of years.” I’m young, I’m strong, I’m, you know, in reasonable condition. The time to do this is earlier not later, was my thinking.

LC: I just wonder if that’s how you approach or subsequently approached other things that were problems. Go ahead and let’s just get it over with.

JH: Yeah. Pretty much. Very much. I think you could almost call it like a personality trait almost. If there’s a problem out there or something that needs to dealt with, you know, well let’s get on with it. Let’s not, you know, there’s no point in—I mean I’m brilliant at procrastination in certain things. But if it’s a serious, you know, I mean if it’s something serious and it’s some dealt with, let’s go! There’s no point in farting around about it. Let’s deal with it.

LC: Okay. What did the next step look like after you had checked the box for volunteer or whatever?

JH: Yeah. I don’t even remember what it was. I think I just told them, as a matter of fact. Within a short period of time—I’m trying to remember. I believe there was a fairly, you know, there was a chunk of time there—could have been weeks, could have been as much as a month—where I was kind of at loose ends just floating around my parents’ house waiting for the letter saying report to the bus station. Then I finally got that communication and one very cold, for southern California, very cold January morning in 1969 I went down to the local Greyhound bus station and loaded onto a bus and went down to the processing center down in Los Angeles. Some funny anecdotes from ther, too. This was during the very, very brief period—you may have encountered this in some of your research. But normally—the Marine Corps historically has been an all-volunteer branch of the service. And for a very brief period of time, I don’t know exactly how long, they were actually drafting people into the Marine Corps, which was probably horrifying to the old jarheads. You know? Probably considered rank, awful, blasphemous, heresy, you know—

LC: It’s going to bring the level down.
JH: Basically. Yeah. You know, “We’re no longer a few good men. We’ve got conscripts amongst us now.” Well, the way they were selecting, they were actually selecting for the Marine Corps when I was—when you go into the Los Angeles processing center it is multi-colored painted lines on the floor. And all the procedures are “Okay, now you get on the green line and follow that.” And you walk along the green line until you get to the end of that which is, you know, the medical examination or something and all the various steps in this process. And when you are waiting or in between chasing lines they would have us all just line up around the walls of one of the rooms—not really in formation but just standing in an orderly fashion—you know, shoulder to shoulder around the room. And we were at a moment like that and here came this—I mean he wasn’t wearing dress blues but he was definitely full-dress uniform, you know Marine Corps non-com. I don’t remember his rank. I hadn’t learned my ranks yet. But he came down the line of us, all of us conscripts, and basically counted off every tenth man. You know, so okay, “You! Step out!” One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. “You! Step out!” And was going around the building taking every tenth guy and all these guys were going to be drafted into the Marine Corps. Now, at that time being drafted into the Army was considered bad enough but the prospect of being drafted in to the Marine Corps was you know, it’s like many, many times worse in the minds of virtually everybody in my generation.

LC: And the reason for that?

JH: Oh, it had a reputation as—well, consider the reputation of the Marine Corps. You know, most people wouldn’t articulate it quite as well, I guess as well. But the Marine Corps bluntly has a very different combat mission, or at least historically it did. You know, I mean I used to call them tourists. The Marine Corps comes in and has a big party and then leaves. The Army comes in to stay. The Marine Corps is shock troops, assault troops. It’s just the whole, you know, reputation of jarheads. You know? They’re riflemen. They’re fighters. They’re not, you know, none of this pansy nation-building crap. I mean come on! That’s the reputation of the Marine Corps. They’re the shock troops, and as a consequence they also had and have a reputation for being much, much tougher in terms of training and also for having a higher mortality rate in combat.

LC: So all of those figure, all of those figured in.
JH: Yeah, all this stuff figured in. That was the hard-ass unit. I mean if you were to rate the services on a scale from most comfortable to most grueling. You know—leaving aside the Coast Guard—the place to be is the Air Force. You always eat in a mess hall. You always sleep on sheets. You always have showers. I mean we used to call it the country club. And at the other end of the spectrum you have the Marine Corps. So anyway, here’s this guy counting off every tenth man and I was one of the ten. He picked me.

LC: Were you really?

JH: Yeah. And he says, “All right, step out.” And I’m looking at this guy and I knew enough to know that this is the Marine Corps. This is not an Army guy and I had some information about the fact that the Marine Corps was drafting. And I took about three steps away and I said, “Excuse me, what’s going on?” He looks at me and says, “None of your business.” I said, “Now wait a minute, this is my business. What’s going on? What just happened?” He said, “You’re going to get the privilege of serving in the United States Marine Corps.” And I said, “Can I serve in the Marine Corps as a conscientious objector?” And he looked at me—he literally did not know what to say. I’m sure he had never encountered, never imagined that situation. And I showed him my paperwork that verified that yes I was in fact a conscientious objector and it was all legal and above board and all this stuff. So he puts me back in the line and he looks at the guy on my immediate right and looks at the guy on my immediate left and tags the guy on my immediate left and says, “You! Come on!” Well, I can remember as this guy is walking away behind—because he knew what was happening—all of a sudden he got picked and not me. And I swear it was like the Exorcist. His head was swiveled a hundred and eighty degrees and his mouth was working the whole time he was walking away from me. I mean he was just promising that he was going to hunt me down to the ends of the Earth.

LC: I believe it.

JH: And do evil things to me.

LC: I believe it.

JH: Yeah. I mean you can imagine. What a scene. But then they put us on another bus and we rode up to Ft. Ord and, you know, and got off. It seems like Army
transports people in the middle of the night, for some reason, I don’t know. We arrived at Ft. Ord at some ungodly hour; you know, two, three in the morning, something like that. And I had to go through a whole another, you know, “Here are my papers, everything’s in order, dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah.” To explain to the military authorities that, yes, I was a conscientious objector, and yes I intended to serve and no I wasn’t going to change my mind and dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah. So everybody else was on the bus with me got shuffled off to, you know, they were formed up into a basic training company. And I was left in a barracks with some sort of dead-ender types. People who were in transit or in trouble or had medical problems or whatever, just this odd lot in this barracks. No training. I was wearing fatigues. I was wearing Army issue clothing but still a civilian. I hadn’t received any training at all and sort of had this rough idea that if there’s nothing on the sleeve you say, “Sir.” About as sophisticated as I was.

LC: So you had at this point you had not been sworn in at all?

JH: Oh, no! Of course I’d been sworn in. They do that at the processing center, you know, so I was—

LC: And you’d had your medical—?

JH: Oh, yeah. Well, such as it is.

LC: Well, do you remember it?


LC: We can use you.

JH: Yeah. Exactly. I mean it was—how shall I say it? You know, high volume processing and this was the LA, the Los Angeles processing center so they’re pulling people in from, you know, ten thousand square miles of high density populations. So there were a number of guys coming through. And I’m trying to remember what exactly happened because then I was given transit orders to go from Ft. Ord to Ft. Sam Houston down in San Antonio, and as I recall they cut me loose. I was a slick sleeve, no rank, in uniform but they gave me—as I recall they gave me travel vouchers and I had this vague recollection of actually going home for just like a day or two and then going on from there to San Antonio. But I’m not sure I can trust those memories, although my mom might remember. But in any event, I ended up at Ft. Sam Houston, which is where the
conscientious objector basic training unit was. Probably doesn’t exist anymore. A
fascinating little unit. Obviously we were the, pretty much the pariahs of the military.
We probably had the shortest chain of command of any basic training unit that ever
existed. Because we were under 4th Army and our chain of command was Headquarters
4th Army and then us.

LC: Wow.

JH: Yeah. Because nobody else wanted us. I mean there might have been one or
two, there might have been a battalion or something in between, you know, Army
Headquarters but—

LC: They were keeping quiet about it.

JH: Yeah. They weren’t going to assign us to any normal division or battalion or
anything like that because we were pariahs. We were, “God, who are these guys?” You
know. Well, they formed us up in companies of—let’s see. They’d run through cycles
and there were, as I recall we had three companies. I’m trying to remember exactly how
this worked. We had a shorter basic training than regular soldiers. Everybody else got
eight weeks of basic training. We only got six, and then we went straight from six weeks
of basic training into AIT (advanced individual training), which for most of us meant
being a medic. There were few exceptions, but I do recall there were three companies
and I believe we were staggered at two week intervals. So, one company would be in its
last two weeks. The next one would be in its middle two weeks and then there’d be a
starting company. That sort of staggered, you know, rotation thing going on. I mean
imagine this military unit. This is the only military unit probably in all of time that is
composed entirely of people who are willing to serve but will not carry a gun. I mean
obviously our drill instructors and our noncoms and our officers were all regular Army.
Or in the case of our non-instructor noncoms, sort of our dorm-daddy types, the guys who
kept an eye on the barracks, they were largely either regular enlisted ranks or I think one
of them was even a draft guy who somehow ended up there. The population in the basic
training company was, at least in my company, was pretty much evenly split between big
city—well not big city really—but West Coast, East Coast, Chicago hippies, or counter-
culture type people and deep, deep Bible Belt fundamentalist Christians.

LC: Oh, boy.
JH: Oh, it was a great mix. I mean, you know, I can remember evenings singing. Groups of us singing, and they’d do gospel and we’d do Janis Joplin and everybody would enjoy it. But basically you’ve got a bunch of counter-culture loadies and fundamentalist Christians all living in the same barracks and we got along. There were no problems. Obvious disagreements but all very—come on. We’re all supposedly these non-violent guys, right? You know?

LC: How did the drill instructors—and I don’t even know if that’s the correct term—

JH: Oh, yeah. No, they were drill instructors.

LC: Okay. How did they treat you guys?

JH: I found—you know, I was actually very impressed by the quality of the drill instructors. Now, having said that, you know, bear in mind, this is not your average basic training company. Well, think it through. The opportunities for somebody making a real big stink, and even a political stink—you know, like I’m talking Congressional investigations—is much, much higher in a real seriously oddball unit like that one. Well, among our Christian brethren there in the barracks you had people who were, I mean, extremely devout. There was one fellow who ended up in the stockade and we never saw him again because he refused to salute. He refused to pledge allegiance. He refused to acknowledge—it was all idolatry to him.

LC: No kidding.

JH: Yeah. And as a consequence was subjected to, you know, the military legal system and ended up in stockade. As a matter of fact, I actually did see him towards the end. He was being discharged and I believe if not dishonorably then administratively. You know, nothing polite about it and he looked pretty raggedy. He’d lost probably twenty pounds in jail and he was not in good shape. He’d had a real rough time. But that’s just an example of the sort of things, you know, that might pop up with this unit.

So as a consequence, I believe that we got actually probably the upper cut of the available DIs (drill instructors). I remember sitting down over a cup of coffee when I was in AIT. I happened to bump into one of my drill instructors on base and, you know, just amicable guy, very nice guy. I mean, when he wasn’t working. But we sat down over coffee and I was just talking to him about being a DI and it turned out that this guy was, either he had
or was just finishing his master’s degree in psychology and the reason he was getting a 
master’s degree in psychology was to be a better DI.

LC: Wow. That’s very interesting.

JH: Yeah. Well—

LC: And out of the ordinary, to say the least.

JH: Yeah. I suspected at the time, in fact, that it probably was pretty out of the 
ordinary. But even though our DIs behaved and sounded, you know, like every 
stereotype you can imagine of a drill instructor, I mean that’s what they were. They were 
also—you know, nobody crossed the line. Nobody got smacked around or any of that 
kind of horror story. I think we were very much, as I say, I think that people paid close 
attention to us because they did not want to have any complications or, you know, 
repercussions. Anyway—

LC: John, let me ask about the group itself, your group that you were going 
through with. Did you form friendships? Were any of these guys from California? Do 
you remember anything about them?

JH: You know, it’s an amazing thing. I’m a pretty gregarious guy, for the most 
part, but with one exception. I have no connection to anybody I served with at all. The 
fellow whose contact information that I’m going to be sending you—J.G. Webb who 
lives in Kentucky—is my one friend who is still my friend who I met in basic training, in 
fact. And he’s the only one. Yeah, there were guys from California. I mean, I went back 
at one point and I looked at the proportion of people who were drafted from the West 
Coast as opposed to the rest of the country for the Vietnam War and it really was 
California’s war. Not a majority, certainly, but probably contributed more troops than 
any other state, as I recall. You know, there were a lot of people drafted from the West 
Coast for that war. Disproportionate, I might add.

LC: What do you put that down to?

JH: For all I know, logistical expedience. You know, it’s a lot easier to ship them 
from Ft. Ord to Southeast Asia than from Quantico or wherever. I don’t ascribe any evil 
cabal conspiracy, punish the fruits and nuts state, sort of theories to that. I don’t give any 
credit to that. I don’t give that much credit to the people who were running the war.

(Laughs)
LC: All right. To have that kind of plan, right?
JH: Yeah, yeah. And also, what possible motive? Why? What? You know? Why would somebody do that? It doesn’t make any sense to me. You’re going to punish the population of a state because some of them are hippies, you know? No. I think that, for the most part, even American politicians are a little more sophisticated than that. Actually, I think it probably was something like just logistical expedience. You don’t have to ship the bodies that much farther but I have no idea why. I mean California is the most populous state so it’s, you know, of course it’s going to be a huge man power pool for a military draft. But.

LC: Sure. Well, let me ask you about the training during the six weeks. What were they—could you figure out how it was different? I mean obviously I’m thinking the weapons training was left out.
JH: Right. Yeah. Well, that’s the two weeks difference.
LC: That’s the two weeks. What about the rest of the curriculum? Essentially the same as what one might have encountered in basic as far as you could figure out?
JH: Yeah. Oh, yeah. A whole lot of dismounted drill, a whole lot of, “Yes sir, no sir.” And push ups, and physical training and obstacles courses and tear gas. They even offered us a hand-to-hand combat course and some of my pals—because I didn’t retain any friendships from the military but of course I had pals when I was in, guys that I hung around with. But I can remember several of my friends in basic training were shocked that I actually elected to take the hand-to-hand combat course that they offered. I was just curious. I was just like, “Well, let’s see what this is all about.”
LC: What was it about?
JH: Well, it was about how to kill people with your bare hands, basically.
LC: How to actually kill them? I mean did they give you defensive moves as well?
JH: Oh, yeah. But when I say an unarmed combat course I mean this was like two hours in an afternoon. And it was take downs and basic grabs and some real, real fundamental, what martial arts people call joint manipulation things. Holds and stuff like that. Basically, though, the one thing that I remember them teaching me is you sneak up from behind them, grab them around the throat, and throw yourself backwards flat. And
if you do that you’ve got a nice tight grip on somebody’s neck. When they fall
backwards and you land on your belly as you hit the ground you’ll break their neck. You
know, that seemed to be the lesson of the day. How to grab somebody around the throat,
jump backwards, pancake, and kill them. That’s pretty much all I retained from my
unarmed combat class. But it included all of the elements of basic training except the
weapons training. Let’s see. By the time we graduated I was—how were we organized?
We were in—each barracks was a nominal company, so we had our own trainee, you
know, trainee officers. And I’m trying to remember because I believe I was second in
command for my platoon when we graduated from basic training. In any event I acquired
trainee rank because it meant you didn’t have to do KP (kitchen patrol).

LC: And you figured this out?
JH: Oh, pretty quick! Yeah.
LC: I’m sure.
JH: I had to do KP once.
LC: Right. And that was enough of that.
JH: Just right away changed my attitude real quick. Rank hath its privileges.
LC: Were you in communication with your folks during the time you were in
basic?
LC: What did they make of the way that you were negotiating the military
experience—the CO status, the different basic training, the fact that you volunteered? I
mean did they have a reaction to those things?
JH: You know, it’s funny. My folks can be kind of odd. I don’t recall any
explicit discussion of the details of what I was doing throughout the entire period. I don’t
recall talking at all to my parents about being a conscientious objector, for example.
Probably there was some discussion when I was still in high school. But during those
years my parents and I, we didn’t talk much. It was an odd and awkward relationship
really. You know, I mean I told you about my high school track record and I don’t know
if you’ve ever heard of the phenomenon, the family scapegoat. I was the only male child
and was definitely, or at least my experience anyway, was that I was definitely the bad
kid. So I was always kind out of the loop, you know, not a particularly close relationship
with my father. Warm relationship with my mom, but again not particularly close. We didn’t talk about deep stuff as I recall or important personal stuff. It was, “Oh, you’re going to do that. Well, good luck.” You know?

LC: Do you think they were worried for you?

JH: Oh, I’m sure they were. My mother told me later that she was tremendously worried. But she’s a pretty tough cookie, you know, and my mom’s response was, “Well, everything is going to be fine.” And that was the façade. Of course, I’m certain there was a lot of other stuff going on underneath, but, hell, for all I knew they were glad to be shed of me.

LC: Right. You weren’t aware of whatever other things there might have been.

JH: Yeah. No, no, no. No Mom sobbing as I’m walking out the door to go into the Army or nothing like that.

LC: John, were you clear when they sent you to Ft. Sam that you were going to be trained as a medic or in medical work?

JH: No. No clue whatsoever. I had this sort of idea that obviously that I would end up being a medic. But we didn’t actually get our orders cut for our various schools. And at the end of basic training we were given our orders which were not just for AIT but they were also for our subsequent assignments after AIT.

LC: Okay. So you got that at the same time?

JH: Yeah. Exactly. So we all knew where we were going six weeks into the game. And out of all the guys in my company there was one guy from the Midwest who was a little bit older than the rest of us. He was one of the religious objectors and he was already a licensed physical therapist. So as soon as he graduated from basic training he was commissioned, I believe, a 1st lieutenant and was immediately assigned to the hospital corps and I always wondered about him. His name was Courtney Floyd. God knows why I remember that name. But this guy, to the best of my knowledge, did not relinquish his CO status and yet in order to function as a physical therapist, by Army regs for some reason, he had to be given a commission. And they weren’t going to let him go because he was obviously a highly-trained therapist. So, to the best of my knowledge, he actually served as a commissioned officer as a conscientious objector, which is another
one of those impossibilities. You know, one of those things that’s not supposed to
happen. I don’t know how they managed to sort that one out.

   LC: Right. It must have given them fits.

   JH: Oh yeah, I’m sure it did. But he did not go to Vietnam. There was another
guy whose feet were size 4-EEE. Right? So he literally had feet like an elephant, you
know, little round things, and the Army didn’t make shoes for him. So he was given a
medical discharge. To the best of my knowledge, of course I could be mistaken, but
scuttlebutt was this guy did six weeks in the military and got out with an honorable
discharge and the GI Bill. (Laughs) It almost makes up for having feet that look like
elephant’s feet.

   LC: Yeah. Turned out to be a good thing.

   JH: Yeah. Turned out to be a good thing. What else? Then there was the guy
who went to the stockade. Oh, and a fair number of the religious went into something
called the White Coat Program. Now, the White Coat Program, these guys are military
lab rats. They’re effectively volunteering for medical experimentation. And they were
called, you know, this group of guys was referred to as the White Coats and basically you
spend your time in the military stateside—you don’t go off to combat—but you’re a lab
rat. In order to get into the program you had to be pure in body and soul. You know, no
alcohol, no tobacco. They’d prefer if you had no caffeine and no chocolate, and I mean
your whole life. So a lot of these religious guys qualified for—strange snake handler
dietary practices. God only knows. So some number of guys went off. I mean, I looked
at that and I thought, “Oh, yeah. Right! Yeah, I’m going to be a lab rat for the Army? I
don’t think so!” God knows what that—yeah, let’s try neurotoxins or something.

   LC: Yeah. That’s a little worrying.

   JH: Yeah, yeah. But you know, these guys loved their country and wanted to
serve and so off they went.

   LC: Do you know where they were sent? Do you know where they went?

   JH: No. I have no idea where this program was. It was kind of like some weird
World War II Nazi Germany scene. It’s like they rounded all these guys up and, okay,
they just sort of went away. They put them in transport of some kind and off they went
and nobody knew where. They knew, obviously, but we didn’t. And I wasn’t that
close—and they were all religious. None of the rest of us qualified for, you know, physical reasons. We were entirely too corrupted.

LC: Right. Exactly.

JH: Yeah. And I’m trying to think. I can’t be certain, but I believe that everybody else in my company got orders for Vietnam. And I remember going to my regular Army commander. I mean this was the officer, the real officer, in charge of the basic training unit. And I knew my manners then so I wasn’t afraid to talk to a captain. Yeah, he was an O-3. He was a captain and probably just cringed every morning when he woke up and realized what his duty assignment was.

LC: Right. How soon can I get out of here?

JH: Yeah. Exactly. I mean this guy’s wearing a CIB (Combat Infantry Badge) and he’s running conscientious objector boot camp. It’s like whose dog did he kick?

LC: Right. Exactly.

JH: But he did get off a great one liner. I walked up to him and, “Sir, good morning, sir. Permission to ask a question, sir.” You know the drill. And so he let me ask my question. I said, “Can you explain to me why it is that absolutely one hundred percent of the guys in this unit all got orders for Vietnam?” And he looked at me with this wonderful dead pan poker face and said, and I quote, “Son, the Army believes that you men should be given the opportunity to prove your beliefs in actual practice.” Is that wonderful?

LC: That’s good.

JH: He’d probably been asked the question before.

LC: Yeah. He had sharped up on this one. He was ready.

JH: Yeah. It was just so perfect and it was just like, “Oh, well, thank you, sir. Good day, sir.” I mean and, hell, it was probably a real honest answer actually. Oh, my goodness. We had murals in the latrines, right. People would, you know, basic trainees would—well, you’ll do anything to get out of training and to not work. And somebody at some point must have talked one of the officers into letting them paint a mural and it was this gigantic mural. I mean it was twenty-five feet long and covered the whole wall from the floor to the ceiling and showed basically a sort of weird mix of World War II and World War I with barbed wire and trenches and illumination rounds in the sky and, you
know, tracer bullets and soldiers all over the landscape. And right in the middle of this
ting is a medic with the classic big red cross and white circle carrying his wounded
comrade through this nightmarish combat landscape and the legend underneath it was,
“No guns, sir! Just guts!”

LC: Wow! Somebody put some work into that. Fabulous.

JH: Oh, yeah. It was actually pretty impressive. You know, it was a cut above
barrio street graffiti.

LC: Fabulous. Wow.

JH: Yeah, yeah. We were never allowed into the other companies’ latrines, right.
I mean we were only allowed to go across the walkway to our latrine so I don’t know
what was in the other latrines but that was the mural in ours.

LC: I wish we had that in the collection.

JH: Oh, yeah. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a photograph of that?

LC: Absolutely brilliant, sure would. Let’s take a break there, John.
LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am continuing the oral history interview with Dr. John Hubenthal. Today is the fourth of January 2006. I am in Lubbock and John is in Massachusetts. Hi, John.

JH: Hey!

LC: I want to ask you a couple of questions, if you don’t mind, that lead off from the discussion we had in our last session in December. And these concern your experience at Ft. Sam during your basic and AIT, which you completed both at Ft. Sam, as you told us. First thing that occurs to me is, I wonder what you saw in the way of diversity, however one might want to sort of interpret that, in the population that was being trained both in basic and in AIT, either with in the CO units or other units at the time you were there.

JH: Well, okay. How to start? I don’t know if it was accidental or in some way constructed. I tend not to be a conspiracy-theorist type so I think that most stuff that happens, stuff happens.

LC: Kind of randomly rather than high plan?

JH: Well, the world is a great big very complicated place so why was my basic training unit one hundred percent white guys? I don’t think that there was a conscious exclusion of black people specifically. We did have Hispanic guys with us, but, you know, we’re all Caucasians. I don’t think that was the Army secretly segregating or anything like that. I absolutely do not think that. Part of the reason for that is in our command hierarchy was, you know, it’s a training unit. So starting at the top we have our company commander who’s a regular Army guy. I think I’ve mentioned him before at some point. He’s a regular Army infantry guy, a captain, O-3, and he’s responsible for everything, really. And then, of course, there’s the whole hierarchy of officers—excuse me—leading down to the NCOs (non-commissioned officers), the drill instructors. Okay, that was sort of treated or functioned as a separate hierarchy, and then tacked on to this were this sort of rag-tag collection of guys. Not too many. I think there were three or four. Wait a minute. Let me do the numbers in my head. It must have been something
like six. Also, regular Army guys, not conscientious objectors, who actually lived in the barracks or functioned like—I don’t know what to call them—dorm daddies. I mean basically they were there just to sort of keep an eye on us. I don’t know what they did, really, aside from live these funny little rooms in the barracks. They had their own private quarters. But they lived in the barracks with us and they were, in the case of my training platoon, there was a guy named Jackson who actually lived in the barracks. Now, his situation was that he, I believe, had enlisted for three years and had this odd slot of time left and the Army didn’t know what else to do with him. So they sort of plugged him in and said, “Okay, you’re going to go be a dorm daddy for the COs for your last six months.” Whatever. Now he was a black guy. Right? I don’t recall that—I actually don’t remember if any of the drill instructors were minorities. I tend to be sort of spectacularly color blind myself, so sometimes this stuff just goes right by me. But even though my platoon was entirely Caucasian, you know, we had this black guy who was our dorm daddy. I mean there were definitely minority people around but not a whole lot of interaction in terms of the trainees. Now, I can suggest one big reason—and let me interrupt myself and say that because of my ongoing medical treatment my neuropathy in my jaw that makes it difficult for me to talk is acting up today. So patience. It may take me a little while to finish.


JH: Well, thank you. I hope so.

LC: I’m sure of it.

JH: Who was going to be a CO, right? Right off the bat, if you’re not a religious objector you’re going to be middle class, upper-middle class, well-educated parents. Somebody who’s been exposed to—most likely you’re going to be someone who’s been exposed to the sort of ideas that would lead you to become a CO. And you’re going to have been raised in an environment that is going to be conducive to that. In later years, after my military experience, I had much wider ranging experiences than I did as an adolescent. And I’m here to tell you that in the black communities that I’ve been closely associated with, the idea of going to war with no weapon would have been considered stupid. You know, I mean just like, “I don’t care what you believe. That’s dumb! Run away! Don’t do that.” So that would tend to filter out, you know, minority members in
the trainee population. And I just don’t know what to say about the religious objectors. They tended to be—and I’m sorry if my language seems old-fashioned or if somebody might respond badly to the way I put things but I’m just trying to be matter of fact here—the religious guys tended to be more extreme Protestant Southerners. And generally were working class and generally had not had the benefit of, you know, well-educated parents, for example. You know, not quite as bad as “I’ve only read one book and that’s the Bible.” But tending in that direction more than the other. Pretty straightforward salt-of-the-Earth types. I don’t know enough about African-American religious communities to know if they tend to be, you know, Pentecostals, for example. But I suspect not. My exposure living in the South would tend to make me think that deeply religious African Americans would tend to be more Baptists or Baptist-Methodist or something like this. You know, not Pentecostals, not Seventh Day Adventists, not the more extreme Protestant congregations. And so that’s a second filtering factor for race or minority status or however you want to put it. But in any event, the fact is that we had a few guys with Hispanic surnames but all Caucasians. And for the most part what in the Southwest we call Anglos. Which is not to be confused with WASPs (White Angle-Saxon Protestants) who are a different category. But just not Hispanic white people.

LC: Right. Not Mexican-Americans, not Tejanos.


LC: Interesting. Amongst the religious CO group that you knew, did you know whether there were, I’m going to say Amish or Mennonites or any of those kind of groups that tend to be not only religious but also more reclusive in character? Did you come across any of those?

JH: You know, I’m trying to remember. My strong sense is—and I can have a lot of fun with this and I’m going to be good. I mean I want to say—

LC: For once. No, just kidding.

JH: Well, almost good I should say. I mean I want to call them snake handlers. You know what I mean? Real thumpers. I don’t recall whether we had any Quakers or Mennonites or Shakers or Amish. But I don’t think we did. There may have been one or two. For the most part they tended to be much more—I want to be careful with my terminology. Charismatic, I guess is the word I want. You know, to be a Pentecostal or a
fundamentalist or a literalist or a charismatic or an evangelical—these are all terms with
very specific definitions, especially within the Christian community. And I don’t want to
use them improperly. So, not necessarily evangelical but very definitely charismatic. I
think that would be the right way to describe them.

LC: The other piece that I thought I might just take up with you is the question of
whether you within this kind of small CO community that you had here—a very kind of
artificial one but one nonetheless it seems—had any awareness or connection with folks
outside the gates of Ft. Sam who were anti-war.

JH: Not a bit of it. Patience. Whoa! Is that your phone or my phone?

LC: I’m not actually hearing anything.

JH: Okay. It’s my phone.

LC: Okay. Do you want me to—?

JH: No. I can hear you. There’s a buzz going on. I don’t know what it is.

Maybe it’s the coffee I just spilled on my telephone.

LC: Doing its work.

JH: Yeah. Exactly. Working its way into the innards. Okay, anti-war. I had two
cultural moments that surprised me while I was stationed at Ft. Sam. The first was that’s
where I saw *Yellow Submarine*. It was actually playing at a base theater, which just
astonished all of us to no end. So that was this kind of other culture, non-military culture,
leaking in around the edges. The other one was myself and a couple of good pals went to
a Peter, Paul, and Mary concert.

LC: Where was this?

JH: In San Antonio in 1969, which was astonishing.

LC: It is, actually.

JH: And in fact Peter, Paul, and Mary stood up on stage and said, “Oh, my God,
we’re doing a concert in San Antonio, Texas.” At the beginning of a concert because it
was sort of astonishing and it was SRO (standing room only). I mean it was a big hall,
hundreds of people, and it was packed. I mean absolutely packed and pretty good
concert, too. I enjoyed it quite a bit myself, but that’s it. You know, my connection with
the community in San Antonio was non-existent. Ft. Sam Houston at that time, and I
assume it still is, was what’s called an “open post.” There were no fences. There were
public streets that ran right through the middle of the base. You know, people
commuting or going to the market might find themselves driving through the military
base. We still walked sentry duty at night, for example. Trainees would be—actually we
would be given about an eighteen-inch section of broom stick handle. (Laughs)

LC: Seriously?

JH: Seriously, and told to walk around this or that perimeter as sentries. And
there were at least two occasions where the trainees walking the sentry duty at night were
subjected to drive-by shootings. So our impression of the world outside the base was not
particularly favorable and we tended to sort of keep to ourselves, as I recall. You know,
that was my experience.

LC: Can you tell me anything more about those incidents?

JH: Not a whole lot. I wasn’t directly involved with any of them. This was, you
know, barracks talk. Scuttlebutt. But definitely there was at least one trainee in an AIT
cycle ahead of me while I was still in basic who was shot and wounded and hospitalized
while he was walking, you know, night sentry duty. So we were a little cautious, to say
the least. That didn’t prevent us during AIT from calling out on weekend passes and
getting extreme. We were soldiers on leave, after all, but we stayed to ourselves. I don’t
recall mixing and mingling with any of the locals in any way. And as far as being aware
of, you know, San Antonio anti-war movement, it’s news to me. I didn’t hear anything
about it.

LC: Interesting.

JH: Well, you know, I was low-ranking enlisted personnel. You know, trainee.
It’s a very different world than, say, an officer or someone who’s regular Army and
stationed there. I was a product passing through.

LC: Off the line. You were coming off the line.

JH: Yeah. There you go.

LC: That’s a Detroit reference, that kind of line—


LC: John, let me ask, as you were finishing with AIT did you feel—what were
your feelings, actually, about the Army and about their treatment of conscientious
objectors and did you have a sense of being part of the Army?
JH: Well, inevitably, yeah. I mean it’s sort of like if I were an inmate I’d feel part
of the prison, in that sense.
LC: But you’re also sort of a special part.
JH: Well, yes and no. Because once we finished our basic training we were not
differentiated. We were just another—you were just another soldier. Nobody would sort
of go, “Okay, all the COs stand over here.” I think that for the most part the NCOs and
trainers that we dealt with probably didn’t even know who was a CO and who wasn’t.
Nobody paid any attention to it, and at the time I wasn’t really particularly aware of this.
I just took it for granted. But in hindsight as the years have gone by I actually find it—
you know, it’s one of those things I’m proud of, just being part of as a citizen, I guess. I
like that. I like the fact that in my Army nobody did that kind of crap. You know, it was
just, “Hey, okay. So you’re a CO. What next?”
LC: No one took pot shots at you guys for—?
JH: No. No. As I say, once we got into AIT, I think most of our trainers didn’t
even know who was who.
LC: That’s really interesting.
JH: You know, who was a CO and who wasn’t. There was no special—I mean
occasionally I think there were one or two training exercises where some kind of combat
training might have been involved. I’m sorry my memories are kind of fuzzy. But I do
recall at least one incident where one of our trainers, one of the NCOs, had to remark on
the fact that some of us were COs, for some reason I can’t remember. But it was purely
functional. It was, “Okay, well out of consideration for you men with these different
beliefs, if you need special accommodation let us know.” It was that kind of comment.
LC: That’s really very, very interesting because I think that’s counter to what
might be expected, what popularly might be thought.
JH: As I’ve aged I more and more have been struck by how many people have
ideas about the world that, so nearly as I can tell, have been shaped by going to the
movies. Because in the real world what I have found is reasonable people behaving
sensibly for the most part and sometimes very honorably who are generous in spirit and
certainly not, you know, some sort of caricature—the sort of thing you might expect to
find in a movie. Most people are actually, I find, a lot like me, frankly, and generally
quite often better than me. People are not cartoons, even in the Army, and most of the
people in the Army that I had anything to do with were people. They weren’t monsters.
They weren’t part of some evil cabal or anything like that. They were just doing a job
that they believed in and really didn’t have much time or energy for dumb games like
“Let’s go harass the COs.” You know, that just wasn’t happening.

LC: Well, power of the media around Vietnam is something that I hope you and I
will have a chance to talk about as we go through because it’s a big factor. It’s a big
factor in what people think now and—

JH: And it’s an unfortunate factor, too, because over time the quality of the
information content in mass media, in my opinion, has gone downhill and it probably
wasn’t real good to begin with. I noticed the difference between Edward R. Murrow and
Walter Cronkite and Fox News, and I don’t like or approve of the difference. You know,
the information content has evaporated and as a consequence, speaking as a teacher who
has been exposed to young people in large numbers for a long time, it’s kind of shocking
what people have come to believe based on—Oh, damn it—what they hear and see in the
media. It’s hard to talk Laura.
Interview with John Hubenthal
Session 6 of 11
January 6, 2006

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University and I’m continuing the oral history interview with John Hubenthal.

JH: Don’t laugh.

LC: You’re naughty, John. Today is the sixth of January, as John can attest, in 2006 and both he and I are darn happy to be doing this interview.

JH: You betcha.

LC: John, you who are in Massachusetts, I should say, let me know what you remember about your medical training in AIT. How adequate was it?

JH: It was wildly, totally, completely inadequate for the job I was assigned to. If I had been assigned to be a hospital orderly it would have been perfect. I learned bedpans.

I learned how to change sheets without taking the patient out. I learned how to—oh what else. I don’t know. Hospital stuff, basically. We had some emergency first aid sort of stuff but hardly up to the level of even a civilian EMT, which I understand actually is pretty darned good training nowadays. Nothing like, for example, the Navy medics who are almost RNs by the time they finish their training, or at least that was my impression.

No. I was trained to be mostly a hospital orderly, and I was not. What I actually ended up doing was practicing what I used to call “Dutch boy medicine.”

LC: What does that mean?

JH: Stick your finger in the dike.

LC: Never mind.

JH: As a matter of fact I saved a guy’s life with my left index finger one day. I’ll tell you about that sometime.

LC: Now, this has to do with controlling—

JH: Bleeding!

LC: Yeah. Arterial bleeding. So they got to that, that sort of thing.

JH: No. They showed us all of the inventory of the Army’s field dressings and we practiced once at least with every size and shape of field dressing, and that was about it. They didn’t teach us anything about jungle rot.
lancing boils. They didn’t teach us anything about the varieties of rashes or what you do
with FUOs (fevers of unknown origin) or how—they didn’t teach us anything about
jungle medicine, field jungle medicine, and they taught us damned little about how you
deal with combat injuries. Most of what I learned, most of what I did as a medic, I taught
myself once I got there. Once I realized that I was in way over my head and that I had a
serious job to do that the Army hadn’t prepared me for.

LC: I think you said earlier, John, that you received your orders for Vietnam, your
assignment orders, at the same time as you got your AIT assignment.

JH: Yeah.

LC: Does that sound right?

JH: Yeah. Right at the end of basic.

LC: So can you tell me how much you knew about what your assignment in
Vietnam would be and did it hold true?

JH: No. No. Nothing that specific. I just knew that I was going to be shipped to
beautiful Southeast Asia, and it is beautiful, by the way. Gorgeous country if you like
jungles.

LC: But you didn’t know whether you would be—

JH: I had no idea. I could have been in a hospital. I had no idea what I would
actually end up doing. When I did get overseas all I knew was my fear.

LC: How did the training unwrap? I mean was it classroom stuff, was it watching
films, that sort of thing?

JH: Yeah. Lot of that. Some hands-on stuff. Let’s see if I can remember. It
got something like this. We would watch a bunch of films. We would have a trainer,
senior medic not a DI, give us a verbal presentation on whatever the subject matter was
and then as appropriate we would practice with the actual gear. But I would guess sixty,
seventy percent of it was appropriate to hospital work. The most memorable week in my
—how long was it? Ten weeks? Twelve weeks? It was a fair amount of time. The most
memorable week, I called “flinch week” because it was right at the end of training—I
love this. The Army has such a great sense of humor, it just doesn’t know it. Anyway,
right at the end of training they did all of our injection training all in one week so every
kind of hypodermic procedure you can imagine we did all in one week on each other and
at one point to ourselves, as well. I mean flinch week! Here are a bunch of guys who’ve
never stuck anybody before wiggling the needle and everything you can imagine
happened. Flinch is the right word. And then immediately following flinch week when
we all feel like pin cushions and can’t move our shoulders, they run us through our
complete series of inoculations for Asia. (Laughs)

   LC: Great.
   JH: I love it. It was like, “Okay, I’m the human pin cushion. Now you’re going
to load the needles.”
   LC: So there was no way to think that out in advance. Go ahead and have both of
those—
   JH: I don’t know. That’s one of the very few where I think somebody actually
did plan it that way. I mean we were all whimpering by the time we got through the
inoculations.
   LC: Now, just to clarify, John, did you get training in how to do blood draws or
was this all IM (intramuscular) injections and everything?
   JH: Oh, yeah. IM, subcu, intravenous—God bless them. They taught me how to
set up an intravenous drip feed, thank God. At least I knew that. Yeah. It took a week of
eight hour days doing every kind of needle trick known to modern medicine.
   LC: Now this might wash out some of the less, hale—I certainly have a problem
with needles.
   JH: You wouldn’t after AIT!
   LC: Man, oh, man. Did anybody kind of not be able to do this?
   JH: Washing out was not an option.
   LC: How did you know that?
   JH: I can’t tell you explicitly but nobody said, “Now we’re going to sort the men
from the boys then we’ll sort the boys from the idiots and then all the idiots will
parachute out of the airplane.” None of that stuff. We were—I don’t know, canon fodder
I guess. We were a product. We were on our way and if you had serious problems, that
meant trouble.
   LC: Now, you obviously at this point would not know that this was not going to
be what you needed to know when you actually got into the field.
JH: No, I had no idea. Well, actually, no that’s not true. I can remember sitting around with some of my pals and we were all laughing because we were looking at what we’d been trained and we were thinking, “Boy they better not put us out in the field because we don’t know what to do.” I have a sort of dim memory of at least one conversation like that. But no real clear—I mean come on. I was eighteen years old. What did I know? I knew how to unsnap a bra. (Laughs)

LC: Yes, we’ve established that, John.

JH: I’m sorry. I’ll try to be good.

LC: That’s okay. I don’t see why but anyway—

JH: It’s a failed effort anyway.

LC: Give it up. In terms, though, of combat injuries I mean did they show you a film of what you might see in the field?

JH: Not really. Old World War II stuff, Korean War stuff—

LC: But I mean the injuries then were bad and severe, but in other words the tone of the film was not realistic?

JH: Well, no. The short answer is no. I mean they tried. They tried. It’s not for want of sincerity. It might have been for want of resources. I’m not sure where the fault, if you will—I don’t even like to use the word fault. We’re not dealing with some—and I think I’ve said this before—this is not some comic book Dr. Evil situation. Everybody involved was, at least in my experience and observation—I didn’t like it and I made fun of it. Hated it. I had my own emotional response at the time and at the time I probably actually thought, “Well this is Dr. Evil.” But looking back, good people doing the best they could. Sincere. You know? And even down to the training. I mean they really were trying to do the right thing. I have a tremendous respect, for example, for drill instructors. I’m sure there are some bad apples and yahoos but consider the job. You’re trying to keep somebody alive in a situation that’s designed to kill them and you have to train them to go into this? That’s a hell of a responsibility. And most of the DIs I met, yeah they were snarling, foul-mouthed, pretty brutal personalities at work, but consider the job they were doing. Again, in hindsight, God bless them and thanks because they really did try. I mean it’s an impossible job, but God bless them. They tried.
LC: Who were the people who were delivering the training? I mean were they people who had actually been in Vietnam? Could they tell you what you might see?

JH: I’m trying to remember. I think there may have been one or two but I don’t recall there being a lot of Vietnam personnel involved in the training. I think most of the people with experience in that war at that time were either in that war or had already gotten out one way or the other. Our training personnel were stateside European tour, maybe some Korea guys. This was at the moment that I was going through training. It may have been a completely different mix a year later or a year before. I don’t know what the turnover rate for training personnel over the long term may have been. All I knew was the one cycle that I went through.

LC: And you were there, you were at Ft. Sam—?
JH: Well, let’s see. I arrived in-country in June, I think it was. May or June.

LC: Of 1970?
JH: Right. No, no. I left in ’70, in August of ’70 so that would have been ’69. And I went into the Army in January of ’69. My total training time was something like five months. So this would have been spring of ’69.

LC: Do you remember whether there was any kind of celebration or right of passage when you finished the training?
JH: Nah. We were product. They were just a factory. There was no sense of unit cohesion or identification with the group or “Here’s your cake for graduating,” or anything like that. It was—what was the phrase you used the other day? We were on the line. You know? No, that in fact, was the most striking absence that I noticed throughout my military career was the very industrial feel of it. There was no sense of—I mean (there were) attempts here and there but we were a conscript Army. And, you know, it was nothing like, for example, the Civil War where units would all be from Beulah, Alabama, or something. We were from all over the map and—patience. We were product. They were cranking us out.

LC: Was there anyone within the group who the other guys kind of gravitated toward and sort of saw as a leader or was everybody just kind of muddling through this?
JH: Everybody was just kind of muddling through.
LC: Okay. Did you know that you guys would not be together? Were you aware that you were about to be split up?

JH: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LC: So that was clear to you?

JH: Yeah, that was pretty clear that we would just be sort of fed into the machine. Wherever it needed you?

JH: Yeah. Exactly.

LC: Did you have a chance to have some time off before you had to report?

JH: Oh, yes. (Laughs)

LC: And did you use this time well young man?

JH: Define well.

LC: Well, you define well.

JH: Well, we got fairly regular weekend passes. To not get a weekend pass would have been—you know, it was an open post and on the weekend it was like a job. You could leave and had to be back. There was a curfew. You could stay away overnight on the weekend. I think Saturday night was the night. And, you know, you want to cut to the chase? We'd go sell blood for drugs and alcohol. That was it, basically. I have some funny stories around that, too. On one of our first—okay, basic for me was on one side of Ft. Sam and AIT was on pretty much the other side and it is Texas so you’re talking about a lot of acreage. I’m sure you’ve been to Ft. Sam so you know it’s a big sprawling post. It’s like a town.

LC: Like a state.

JH: Yeah, yeah. Damned near, in New England. Absolutely. But we could walk from AIT through some officer housing, family-type housing—looked like a suburb—and down into a thoroughfare, a fairly busy street that was a San Antonio city street right across from a big park whose name escapes me completely. All I remember is that there was a little miniature sort of a theme park type train that you could buy tickets for and it would run you around the park for kids and bored soldiers. Well, the route we took walking off the base took us out right near some sort of fast food place, burger joint. And the first time myself and my pals—and we were freaks from Chicago and the coasts—the first time we walked out we got to the street and we’re standing there in front of the
That was our goal. That was our mission. And there was a guy in a clown suit. Not McDonald’s, but some sort of random clown with a fistful of helium balloons. I mean the guys got the nose and the funny hair and the big shoes and the floppy clothes. I mean it’s a clown, right? And in this sort of “What the hell spirit” one of us walked up to the clown and said, “Hey clown! Where can we buy some pot?” And the clown said, “How much do you want?” (Laughs) I mean the guy obviously took the job because soldiers pass by on the way out and—

LC: Great cover.

JH: Oh, yeah! And in his big baggy clown pants he had—have you encountered the term a lid?

LC: No.

JH: Ok. A lid was roughly an ounce of pot.

LC: How did that, what was the connection?

JH: Oh, that was universal—coast to coast. If you were in New York and said “Where can I buy a lid?” Somebody would produce a baggy full of pot. It was like saying six-pack but for marijuana in the late ’60s. Well, this guy, his pants were stuffed with lids, all pre-packed, that’s why they were so baggy.

LC: And ready to go.

JH: Ready to go!

LC: Talk about drive-through.

JH: Yeah. Exactly. Big wad of change and right there on the street in broad daylight, in front of God and everybody. You know, we all bought our stashes and wandered into the park and proceeded to get stoned. It was wonderful. Very funny.

LC: Very American.

JH: Yeah. Very American, very Hunter Thompson, actually. But I mean it was just so perfect. It was so like, “Oh, my God.” You know? “We’re not in Kansas now.”

LC: That’s right. Texas.

JH: No, we’re in the Army. (Laughs) That’s another country.

LC: Well, that sounds like that was the lost weekend then.

JH: One of many.
LC: Like the entire time.
JH: Yeah. Like the entire time. Like every weekend just go out and just get—as I say, sell blood for drugs and alcohol. That was the drill. So we’d come back all anemic and hung over.
LC: And ready to learn.
JH: And ready to learn and save lives for God and country.
LC: Well, speaking of that, I mean did they talk to you, John about, did they brief you on the reasons for the war?
JH: No. Why would they bother? We were product.
LC: That did not happen at all?
JH: Not that I recall. They did talk about our mission as members of the medical corps and actually got kind of serious about that, as serious as they could get. But no, there was no, you know, “Kill the gooks”—none of that kind of stuff. For that matter, no “Stars and stripes forever,” really. Not much. As I say, it had a real factory assembly line feel to it.
LC: What did they tell you the mission of medical corps was?
JH: Save lives.
LC: That’s it?
JH: Basically.
LC: Simple.
JH: Basically. I mean they would elaborate on that but that was it. “You men are going to be the salvation of the American soldier.” Which boils down to, “Save lives.” I think I was probably the standout character. I really liked calling cadence. God knows why. It was like singing, you know. And so I finagled my way into a shot at being the cadence caller for my AIT company. Do you remember—the band’s name was Country Joe and the Fish? And they produced a song called the “Feel Like I’m Fixing To Die Rag.” “Well, it’s one, two, three, what are we fighting for? Don’t ask me I don’t give a damn. The next stop is Vietnam.” Right? Okay. I transposed that into four-four cadence calling time. You’re left, right. “Well, it’s one, two, three, four, what are we fighting for?” (Laughs) And I marched my entire AIT company past the base
commander singing that. “Don’t ask me I don’t give a damn. My next stop is Vietnam.”

That was the end of my cadence calling career. (Laughs)

LC: And I can’t think why.


LC: That’s right. Give me a chance.

JH: What is it, a one line, “Be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box.” Oh, I love it. You should hunt up the song and listen to it and then imagine it as cadence calling. It was a nice moment. It’s one of my fond memories.

LC: Were there other songs from this time before you actually went over there that—I mean we’ve talked a little bit about music—but while you were at Ft. Sam that come to mind from that period?

JH: You know, I’d have to think. Try me next time. Nothing comes to mind right now. I’m sure there were. But, you know, there was this wonderful thing about folky protest songs. It was almost like what I would imagine Soviet protest is like where everything is indirect and there are allusions and nothing is said straight out.

LC: Nothing they could actually nail you for.

JH: Well, no. I’m thinking more of civilian life and what was being recorded at the time. You got things like, earlier you had Donovan singing “Universal Soldier,” right? Which was doesn’t directed at any specific topic, or Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind.” So it’s all sort of nudge-nudge, wink-wink kind of stuff. But I’m sure there were other songs that were more explicit. That tended to happen later, though, when things started to really bust open in the middle ’70s. You know, started to get more explicit comments.

LC: Yes, yes. Yeah. I think you’re right, ’72, ’73, somewhere in there. John, what, if anything, did you do on your break after graduation before you had to report somewhere in California, probably?

JH: Yeah, yeah. Actually, it was—where did—yeah, it was the Bay Area. I’m trying to remember there was some processing place. It wasn’t Ord.

LC: Travis?

JH: Might have been. I don’t recall, as a matter of fact.
LC: Interesting.

JH: I know. I just remember being in the Bay Area and then being on a plane for Asia with a stop—weird route going over. We went from the Bay Area to Anchorage, I believe, then to Kyoto and then to Tan Son Nhut. Whereas on the way back they stuck us on a Flying Tigers flight that was non-stop. Tan Son Nhut all the way to Ft. Lewis up in Washington. That was a flight to remember. We’ll get there.

LC: I’ll bet it was.

JH: Yeah. Oh, my God.

LC: Well what about the flight over?

JH: Grueling. Long. I got to get out of the plane in both places. Couldn’t go any place, had to stay in a very limited area, some sort of building, stretch your legs kind of thing.

LC: What was your mood?

JH: Flying over?

LC: Yeah. Do you remember?

JH: A combination of bravado and—I mean it was all mixed up with physical fatigue because it’s a grueling flight, but fear and bravado. I mean I think as a middle-aged guy that bravado probably is fear. But that was probably the dominant tone, I think, of my mood. It was, “Okay. I’m ready. Let’s go!” I mean what else are you going to do? Seems like a good idea at the time.

LC: What about the other guys on the plane?

JH: The same, I think. The same. There were a few people who were openly, you know, nervous, frightened. And there were some people who just I don’t think you could frighten them with a brick. Those kind of guys. “Yeah, I’m going! I’m going to over!” It wasn’t all medics. It was a mixed bag. Again there’s that sort of industrial feel. “Let’s load up the hoppers with this product.” You know?

LC: Was there anyone there from your AIT group?

JH: Yeah. I did fly over with a couple of guys and we stayed together for about a day in Tan Son Nhut. After I graduated from AIT I had—well, the guy that I sent you the email address for, J.G. Webb, came out to my place in California. We didn’t sell blood but smoked pot and drank in California instead of Texas. (Laughs)
So you guys kind of hung around together before?

Yeah. And aside from—well, there was a long period there—I think I might have written you this in an email. But we lost touch basically through the “raise-the-little-kids” phase of our lives and then got reconnected when I moved to Virginia and have been in touch ever since. We email certainly weekly, sometimes almost daily. He’s a good friend. He’s a good guy. I like him a lot. Love him actually. Well, he’s my oldest friend, actually, of all the people that I know today I’ve known J.G. longest.

Everybody else I met after him.

And he was with you for a little while like a couple days on arrival at Tan Son Nhut?

I think a day. Maybe less. It was industrial and it was efficient. He went to II Corps, I think. II Corps or III Corps. I was on my way up to I Corps, so we were in different hoppers.

John, how did you find out what your in-country location was going to be?

There was no effort on my part at all. They said, “Go here. Stand there.”

Basically. Well, they put us in—a transit barracks. So we were TDY (temporary duty). And at intervals someone would come in and collect the appropriate numbers, really—not even names—would come in and say, “Okay, we want so and so. Come on.” They did give us—now I want to get this right—they did give us a very brief, I think one day, little tutorial in how to survive in the jungle. And this was conducted by the real guys, combat guys, in-country.

Now, did this happen—just to clarify—did this actually happen upon your arrival at Tan Son Nhut?

Pretty much. Yeah. They took us out to the edge of the base and said, “This is a booby trap.” And it was a real booby trap. And, “This is what you can expect and this is how you do this and do that.” But again, it was like a day. That was it.

Was this in any way kind of catalytic for you? I mean there, finally, you know, you’re in-country and now someone’s actually shown you what’s going on. I mean did it change things?
JH: No. I was pretty dumb, actually. Naïve I think. I can remember thinking “Yeah I’m really here,” but it still wasn’t real. I mean Tan Son Nhut. Come on. The difference between Ft. Sam and Tan Son Nhut is that there are no women and kids, otherwise very similar. Same kind of architecture and I mean it had a rougher feel to it, just architecturally. But it was an Army base. The Army, I said earlier, it’s another country and that’s really true. The Army is a world unto itself, even stateside. You go on post and it’s like another country—different laws, different customs, different native dress.

LC: Language.

JH: Yeah. Yeah. That too. Tan Son Nhut felt like an Army post. You know? No civilian vehicles except for the locals and not many of them. But otherwise everything else was pretty damned fungible so the effect on me was I was there but I wasn’t there yet. You know what I mean?

LC: Yeah. I do. You’ve crossed the Rubicon, you’re just not wet yet.

JH: Yeah. Something like. Something like. And again, factor in, I mean geez I was eighteen. My birthday was in August. I did two birthdays in-country and I didn’t turn nineteen until August of that year. So my first ninety days, which turned out to be fairly eventful for me, I was still eighteen.

LC: John, when you say I was just eighteen—?

JH: Oh, that’s the old man talking.

LC: Yeah, that is the old man talking. What does it mean to the old man? What does eighteen mean?

JH: Eighteen means are the diapers off yet? You know? I mean I wasn’t wet behind the ears. I was dripping. I was a baby. I thought at the time I was all growed up. All eighteen year olds do. But when I look back at that kid I didn’t get to stay a kid very long. That’s probably my biggest comment on my transition to adulthood. I used to say after I got out in the ’70s I used to say I went from seventeen to fifty-five. And every year since I got out I’ve been losing about five years getting younger again. I’ll probably match up again at about twenty-four or twenty-five, something like that. And that was actually pretty accurate psychologically. You grow up real fast in some environments.

LC: I’m going to ask you about that next time, okay John?
1 JH: Yeah, if you like.
2 LC: Okay.
Interview with John Hubenthal
Session 7 of 11
January 11, 2006

LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.
JH: (Trumpet anthem.)
LC: And my co-star today is Dr. John Hubenthal. It’s the eleventh of January 2006. I’m in sunny, windy Lubbock and John is in—I don’t know. What’s it like up there today in Massachusetts?
JH: For here warm, for any place else cold, so kind of sunny, kind of not sunny.
LC: Nothing too bad then. It could be gray and awful.
JH: Yeah. It could be awful.
LC: You know, twelve inches of snow and all those other things.
JH: Right. Like I’d know.
LC: Massachusetts is noted for—yeah. I’m just filling you in.
JH: Like I’d know here. I’m under the rock.
LC: They don’t let you out that often, huh?
JH: I don’t let them let me out.
LC: What about sunny California? I think we should get you back there.
JH: Oh, tell me about it.
LC: Well, we’ll see what we can do.
JH: Circumstances will not permit.
LC: Do not permit at this time. Well, like the Magic Eight Ball try again later, something like that?
LC: Right. Well, we can talk about sunny Vietnam.
JH: Yeah. Sunny steamy—
LC: Yeah I’m sure. Your arrival was in June.
JH: Right.
LC: So was it wet, as well?
JH: Monsoon—you know I tried to remember when exactly the monsoon hits and as I recall it’s earlier in the spring. It’s like February, around there. By June it’s
reasonably dry. You know, you still get the occasional rain but nothing like monsoon
and very hot, very humid. There are days that are delightful—you’re day-dream Jamaica
vacation day, you know. And that was actually pretty much the weather that I
encountered when I got there.

LC: Well, we talk—go ahead John.

JH: Well, they stuck me in—I think I said—I went through some TDY barracks at
Tan Son Nhut. And they ran me through a silly one-day welcome to the jungle walking
course, basically, trying to give us some sense of what the real circumstances, not the
stateside training circumstances—

LC: I remember you said they showed you a real booby trap.

JH: Yeah. They showed us real booby traps.

LC: But they didn’t show you what they do.

JH: No, no, no. They showed us how they were triggered. They showed us how
they were set. A lot of these things though were—it was weirdly parallel to my AIT
training at Ft. Sam Houston in that—I’m trying to remember where Tan Son Nhut is. It’s
in II Corps, III Corps—it’s further south than where I was. And they were dealing with
more, I’m guessing, not so much NVA (North Vietnamese Army), more Viet Cong-type
guys. So they showed us a lot of improvised punji stake type-booby traps, which were
the sort of things that we almost never encountered. You know, we had a different
variety of booby traps that we had to deal with. A lot more, scavenged explosives were a
lot more of the sort of thing that we had to deal with. These were, you know, dead falls
and tiger pits and things like that. You know, shit-covered bamboo stakes and that kind
of stuff. And it was interesting. I do remember that oddly enough it didn’t seem to
impress me too much. I didn’t get the feeling like, “Oh, my God.” It was like, “Oh, well,
that’s interesting.” And I have no explanation for that. It just happened to be where I
was at the time we did it. Not too many interesting or memorable or funny anecdotes
from my very few days down south. I do recall thinking, “Okay, I’m in combat now. I
can look like a pirate.” Yeah, well basically, so I went and I bought myself a
camouflaged handkerchief and tied it around my head like a do-rag and lost my hat and
rolled up my sleeves and unbloused my boots and basically got kind of raggedy. About
as close to hippie-looking, as you could be.
LC: You got a little funky there.

JH: Yeah, a little funky and immediately, just immediately, got jumped on by one of the NCOs there in the rear. “What the hell? What do you think this is? San Francisco? Get in proper uniform!”

LC: Did he actually say San Francisco or something similar?

JH: Oh, I don’t know but it was something similar. That was definitely the gist of it. You know, it’s like, “What you think you just left the Army?” So I had to go back to the proper attire. But that’s my only sort of memory of culture clash at Tan Son Nhut.

Then they stuck me on a—what were those things? C-130s?

LC: Those would be a big transport aircraft.

JH: Yeah.

LC: Not necessarily for passengers.

JH: Yeah. Flying pick-up truck—I don’t know what to call them—with the drop door in the back and incredibly uncomfortable flight. No seats. We just sat on the floor. No seats, no safety belts, nothing like that.

LC: Did you know where you were going?

JH: North.

LC: That’s all you knew?

JH: I’m sure somebody told me but it didn’t mean anything. “You’re going to gobbledy-gook.” “Oh okay!”

LC: You know this morning when I was thinking about this interview, John, I was wondering whether you had in your head any kind of map of Vietnam. Did you have any idea kind of where one thing was relative to another?

JH: Well, I had studied the place—

LC: Yes, in your reading.

JH: —in stateside when I was reading, so I did have a map of the entire country in my head. But it didn’t turn out to be a very effective way to orient myself. I knew that I was going to be heading north of where I was. I didn’t have any clear sense of the difference in actual—oh, what, working conditions that I would be dealing with. I had expected a pretty fungible, pretty uniform environment. Vietnam is Vietnam is Vietnam is what I was thinking and of course that’s completely not true. The Central Highlands
are not at all like I Corps—different topography, vegetation, population densities. It’s a completely different place. So I was jumping blind. I didn’t know what to expect. I do recall that as I was actually being transported north that I started to get, you know, more of the sense of anxiety. It was getting realer and realer as things went along. I still remember—and who knows how accurate this is—but what I recall is still feeling reasonably calm, not hysterical or anything. Anxious but manageable and it’s like, “Okay, let’s see what’s going to happen.” Now, let’s see, arriving up north. I believe we flew right into Camp Eagle, which is just to the west—and I forget if it’s north or south—but it’s just to the west of Phu Bai. Which is the town, and it’s south and a little bit west of Hue. Complete confusion. It’s just sort of, “Okay, tell me what to do next because I sure as hell don’t know what’s going on.”

LC: Right. You get off the plane and you don’t know what to do, presumably.

JH: Yeah! Hell, I didn’t know what to do before I got on the plane!

LC: Well, there’s that.

JH: Yeah. I mean you know—again I use the metaphor of product and fill this hopper and carry it there. Very much that sort of feel to it. No, “Private Hubenthal, here’s where we want you to stand.” It’s like, “Troop, fill this empty space.”

LC: “Body, over here!”


LC: I believe it.

JH: Or not even body. It’s like, “MOS (military occupational specialty), over here!” And we weren’t even at the MOS level yet. They were just getting us off the field so they could bring in the next load, I guess. And I’m trying to think—they put us in a vehicle. It was probably a deuce-and-a-half, and drove around to the different battalions and I got dropped where I was supposed to go. And of course, by that point they actually are calling names. “We want five grunts here. We need two medics here. We need a medic and three grunts here.” You know, just doling us out, making deliveries.

LC: Like a bread truck?


LC: Two white loaves and a pumpernickel over here.
JH: That’s right. We want the cinnamon raisin bread over here. Yeah, and as I say, very a sense of being just a cog. You know? Just a real component being plugged in. My memories of arriving—and I was assigned initially to the 1st of the 327th Air Mobile Battalion of the 1st Brigade, I think, of the 101st Airborne Division. You’re familiar with the sort of the personnel roster of an Army infantry battalion at the time, I’m sure.

LC: Right. I am but the points that are of interest you might pick out for someone who wouldn’t have the same background.

JH: Well, basically what you’ve got, the structure of an infantry battalion in my Army consisted of—let’s see—there were four companies which you’d call line companies. These are your standard infantry guys and a company consists of three platoons and a headquarters. Platoon strength can float between twenty-five and thirty-five guys. Platoon armaments—a platoon will be armed with M-16s, your standard infantry arm. Typically one M-79 grenade launcher and typically one M-60 belt-fed machine gun. In that roster you’ll have a platoon leader, typically a 1st lieutenant, maybe a 2nd lieutenant. You’ll have a platoon sergeant; a high-ranking platoon sergeant would be an E-7. More typically this would be an E-6. The platoon would be broken up into three squads. Each squad would have a squad leader, typically an E-5. And would consist of, you know, ten, twelve guys, whatever a third of the complement was. In addition to this there would be personnel assigned from the headquarters and headquarters company. For example, I was a medic so I was not assigned to a line company directly. I was assigned to the headquarters company, and then the headquarters company would then subcontract me out to an infantry company. There would be a company medic. So basically, you’ve got, in an infantry company, you have a company commander who is a captain. You have three platoons, each of which is headed up by a lieutenant. Then you would have platoon NCOs, E-6, E-7. Each platoon would be busted up into, typically three squads. Then there would be a squad of medics and each platoon would have a medic and then there would be a company medic who walked with the company commander. Now, every company had its own company headquarters, which would consist of the company commander, the executive officer for the company. Usually there would be a company sergeant. Now this is a higher-ranking
NCO—E-8, E-9, E-10 even. And the company sergeant generally did not walk in the
field. Generally the company sergeant would stay in the rear in our permanent area at the
battalion location and would serve as a liaison for supply and communications with the
company when it was in the field. It was very unusual for the senior, for either the
executive officer for the company or for the company NCO, the company sergeant, to be
in the field. Now, there would be some people assigned to the rear for each company to
handle resupply and things like that, but they would be infantry guys. They would not be
specifically quartermaster corps or anything like that. Those were considered plum
jobs—

LC: Why?

JH: Well because you’re not out in the woods!

LC: Walking point and walking trails and bear watching?

JH: Yeah. It’s all of that stuff. You’re not out in the woods. You get to sleep in a
cot. You get to take showers. You get to go to the movies. You know? You’re in the
rear. Very, very plum jobs and not very many of them. One or two sort of clerk type
jobs in the rear. Everybody else would go out to the fields. Now, as far as the battalion
goes—I’m not doing a very organized job of describing this—there would be five
companies. Four of these companies were just clones. They were all the same—chock-
a-block. Same organization I just described. These were the line infantry companies.
Then the fifth company was the special company for the infantry battalion I was in. You
had a reconnaissance platoon, a little bit smaller than an average infantry platoon, more
like twenty guys. And then there would be our mortar guys. In our layout A, B, C, D
were the line infantry companies and Echo Company was the weirdo company. That was
recon and mortars and—I forget what else. There was some other component but I can’t
remember what that was. Now, the organizational chart, the chain of command,
organizational chart, for Echo Company roughly mirrored that of a line company with
modifications as necessary. You know mortars move and act and do different things than
a line infantry company does, and recon, of course, does some significantly different
stuff. So I arrived and was immediately sent to battalion headquarters, which was kind of
up on a hill away from everyplace else.

LC: And was it still within Camp Eagle?
JH: Yeah. This is all Camp Eagle. Now, the line infantry battalions had their areas on the perimeter and then inside of us were the rest of the brigade and division. Camp Eagle is a big place, as such places go. And we didn’t have the entire division there. There were other 101st elements down in II Corps, I believe, and a couple of other places around country. But a big chunk of the 101st was up at Camp Eagle. As I understand it, Camp Eagle was 101st home base in-country. So inside of us would be helicopters, fuel dumps, transportation companies, quartermaster companies—you know, all the logistical stuff basically. And then the fighting units, if you will, the infantry people. We ringed the perimeter and maintained the perimeter. And of course, when a big chunk of the line infantry was out on operations then the people from inside the camp and the leftovers in the infantry areas would man the perimeter and do daily watch duty, 24/7 watch duty and do security. That’s sort of the rough picture of how the place operated. I arrived and maybe got one night in Camp Eagle and then was almost immediately shipped out to the field to join the 3rd Platoon of Delta Company. 3rd Platoon of Delta Company had been assigned to re-secure and—excuse me—clean up a firebase to the south of us called Tomahawk. Tomahawk—I’m not sure what the timing was—but very shortly before I got there Tomahawk had been attacked and overrun with pretty catastrophic results for our team. The original complement, the original garrison there, had been cut up real bad so they had been pulled out and it was being reoccupied and refurbished by 3rd Platoon. And 3rd Platoon was—well, an infantry platoon is a fascinating and complicated little community with all of the personalities and interactions that you would find with any random group of people hyperactivated by the circumstances. You know, there were friendships and—

LC: I’ll bet. I mean everything’s pretty much—I mean at some stage—probably laid bare would be my guess.

JH: Yeah. People don’t tend to waste a lot of time on niceties. Let’s put it that way. So, I arrived—now bear in mind, I had been in-country total time probably something like a week, maybe. Eighteen years old and I stepped off a truck and tried to figure out who I was supposed to talk to in the middle of this chaos. The firebase had been trashed. There were bunkers blown wide open. The first thing I saw was a mound about—I don’t want to exaggerate—probably four feet tall of what looked like oilcloth.
Imagine something a little bit smaller variable around the size of a common red brick, right? Little bit smaller but not a brick. It looks like somebody’s wrapped fish or like you’ve been to the butcher and bought meat and it’s wrapped in this kind of oily green, not cloth, not plastic, like an oil soaked, an oil cloth I guess. And tied with string and coming out one end of this thing is a little string-like arrangement. And there was a mound of these things. I mean hundreds of them would not be an exaggeration. They’ve just been piled up next to one of the more serviceable bunkers. I had no idea what they were and there’s a bunch of guys running around bellowing obscenities at each other. And everybody looked like they were doing but I’ll be damned if I could figure out what they were doing. People on the radio—you know it was a working base—and people were cleaning it up and doing that Army thing and I was completely naïve and completely clueless.

LC: So everyone seems very busy?
JH: Pretty much. Yeah. And certainly didn’t want to take a lot of time to deal with the new green medic.
LC: Was there an urgency in what they were doing or just—?
JH: Well, everybody was busy. Everybody was moving at a good clip but it wasn’t like landing planes on a carrier deck. It was nothing like that, but it was busy, people were running around. There was the occasional person just sitting having a cigarette or something. But for the most part people, “All right, get over here you men! Get those sandbags filled and ra-rah!” Part construction sight, part military base, part chaos. Didn’t know who anybody was. Didn’t know anybody’s name. All I knew was I’m the medic. I mean that’s literally it. That’s all I had. That and this gigantic backpack with all the standard-issue stuff. I was so new they said, “Here’s your aid bag. Here’s your backpack. Here’s your poncho. Here’s your poncho liners.” You know.
LC: Standard, your standard—
JH: Standard-issue stuff, which of course is either wrong or inadequate. After a while you just assume that. This is what the Army says you’re supposed to have. Uh-huh. Yeah, right. Okay. So we know that I’ve got some work to do. But I wasn’t at that point yet. So I just stood there for I don’t know how long, not too long, and a great big burly guy from Texas who obviously did not like me on first sight—he actually turned
out to be a pretty nice guy. And later on I learned that his nickname was Lurch from the
old “Addams Family” TV show. (Lurch imitation.) Because he was huge he looked like
he had a touch of acromegalic bone growth. Seriously, real prominent brow ridges, real
prominent hands, jaw. Healthy, healthy as a horse, and as I say big. Six-foot-plus and
built to match, and obviously from Texas.

LC: And what was his rank?

JH: He was the acting platoon sergeant, as I recall. He was an E-6 at the time,
and as I say—well, the conversation went something like this. “Who the fuck are you?”
“Sergeant, I’m the new medic.” “Are you a faggot?” “Why, no.” “Last medic we had
was a faggot. I damn near killed him. He’s not with us anymore so I got rid of him. If
you’re one of them damn faggots I’m goin’ kill you too!” “Well, I don’t think we’ll have
any problem there.” (Laughs)

LC: Fabulous.

JH: Yeah. This is the start. Okay. “So what are you supposed to do?” “You’re
supposed to tell me.” “All right.” And he unsheathed this knife—big buck knifes were
quite the cult item—and he unsheathed this buck knife that looked like a Bowie knife and
he said, “This is my favorite knife and I’m going to do you a real favor because I’m
going to let you use it. You drop your gear right there soldier.” I’m obviously
paraphrasing, but this is pretty close. So I drop everything on the spot. I was trained to
be a good dog. Dropped everything right there, and he walked me over to this pile of
green things and he said, “Now this is what I want y’all to do. I want you to take this
knife and I want you to pick up this thing and this is what you do.” And he held it in his
left hand—you remember I told you there was a little string thing coming out one end.
He held it one hand and he said, “This is what I want you to do.” And he took this knife
and he thumped this thing with the cutting edge of the knife right down the length of it,
just split it like a potato. Bam! And he hit it hard. And he said, “You see this little silver
thing? I want you to pluck that thing out and pitch it over here and pitch the other part in
another pile there and I want you to do every single one of these.” I said, “Okay.” It was
something I could understand. Hit thing, throw here, throw there. Okay. I can do that.
So I settled in to cracking open these weird green packages. Now, bear in mind I’m right
next to the only, you know, serviceable, surviving, undamaged bunker.
LC: Is anyone else around?

JH: People at a distance running around filling sandbags, rebuilding stuff—

LC: But no one near where you are?

JH: No one real close to where I was that I knew of. And the sergeant wanders off. In retrospect I can say he wandered off fairly fast and he seemed really happy when he left. You got a clue to what’s going on here?

LC: I think I might.

JH: Yeah. Okay. Well, I’m banging away on these things for minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. And all of a sudden out of the only serviceable bunker, which is really quite close to this pile stuff, comes the platoon leader. Now, later on I discovered that the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant are not exactly best buddies. As a matter of fact, there was a whole lot of not-best-buddy stuff in this platoon. All right? Well, the platoon leader comes out and stretches. He’s been doing something, reports or radio or something. I don’t know what he was doing, napping, you know. And he comes out and I’m banging away and trying to be efficient, soldierly, and about every third time I’d whack one of these things that little silver tube in one end would get dinged or dented, and I must have done scores of these things at this point. I had quite a pile and I was feeling really proud of myself.

LC: You’re making progress.

JH: I’m making progress! Right! And the lieutenant turns around and sees me and watches what I’m doing—watches me hit one of these things and just goes ballistic because, of course, I’m sitting on top of hundreds of pounds of plastic explosives all set up in satchel charges with blasting caps. Right? That’s what these things are and I’m smacking these things with a big heavy knife. About half the time I’m hitting the blasting cap. Now this is plastique. Plastique will detonate with enough concussion, and I’m sitting on the pile. If I had set off one of those things I would have left a whole in the ground about fifteen feet deep and that bunker next to me would have been no more.

LC: Right. Right. And all within it.

JH: And all within it. Exactly. And clueless, had no idea what I was doing. I’m being a good soldier. Well, I found out what I was doing. The lieutenant did a wonderful job of very compactly and concisely explaining exactly what I was doing; how stupid I
was; why my ancestry descended directly from baboons or something worse; what my
mother’s sexual preferences were. I’m sure you can imagine the conversation, and took
an instantaneous dislike to me.
LC: Sure. Oh, great!
JH: Oh, yeah. It was wonderful. Well, there was already a feud going on.
There’d been a couple of fragging incidents a month or so before I got there. And
nobody was happy about being assigned to a hugely badly designed firebase that was so
badly designed it had already been overrun once, right? And we’re supposed to occupy
this thing. So what ended up happening my first night is the lieutenant assigned me to the
forward observation post. Well, the forward observation post was uphill about a hundred
yards outside the perimeter and with me in the forward observation—and I’ve got no
gun—with me in the forward observation post are five guys who were involved in
fragging incidents but hadn’t been nailed, hadn’t been busted for it.
LC: Now, if I can, John, I want to ask you when you found out about these
previous incidents?
JH: Oh, that night.
LC: That night?
JH: Yeah, when I was chatting with my fellow soldiers.
LC: And was the lieutenant of the platoon the target?
JH: Both him and the platoon sergeant.
LC: Oh. Both of them!
JH: Yeah. And you know, one of the aspects of intra-service problems like this—
hang on just one second.
LC: Sure.
JH: So, me and these five guys walk out to what is a super-sized foxhole with a
ring of sandbags around it. And there’s a hardline commo set up, you know, an old field
telephone.
LC: With wire.
JH: With wire. Right. Very old fashioned, that runs back down to the firebase.
And once you’ve been observed entering the observation post don’t even think about
trying to get back inside the perimeter. Because as soon as you leave the perimeter they
set out all the, you know, the starlight flares and the claymores and that’s always an
improve, ideally, anyway. You don’t leave them out. You set them out new and
different every night. That’s the proper way to do it. Of course there are lots of places
where they set them out and leave them out for months.

LC: Right. But the ideal—
JH: Well, and the ideal tend—people tend to sort of reach towards the ideal in
direct relationship to how frightened they are and this was not a cozy place. So you could
see the guys working the perimeter setting up all the trip lines and whatnot as we were
walking out. And there’s no way we’d know where everything was and there was no
way anybody inside that perimeter was going to want to go out in the dark and dismantle
stuff so that we could come in. So we were out there on our own and because it’s just a
little five-man observation post we don’t have any of that stuff.

LC: And so these guys, did they have their M-16s with them and—?
JH: Yeah. What did we have? I think we had an M-60, bunch of M-16s, and a
case of hand grenades. Oh, and these guys had giant bags of pot, too.

LC: Really?
JH: Yeah. All these guys were short timers. They were down to a month or less
and they were mad as hatters and just didn’t give a shit anymore. It’s a condition I finally
experienced when I got along that far myself. I was in very different circumstances by
the time I got there. But, you know, if you like I can give you my comments at some
time about the psychological impact of going through that kind of warfare and probably
any kind of warfare.

LC: I absolutely want you to pitch that in.
JH: At some point.

LC: Sure. This sounds like an interesting night.
JH: Yeah. Among the other highlights was sitting directly across—you know,
these guys obviously got a live one with me. I’ve been there ten days or less, eight days
or less. Couldn’t find my asshole with both hands and a flashlight, basically. And once
they found out that I had come over intentionally with no weapon I was the most
wonderful toy they’d ever had to play with. “You did what? You’re the craziest
motherfucker I ever met in my life! What the hell?” And that’s where it started and sort
of went on all night. Obviously, I did not sleep all night.

LC: So are they like rolling joints and—?

JH: Oh, yeah! Packing pipes and standing up and throwing hand grenades back at
their own perimeter, and screaming obscenities at the lieutenant, and firing bursts at
random all around them just for the hell of it. Packing magazines with all tracers.

LC: Oh, God!

JH: And cutting loose with like ten and twelve round bursts with all tracers. Well,
yeah I think that’s a great way to burn up your weapon. I didn’t know that at the time. I
thought, “Gosh that’s really impressive.” Screaming at the enemy, screaming at their
own troops, and throwing hand grenades at their own perimeter. You know?

LC: Yeah. This is frightening. I mean—

JH: Well, yes.

LC: Were you scared out of your mind?

JH: I was so astonished at how bizarre my comrades were that I don’t recall sort
of ever getting my bearings enough to really feel frightened. It was like, “This is, I don’t
know what this is. This is no longer planet Earth.” Of course I was concerned that they
were telling everybody for three counties, “Here we are, just five of us, and we’re
obviously nuts.” So I was obviously concerned about who might be on the other side of
the ridge that we were on and what they might be thinking about all of this. But mostly I
was sort of horrified and fascinated by the behavior of these guys. I mean I’m eighteen.
They’re all, maybe, twenty to twenty-two. It seems like they were a thousand years older
than me. They knew things and spoke in ways—they knew things I was completely
clueless about and even the way they spoke, the language, the jargon, the slang, was
almost incomprehensible to me. I did pick up real quickly that my name for that night
anyway was Cherry. It’s infantry humor, if you will. Of course. I certainly wasn’t going
to get upset, “Don’t call me that!” I certainly wasn’t going to do that since I didn’t have a
gun and they had plenty. The high point of the evening was when they decided to discuss
the fact that I was a conscientious objector and they said, “What are you going to do
when you get into combat?” I said, “Well, I’m a medic. I’ll take care of the wounded.”
“Well, what are you going to do if you have to fight?” “To tell you the truth, I haven’t
thought about it.” They said, “Well you might start thinking about it.” Pulled the pin, pop spoon, threw a live hand grenade in my lap.

LC: No shit?

JH: I’m eight feet away from this guy. (Laughs)

LC: The fact that you’re even here to tell this story is incredible.

JH: I fumble fast.

LC: Bet you did.

JH: I fumble fast.

LC: How far could you fumble it?

JH: Away from me. I’m just glad I didn’t throw it right back at him. Man, get, go, out, go elsewhere, disappear! And was so astonished I didn’t even duck when the sucker went off, you know. Heard the whistle of a frag going by, not close to my head but definitely—I mean it was like, “Okay I’m here now. I’m paying attention.” Oh, Lord.

LC: I mean this guy was not going to be around for a much longer time—couple, what, three or four weeks or something like that?

JH: Something like that. Yeah. And then he was going to go home to his girlfriend and his neighborhood. What was he going to be like when he got off the plane? I mean—

LC: What did they do? Did they laugh?

JH: Oh, yeah! They thought it was freaking hilarious and nobody moved a muscle. They just threw it at me and said, “Okay, let’s see what happens.”

LC: Can I ask had you smoked or anything with them?

JH: Oh, no. Are you crazy? The thought of getting stoned was—the only thing that was more terrifying than them was the thought of being stoned.

LC: And being out there.

JH: And being out there. Good God! I didn’t even want to smoke cigarettes because they glow in the dark and they put out a stink. Of course, we were like a campfire. There was this plume of smoke coming out of this little hole we were in between the pot and the cigarettes. I mean it was quite an introduction. It was quite an introduction to life in the field. I got a little more sorted out. The sergeant lightened up a
little bit. I think mostly what he was doing, aside from trying to kill the lieutenant, I	hin mostly what he was doing with me was making a point. It’s almost like a “sissy”
culture in prison. You know, it’s not quite that weird.

LC: Now, for somebody who doesn’t get that reference or may not in the future
what do you mean by that?

JH: Well, if you’ve ever been around cons or if you’ve ever been inside a
prison—I’ve never been a prisoner but I’ve been exposed to the inside of prisons. It’s an
all male society and heterosexual males will get sex even if it’s only with themselves.
And if they can have sex with anything else they’ll do that, too. If you got people who are
already, you know, sociopaths and psychopaths and otherwise kind of marginal, then
what develops is not exactly a homosexual society. It’s something that I’ve always heard
called “sissy” culture. Where stronger men will impose their will on weaker men and use
weaker men as objects of sexual gratification—anal intercourse, oral intercourse—in
exchange for—it’s like a protection racket. And if you’ve ever wandered around inside a
prison it’s flagrantly obvious, at least in the prison that I wandered around in. And it has
a real—it doesn’t have a clean and healthy feel to it. Let’s put it that way. This
environment had the same sort of dominance games without the sexual overtones. So
what the sergeant was doing was establishing that he was the alpha-wolf. You know, I
was expendable.

LC: And if you live long enough to find that out then you’d know it for the rest of
the time.

JH: Then I’d know it for the rest of the time. It’s like, “Don’t mess with Texas.”

LC: Got it. Right.

JH: And that’s what he was doing. And once that was established, which didn’t
take long—also I think I scored points with the sergeant because now the lieutenant was
pissed off at me.

LC: Yes. He now hated you.

JH: Yeah. He now hated me. He figured I was just a loose cannon on deck and a
potential disaster waiting to happen. So that made the sergeant sort of warm up to me a
little bit. I mean these are the kind of social dynamics that you can encounter, and this is
on the ratty, crappy end of the scale. You know, you have to understand that this was a pretty dysfunctional platoon.

LC: Well, John can I ask you one fairly serious question, and I don’t know how far you recall what you were told, but that night, the first night when you were out at the LP (listening post) or the forward post—

JH: OP (observation post).

LC: —OP, did the guys tell you what they had tried to do to harm—?

JH: Not in detail. Just vague references. I think they had enough wit to not spread incriminating evidence around. More of what they told me was that I was going to die, and that it probably wouldn’t take too long, and the Army was consciously trying to kill me, and the lieutenant was definitely out to kill me, and the sergeant would be trying to kill me but he was too incompetent. And they all expected to die. You know, these are all short timers.

LC: Right. And they were acting out that, I mean they were living with that paranoia that they were going to be gone because they’re almost out of there.

JH: The amazing thing about these guys is that they were so calm.

LC: It sounds like they were flaring out all over the place.

JH: Oh, yeah. Hooting and hollering and laughing and whatnot.

LC: Firing guns, throwing grenades—

JH: Yeah. Oh, throwing hand grenades and, you know. But the thing is they were calm. Loud and rowdy but not with that hysterical edge to it.

LC: You mentioned that when the one fellow threw the grenade to you, at you, nobody moved.


LC: Yeah. That’s interesting. Not what one would expect.

JH: Well, you’re dealing with some very, very significant psychopathologies.

LC: Yeah, way.

JH: Yeah. Like these guys were dead. That’s sort of bottom line.

LC: When did you kind of figure that out, John?

JH: Oh, much, much later, certainly not that night. That night I was just bedazzled by being in another universe. You know, this was truly my introduction to the
war. I have never ever been any place like—I thought I’d been in some pretty interesting places. You know, jumping out of a tree onto a Brahma bull’s back at the age of fifteen was a pretty interesting place but nothing like this. (Laughs)

LC: Wow. John, let’s take a break there.

JH: You know, and there was some indeterminate amount of time that again I’m very fuzzy on. The next Fort Tomahawk incident we were called upon to—they had been ambush us so we were going to ambush them.

JH: Not—unit designations? No. The other guys.

LC: Did you know who they were, I mean specifically?

JH: No. You know, I never in the entire time I was there I never knew, nobody ever told me, “This is the 47th Battle Group of the North Vietnamese Army and their numbers are a hundred people.” Never. I never got a shred of that kind of information. It was always, you know, “We’re going to go over here and assault this or we’re going to patrol through this area or we’re going to lay in ambush for these guys.”

JH: Line infantry platoons functioned as platoons, as whole platoons. In my experience anyway, it was not real common for a line infantry platoon to get busted up into squads and operate at squad level. But the next incident some number of time—not very long, day or two, something like that—we were sent out to set up an ambush. And it was your classic, you know, L formation along the path. We got there in good order and it was a squad situation, there were nine of us, and it was nothing like I’d been trained for. It didn’t look like anything that I’d seen in my “training.” You know, people giving Army slang commands. “Okay, Joey, I want you to take the uphill end of the red ball.”

Well, right there I don’t know what they’re talking about.

LC: You’re lost.

JH: Yeah. I’m lost. Uphill I think understand. What the fuck is a red ball? That just means the path.
LC: What was the origin of that? Do you know?

JH: Oh, I think that goes back to World War II. You know, Red Ball Express and—yeah. It’s the road. It’s the path. I guess. Nobody ever explained it to me. I just sort of figured it out later. In context learning this new language pretty quick—pretty quick, it took me about a month to get my Army slang. To understand that a prick-25 was a radio. Right, that kind of stuff. It took me a little while. So we go out on a night ambush and as I say this was not your Cracker Jack elite combat unit. This was a pretty dysfunctional platoon. They were still alive. They had their skills. You know, they knew how to set up an ambush and they did but they didn’t set it up well. We must have been too noisy or something like that because in the middle of the night they ambushed our ambush. And this was my first exposure to actual live fire, actual combat fire, and it’s all going on in the dark. The first thing I noticed was there were different colored tracers. I was laying on the ground in an inadequate, shallow sort of depression I’d scraped out for myself, not really a foxhole, and it was pretty open. It wasn’t like we were in heavy brush or trees or anything, just scattered bushes. Open fairly heavily-vegetated parkland I guess I would call it.

LC: With high—not elephant grass—but grasses and that kind of grassland with bushes just—?

JH: Yeah. With bushes all pretty tight, little coaxes of trees, a village off in some direction fairly close. You know, it is farming country and there were rice paddies out there someplace. I remember waking up completely, just completely confused, barely even knowing where I was. And of course, there’s automatic weapons fire going on all around me and I’m laying down and, you know, just a little bit above where I am laying down is this intermittent field of tracers, streaking lights. And it was one of those stupid moments where I was lying there thinking, “That’s really pretty.” And right about then I heard somebody call, “Medic!” Well, nobody had trained me how to move in—I hadn’t been through any gun training. I was a CO. So I moved. I stood up and walked towards the voice, which was about ten or fifteen feet away, noticing the little lights flashing around my shins. I walked over to the voice, rubbing the sand out of my eyes—had just enough wit to have grabbed my aid bag—and when I get to the voice somebody just literally throws me flat on the ground. “What the fuck are you doing, you idiot?” I mean
of course, what do you expect? “Well I came! What do you want?” “So-and-so has got a hole in him.” Turned out to be a flesh wound upper arm. You know, small caliber steel jacket bullet. It’s not like the Civil War. Tends to punch in clean, punch out pretty clean. The guy would be okay. He’s not going to lose his arm or anything like that. You know standard upper body flesh wound. Wasn’t in the abdominal cavity or anything like that. I’m fumbling around sort of trying to figure this out. I get a compression bandage on it. I get the bleeding stopped and then start to kind of take stock and barely get to do that when somebody else calls medic. So I stand up and I walk across the ambush site again, still not getting it. And again got slammed down to the ground. By now I’m starting to get the picture that you’re not supposed to stand up. So I’m kind of starting to get that. That’s starting to percolate in. Dealt with this guy, slightly more serious. Had taken a wound to the upper leg. It was dark. Didn’t see anything and I’m sure as hell not going to shine a flashlight. I was up to speed that far. Couldn’t find a flashlight if I wanted to.

LC: And firing is still continuing?

JH: Oh, yeah. The fight’s going on all around us. Got that leg wound taken care of. It was right about then that I realized what was going on—that I was in the middle of a gunfight and it wasn’t little kids with cap guns and that I’ve got blood all over both hands up to my elbows and the reality—not just the fact that it was real, but the specific nature of the reality. I’m in the middle of a fully-automatic gunfight in a foreign country and it really is a life or death situation. That hit home or started to hit home. That was the moment when my commitment to being a conscientious objector pretty much collapsed. By the time everything settled out, and I can’t remember all of the details, but by the time everything settled out it was daylight. Sun was coming up You could see what was going on. They had scampered off into the woods and we were left. There’d been nine men on the ambush. We had a medevac come in and put, I think, four guys on the birds going out. And as the guys were going out I turned—same guy who had me doing satchel charges was running that ambush. And I picked up one of the M-16s. I said, “I think I want to have one of these.” And he said, “Sure, whatever. If you want it.” Hardly knew how to use it. Only had the one clip. Didn’t even know I should grab a bandolier, right? And it didn’t make me feel any safer. It was this kind of alien object. I mean I knew what guns were. I’d fire guns before but this is a military assault rifle. It’s
a slightly different critter. I can’t remember all of the day-in, day-out details. But I carried that weapon until basically my big day. It wasn’t long. It was a couple weeks and we were reassembled off of Tomahawk back at Camp Eagle. The entire battalion came back. And then the entire battalion was moved again out to the floor of the A Shau Valley. I mean they called it a firebase but it was absolutely dead flat, in the middle of no place, place with a large graded—you probably could have landed a birddog on it. It was like a little dirt airstrip.

LC: Did it have a name?

JH: If it did I can’t—either they didn’t tell me or I didn’t know. And we just hung around there for some days.

LC: Most of the entire battalion was out there?

JH: Yeah. The entire battalion, and that struck me as—one, that struck me as very large. I mean you’ve got 120 guys per company roughly, and you got four companies out there. So you got like 500 guys camping out around this big flat real rough sort of bush plane landing strip and nothing, nothing else. Birds would come in and drop off C-rats and blivits of water and ammo and whatever we needed. And we hung around there basically gussying up. I was checking my medical gear and I had certain daily duties that had been explained to me. I had to get up in the morning and I was with the 3rd Platoon. Boy, am I getting this story confused? I don’t think so. I was with 3rd Platoon then. You know, I have to take a break and do a little interjection here. In the course of sort of reviewing and kind of getting myself ready for the interviews I’ve been trying to do something that I have not done but just the opposite of what I’ve done for the last three decades. For the last three decades I have been denaturing all of these memories.

LC: When you say denaturing, what do you mean?

JH: What I mean is I made up my mind within a very few years after getting out of the military that I was not going to have my military experience become the most significant thing in my life. I just at some point just made up my mind that I was not going to do that. I was not going to define myself by that year-and-a-half that I spent in the military, by that fourteen months chunk of time I spent out in the bush. I wasn’t going to do that. I was going to move on. I was going to have a life full of and enriched by different things. You know, this is the language of a professional middle-aged man.
I’m sure I didn’t say it that way or think it that way at the time. But in terms of content and meaning that’s it and that’s just the way I talk now so that’s how I’ll say it. But I was not going to be defined by that experience and the way I went about resisting being defined by that is—I—denial is not the right word. I worked on forgetting it. I didn’t think about it. I didn’t want to talk to people about it and if people asked me about it I would give evasive action. One of my favorites is sitting with another veteran who I liked. There were not too many veterans that I liked because a lot of veterans, frankly, seemed to want to define themselves by that experience and it just didn’t appeal to me. It didn’t seem healthy. But this was a guy I liked. He had very much the same sort of attitude that I did. He had gotten out of the service a couple years earlier than me. He had actually been hit and had a pretty prominent scar, bullet scar, on I think it was his left forearm. So if he was wearing a t-shirt there was this great big pucker on one side and a bunch of other scar tissue on the other side of his left forearm. And of course, people would ask him about it. I loved his answers because he’d just make them up on the spot and one of my favorites was some woman asked him, “My, God. What happened to your arm?” Says, “Oh, I got shot.” “Were you in the war?” “Nah. 7-Eleven.”

LC: Sort of the end of the conversation in a way. Doesn’t invite you to—
JH: I mean he’s just not going to talk about it. He’s not going to get into it and I kind of took him as my model. One of my favorite responses was people would ask me, “I heard you were in the war. Weren’t you in the war?” And my response was, “Weren’t we all? I mean aren’t we all still?” People would say, “Did you see combat?” And I would say—and frankly this I think is an accurate and honest answer, “Yeah, a little bit, not much. Nothing stupendous.” Now, that means that today when I try and remember details—where was I, how did that happen—things are kind of jumbled and confused because I have worked to not retain them. But it gets more complicated than that because I have two neurological conditions. Both of which I only found out about when I was fifty years old conclusively, I mean in terms of hardcore diagnosis. The first is that apparently I am an ADD brain, and I seriously dislike that nomenclature. I do not like calling myself an attention deficit disorder person. I come up with my own versions. I can’t think of one right now but I have an attention difference. I don’t consider myself to be deficited or disabled at all. Rather, I’m obviously a working academic in the liberal
arts. I’m hardly disabled. And around the whole ADD subject, one of my favorite anecdotes comes from something I was reading where a young woman who had been just diagnosed was being counseled by a therapist. And the therapist was doing the, “It’s okay, honey,” schtick. You know, it’s like, “It’s all right. You’ve got this problem with paying attention but that doesn’t mean it has to be the end of your life and da-da-da-da-da.” And this chick puts up with it for some period of time. Not long, half-an-hour, forty-five minutes, and finally turns to the therapist and says, “Hold it. I don’t have a problem with paying attention. You’re boring.”

LC: Yeah. Problem over there, not here. I’m with you.

JH: Yeah. Right. “Okay, I’m different but you’re boring!” And that’s been my attitude from the get-go. I mean that’s probably the one advantage from not knowing. It was very interesting going through my life not being able to take notes, not being able to highlight things. One of the features of certain types of ADD brains—I’m what they call a global learner. I don’t learn things one brick at a time. I watch my wife and she’ll break down a book and she’ll do an outline and highlight passages and she’ll learn this passage and then she’ll move on. It’s like watching somebody build a brick wall. I’m what’s called a global learner. If I’m going to learn, you know, Gibbon, I have to read the entire damned book and if I don’t get it then I go back to the beginning and I read the entire damned book again. And then what happens is at a certain point I get it. Now, I get it in a very different way. My wife gets it in this linear, sequential, flowchart sort of way. My understanding is holistic and completely synthetic. So I can go from A to Q without even breathing hard. It’s a different understanding and it’s informed and aided and improved my teaching because you can ask me about last Thursday when I’m lecturing about Friday night and I have no problem—

LC: Right. You’re fine with that because it’s all kind of a stream.

JH: No, it’s not a stream at all. It’s holistic is the word. There’s a reason why they call it global learning. I know everything all at once and nothing first. So the thought of moving from topic A to topic B, it’s not in my vocabulary. There is only the one topic. It’s kind of difficult to explain to somebody who doesn’t have that kind of mind but it’s not a disadvantage. It’s like anything else. There are times where it might not be the best but there are also times where it’s way better than what “normal people”
can do. After the war I got into the martial arts and I was a damned fine martial artist, and part of the reason is because of the way my brain works. I don’t want to go on and on about this but this is a neurological condition. It is not a psychological condition, and there are certain features. When I get these diagnoses—the other was post traumatic stress disorder—and when I got these, the academic that I am, I jumped into a fat stack of books on both of them. Tried to figure out what the hell I was dealing with. Well, it turns out that the mind is a wonderfully flexible instrument and that neurogenesis goes on throughout life. It’s not that your brain grows and you hit maturity and it stops and you’re stuck with those pathways. Quite the contrary. You grow new axonal connections and new neuronal paths throughout your entire life and the growth of these neuronal paths is directly a consequence of the stimulus that you’re receiving. This is a large part of how education proceeds. This is how memory is encoded or retained. Now, with long-term post traumatic stress disorder what happens is you get a different kind of memory so that the traumatic incident or incidents functions a little bit differently. It’s kind of like the difference, to use the computer analogy—which I’m not completely comfortably with—it’s kind of like the analogy of software and hardware. Most memory exists as something like software. But when you suffer traumatic stress to the level of pathology what happens is the memories involved with—and this is not for short term PTSD, this is for what I’ve got, which is long term—you actually grow permanent neuronal pathways that contain the traumatic incident. And, it turns out, that people with ADD minds are particularly susceptible to that phenomenon. So I can’t forget the significant traumatic incidents. I literally cannot forget them. I can when they’re activated, when I’m experiencing them it’s—did you ever read Kurt Vonnegut?

LC: Sure.

JH: I can’t remember the name of the book. It’s the one with Billy Pilgrim, Tralfamadorians. It has all the stuff with Dresden firebombing and Vonnegut’s experiences during the war. Okay. Anyway, Billy Pilgrim, the character, is described as occasionally becoming unstuck in time where he will be cruising along in the present and all of a sudden he’s in the future or he’s in the past and he’s in that reality. I’m convinced that Vonnegut was writing about his own diagnosed or un-diagnosed PTSD as a consequence of being a very young man living through the Dresden firebombing.
Because that’s what it feels like. When I’m engaged by my trauma memories, it’s reality. There’s no other way to say it. I remember—I can’t forget the details. They’re hard-wired. They’re burned on to the disc. It’s not a data package floating around on the hard drive some place. They have been burned on to a disc. It’s permanent in my mind.

LC: And this is what you’re saying about the having grown the new pathways for where this information is held.

JH: Exactly. It exists as a physical component in my brain, which is why my kind of PTSD is long term and it becomes—I can’t get over it. I can learn to manage it and I have done that, and I think I’ve done that actually fairly successfully. But imagine, for example, driving down the road and a certain song strikes an emotional chord and all of a sudden I’m in the middle of a firefight on a hillside in Vietnam. I mean I’m still in the truck driving the truck. No, I never had the full-boat visual hallucinations, thank God, but certainly auditory and olfactory hallucinations. And because it’s playing this hard-wired thing I would get the full-boat of glandular and physical flight-or-flight, to put it crudely, sort of responses. I’m cruising down the freeway and all of a sudden I’m weeping hysterically. I’m listening to machine guns and helicopters. I’m smelling the jungle. My body is shaking like a leaf and my heart is going a million miles a minute and I’m in mortal terror. The curve is a falling curve. It’s a falling curve and I think I’m getting pretty damned close to the ascent, though, at this point. Immediately after the service this would happen quite frequently. And over time, slowly at first, but better and better incidents came further and further apart and it’s been a long time. It’s probably been, oh, man, six months since I’ve had a full on bout where I’m effectively incapacitated by it.

LC: Are the triggers the same every time?

JH: I never know what the trigger will be. There have been periods where—for example, there was a long period where I could not—and you never know what they’re going to be. But for example, there was a period of probably two or three years where I could not listen to the Joni Mitchell album “Blue.” Couldn’t listen to it. It’s got nothing to do with the direct experience but for some reason that would do it. That would punch the button. And on more than one occasion I’ve had at least a couple of occasions after the war at a party, drinking, having fun, relaxed, great time, some knuckle-head two
houses down decides to pump off a few rounds from a pump shotgun. And when I go
through the door I don’t bother to open it. You know? I mean, you know, that kind of
stuff—or the window. (Laughs) Been through a window, too.

LC: Literally?
JH: Literally, yeah. Mercifully I only took out the screen but—
LC: Yeah. That was a good thing. How long—?
JH: Fucked up the bush outside pretty bad. Thank God it wasn’t roses. Oh, Lord.
LC: How long would a period like that last?
JH: It’s hard to say. There’s no variable time. Generally not short, though. It
would take me anywhere—I don’t know—shortest might be half-an-hour. Longest might
be a big chunk of a day. You know, and again as I say over time it got less and less and
less. But almost the hardest part about it was feeling like I had to try and hide it.
Because my understanding of it for all my life until I was fifty really was that—I mean by
the time I was getting into my late thirties and forties people were talking to me about
things like shell shock. And for a long time I walked around and said, “Yeah okay, so
I’m shell shocked.” Well, I’ll just deal with that.

LC: Right. Without really knowing what that—
JH: What it meant. What that meant to me was you’re not tough enough to stand
up to what you went through and so this is the price for being a wimp. Right? But it’s
funny because I never had any sense of, “Oh, I’m despicable.” It was more like “Okay,
so I’m a wimp. Well, deal with it.” I took it as a very personal, very individual sort of
weakness. And because I avoided the veteran’s community and because I didn’t want to
be identified primarily as a Vietnam veteran I was never exposed to exactly the
community that probably could have identified what was going on with me and given me
the information that I needed for proper support.

LC: You know, these things—the reactions that you had and then your sort of
trying to establish some intellectual control by excluding this experience from your self-
definition—
JH: Oh. yeah, and in the throws of the physical response—force of will. You
know? I’m not going to weep. I’m not going to let people see my hands shaking. I’m
going to leave the room because I can feel the hyperventilation coming on. You know? I
hear those guns. I’m going to make an excuse. I’m going to go to the bathroom. I’m
going to go someplace else.

LC: And get away and be alone?
JH: And get away until it passes and I can come back and none-the-wiser. You
just deal with it.

LC: Did anybody else know at all?
JH: Not explicitly from me. I mean the people who saw me jump out the window
knew something wasn’t fine. (Laughs)

LC: Yeah. There goes John, again.

JH: There goes John again. Yeah, there was a lot of that. There was a lot of,
“There goes John again.” Because people—I was fooling myself. I mean of course
people around me and close to me knew that there was something wingy about this, but
we were all young. All the people I was hanging around with had never been in the
military let alone being in combat. They just figured, “Oh, yeah, veterans are crazy.”

LC: See? Yet more evidence.

JH: Yeah and you’re exactly right. That’s the kind of feedback. So anyway, and
I really did have a point here.

LC: You’ve made several points along the way.

JH: Yeah, well, unfortunately that’s that academic twitch. I know you know that
one. So when I talk about my experiences: One, sometimes it’s hard for me to get them
sorted out in something like a chronology, an accurate chronology. And Two, I had the
very, very disturbing experience—I know I’ve mentioned this already once in these
interviews—of actually getting what is the official history of the battalion that I was
assigned to. And when I read the details and the dates it didn’t match my memories at
all. I mean almost at all. It was like reading about a different unit except for the place
names in terms of which company was where and who did what and, you know. This
history would identify a different company as being the company that sounds like what
my company was doing.

LC: How disconcerting was that?

JH: At first it was tremendously disconcerting because my thought was, “Whoa.

Am I really delusional here?”
LC: Right. How wrong am I?

JH: How wrong am I? Did any of this really happen? Hello? What’s going on here? But I’m pretty sure I’ve reconstructed—the guy who wrote the official history for the battalion—and I’ve checked this out and I’m pretty sure I’m right about this because he did stick in my mind—when you’re re-supplying a company in the field the last bird to come in and go out is called the DX Bird.

LC: Yes.

JH: Oh, okay. So you know that one. Right. This guy was specifically, explicitly, in front of the entire company, held back by the company commander and sent out of the field on the DX bird. Right? The platoon leader. Right? That’s the reputation as a field officer this guy had. He was what we used to call a “one man cluster fuck.” Just a complete disaster. I can tell tales on this guy. And I’m pretty sure that he is the guy who wrote this thing and I went back and I read it and it’s the most ghastly sort of, “The fighting miraculous 1st of the 327th performed heroically as usual.” It’s all that kind of crap. You know? Just kind of weird, dumb wannabe stuff. And when I thought about that and when I thought about, “Okay, I know the nature of these memories.” Now, I may not have them in a good chronological sequence, but the details that I do remember, I can tell you they have not changed in my mind for thirty years. Now I know why, because they’re hardwired. They can’t change. So I’m a little more comfortable about it. But I don’t know what that does, speaking as a historian, I don’t know what that does to the information. I know what I experienced. But I’m not entirely sure that it could be fully corroborated with outside evidence. I’ve got my DD-214, got my decorations. I’ve got all the standard package of stuff and I’ve got this stuff in my head too, right? So especially when we talk about what I sometimes call my overtime days, you know when we had a little extra work to do. It can be a bit of a jumble, and on my worst day, the one that really knocked me for a loop, it’s this collage, it’s this pastiche. You know? I mean I have a rough sequence of events. But during the actual combat what I have are these blips and flashes of these moments.

LC: Well, I think those will do fine, John. I think those will do fine.

JH: What I remember was something happened between the night ambush and the time we were deployed in the A Shau. Now, at the night of the night ambush I was the
junior medic for the company. By the time we had our big battle up on the Laotian
border I was the company medic. Is that right? No. I was still 3rd Platoon medic. Okay,
okay. All right. But you have to understand I went from private E-1 to specialist 5th
class in two months.

LC: Well, John, let me if I can—

JH: I’m going on too long aren’t I?

LC: Let me just stop you there and we’ll talk again tomorrow, okay?

JH: Okay.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech. I’m continuing the oral history interview with Dr. John Hubenthal.

JH: Honk honk!

LC: Who is taking this incredibly seriously as am I, on the twentieth of January 2006.

JH: This is my life.

LC: John, your life is a complicated montage.


LC: Train wreck. And we’ve come to the point where we have you visiting Vietnam courtesy of the US Army.

JH: Do you know that it was possible to be prosecuted for destruction of government property when I was in the military if you got a tattoo?

LC: No kidding! Really? How’d you find that out?

JH: Well, that’s what I was told. I mean, you know, but who knows. Scuttlebutt, barracks talk. But I love it. I treat it as truth because—

LC: Because it works real well.

JH: It fits. Yeah. It fits the environment so perfectly.

LC: Did you ever think about getting a tattoo over there?

JH: Oh, lots of times. I could never come up with—before, during, and after and I could never come up with anything that I wanted to wear forever. You know?

LC: What merits the permanence of it? Yeah.

JH: Yeah exactly. I assumed I would get tired of it and then what do you do?

You know?

LC: Yeah. Well, whatever it is, it’s going to cost you a lot of money. Probably won’t be effective.

JH: It’s like a laser thing to do now but that didn’t even exist.

LC: Yeah that’s right.
JH: And you’re stuck. And then again, you know, I mean you look at some of the
tattoos that are up there and it’ll give you pause. I remember the enlisted guy, the lifer,
who looked about a thousand years old to me then because I was nineteen and he was
probably all of forty, maybe, forty-five. But we were both taking a shower and this guy
strips down and walks in and he’s still wearing his uniform. I mean he’s got his rank on,
his original unit patch, all his decorations all tattooed permanently.

LC: Oh, no.

JH: Yeah.

LC: Yikes. Yeah, what was that you were saying about not having your life
defined by your service in the military?

JH: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. And it’s actually been a little bit of a struggle for me.
I try not to talk about it. I try not to bring it up and yet I find myself doing just that and
doing exactly what I don’t want to do which is defining myself by that experience. And I
think it’s a measure of how much it tattooed me, really.

LC: In its own way.

JH: Vividly and permanently it shaped me. It was a very formative experience at
a vulnerable age. You know, I mean I was in Vietnam just before my nineteenth birthday
until just after my twentieth and virtually all of that time was spent in the field.

LC: And as a conscientious objector you had a longer term in-country than—

JH: Well, no actually I extended my tour.

LC: Oh, you did?

JH: Yeah because they had a program that allowed you—it was so close. It was a
one-year tour and by the time most guys finished up their—you know, a draftee you’re in
for twenty-four months. So it takes five, six months to get you trained and ready to go. I
don’t know what the exact figure would be. Then you go over and you’re in-country for
twelve months. Okay. There’s eighteen months. You got six months left. What good
are you? Why do they want to feed you and clothe you and house you for six months
when you’re basically TDY no matter where you go? So if you extended your tour in
country to within five months of your date of separation from active duty they just cut
you loose.

LC: At the end of it?
JH: At the end of it, yeah. And so I stayed fourteen months. I had to extend a
couple of months to get that close.

LC: But of course, this had to be in-country time.

that might have felt like in-country to me. I don’t know.

LC: Yeah. Yeah.

JH: And actually it was good because I never really had to do a lot of regular
Army crap—the barracks inspections and boot polishing and all that stuff. I was out in
the field. You know? Nobody had time for that kind of crap.

LC: Well, that was clear when you were talking about your first couple of days up
there at Phu Bai.

JH: Yeah. I started right off.

LC: At Ft. Tomahawk and it just kept going. Well, I gather—

JH: Actually, allow me to correct you, Firebase Tomahawk.

LC: I’m sorry and you’re right and I can’t read my own writing. That’s that
problem.

JH: Uh oh.

LC: But that’s always been true. Nothing new. No reason for panic. Always
ture.

JH: I purposely forgot how to write cursive because anything I write in cursive
looks like a seismograph. So I just use all caps block printing and I can do it as fast as
most people can write cursive and it’s legible.

LC: John, the last time that we talked about your actual experiences we talked
about the ambush that was ambushed and you sort of—

JH: Do you want me to—Well, go ahead. I’m sorry.

LC: I was going to just say that you had led on through that experience and how it
affected you to the point I think you said that your sense of being a conscientious objector
basically collapsed.

JH: Yeah, yeah. Pretty much.

LC: Does that sound right?
JH: When I finally had time to sort of realize what was going on—and it didn’t take long—it was actually on the scene of the ambush. Because that particular contact occurred very, very early in the morning near dawn. And so when the sun came up we were still evacuating the wounded and tidying up and sort of pulling up our pants and getting ready to go back to work. This was my first up-close and personal exposure to, you know, live fire situation, actual combat, and it scared the hell out of me. So, at the end of that particular incident one of the wounded guys—you know, we had all the weapons left—and so I picked up one of the rifles. I said, “Well, boy, I think I better carry one of these just to be on the safe side.” And I believe I carried it for about two weeks, somewhere between two weeks and a month, and then I had my sort of baptism. Now, I want to reiterate. I said this early on in the course of these interviews but I want to reiterate this. This is my recollection. This is what I have carried around in my head for thirty years. And I think I mentioned that I was very startled when I read the “official” history of my battalion. That it just didn’t seem to match up with what I remember and yet these memories have been consistent and stable in my head. Well, I think I talked about PTSD, too, and the neurology—which I only discovered just about four or five years ago how that works. So I can’t discount my own memories but they are my memories. This is very much my subjective take on all these experiences.

LC: And that’s what we’re after.

JH: Well, good because that’s what you’re going to get.

LC: No, it’s true. Really.

JH: Anyway, we were involved shortly after that—and again very, very early in my tour—in a battalion-sized operation. It was an assault on a whole line of bunker complexes on the—what would it be?—on the western side. Up in the Highlands on the western side of the A Shau Valley. So the entire battalion was flown out to the valley floor. That was the staging area. I’m talking about four infantry companies of about 120 guys each, so this was a big deal in my universe. There was some kind of a funky dirt, you know, airstrip and that’s about it. Big graded airstrip and that’s it; and flatlands and scrub lands and, you know, brush. Actually, very similar to some of the stuff you see up in the Hill Country. But dead flat and of course different plants, different details.

LC: And so did you fly out there on transports then rather than helicopters?
JH: No. We were an air mobile battalion so in the field our transport was almost exclusively Hueys. So you’d stick six guys, you know, stick a rifle squad per Huey and fly us out, which meant a lot of birds. I mean do the math. You know, you’re talking four or five hundred guys. So it was a lot of aircraft involved in this, and we were there on the valley floor for a while. At least one night I think, maybe two, and I remember it being cold. It was amazing. We were building fires and standing around the fires. It was kind of shocking how cold it was. And then on the day that we were going to move, that the actual assault was going to take place—and let me interrupt myself. I didn’t know anything at the time. I can say, “Okay this is a battalion assault and we all assembled on the valley floor and blah-blah-blah.” This is stuff I figured out after. At the time I was—I’m trying to remember if I was eighteen or nineteen. But it was like, “Whoa! Look at this. Bunch of guys! Where are we now? What’s going on?” Nobody told me anything. I was a mushroom, on a need to know basis. I knew where my gear was and that was my level of intelligence.

LC: But could you see preparations for something that looked like an offensive action?

JH: Well, for starts, the entire battalion was assembled in one place in the field. I never saw that again. That was the only time I ever saw that. Of course they’re passing out ammunition and I got re-supplied and we all got fitted out with whole load of rations and stuff like that. Everybody was checked so that everybody had good boots and things like that—ponchos and poncho liners and all that kind of stuff, the important stuff. And then one morning, fairly early, we started loading up in flights and they put all of us in the air at once. It was amazing. The formation of helicopters when we finally assembled—because they’d load, you know, probably a platoon’s worth of birds and they would take off and do a holding pattern overhead like O’Hare Airport or something. And then as everybody loaded, and they did this until everybody was loaded and in the air. And when we took off across the valley floor headed for the hills it looked like this gigantic green flying carpet. Looking out the bird it was really quite a sight. It impressed the hell out of me. And we flew in and as I recall made a gigantic—you know, this whole formation made a right turn headed north along the line of hills and then as we flew along, company-sized formations of birds peeled off for insertions. And I think they
probably held a company or so in reserve in a holding pattern. I think. I can’t say for
certain. Our LZ (landing zone), when we came in to the LZ—the LZ was actually
located in a saddle between two hills. And as we came in on the left was a low hill and
on the right was a much higher steeper hill and the route in and out of the LZ was through
a fairly open approach. And then as the birds left they would have to negotiate,
obviously, between the two hills because the LZ was in the saddle and then make a kind
of a right turn around the bigger formation on the right through a kind of a valley and off
and out. And I couldn’t see them after they made their right turn and were gone.

LC: Wow.

JH: I’m not sure. I was second or third bird. I always tried to get as close to the
first bird as I could.

LC: Because?

JH: I was a medic and everything that happened happened at the front of the
formation. And I can remember my officers trying to put me in the middle. You know,
say we’re moving on foot. They always tried to put me in the middle and I’d sneak up. I
liked to walk about somewhere between sixth and tenth man. Now, that’s counting both
point and slack, which is—apparently most medics didn’t do that but it just seemed nuts
to me. You know? I mean if something’s going to happen it always happens at the front
so you want to be there. I want to get this done today just to get this shit out of the way.
Okay?

LC: That’s fine.

JH: And you have to bear in mind that I’m doing the exact polar opposite of what
I’ve been doing for thirty years. Which is trying, you know, to just not pay attention to
this shit. And actually I’ve been thinking about it all morning, kind of getting ready. So,
I was second or third bird in and I was going to jump from the left side of the bird. The
bird didn’t come any closer than five feet to the ground. It looked farther than that. The
first two birds got in and out okay. The bird I was in everybody jumped. I’d never had to
jump from that high and we were all carrying full heavies, so I got a seventy-pound pack
on my back. So it looked like a long way down. I was pretty well tuned up. We’d been
walking around by that point. I mean I was physically fit. I could do it but it was still
kind of, “Holy shit!” Now, I don’t know if you’ve ever been in a Huey but it’s God-
awful loud. You can’t hear anything but that bird. I could see that we were taking fire. Nobody else has ever described it to me so I don’t know what other people called it. I always called it popcorn round. Because when there’s automatic weapons fire and it hits the ground you get this—looks like popcorn going off. Little puffs of dust where the rounds are smacking in. You get the same thing if you’re in the forest in the duff, all the leaf litter. It’ll just jump around. It’s just wherever a burst hits and I could see that shit going on and I could see the guys from the first two birds returning fire. So obviously this was a hot LZ. I might have been the last man out of the bird. I think I probably was. I don’t know what’s going on behind me. But I was standing on the skid hanging on to the frame of the door getting ready to jump and for some reason I looked up. And as I looked up I remember seeing a line of rounds just stitch in to the door frame right above my head. Bird was taking fire, and I didn’t think at the time, “Oh, shit. I better get out of here so the bird can get away.” My thought was, “I’m an awfully big target.” So I jumped. And I think it was my bird that went down. I remember seeing a bird, you know, blowing smoke and dropping, not climbing, as it made the right turn out of the LZ. It was going autogyro and it was basically down and I have no idea what happened to those guys. I didn’t hear that they were all lost and I suspect I would have if they had been so I assume they got recovered and made it out okay. So I jumped down in the middle of the LZ trying to figure out what the fuck to do. What do I do now? And as I’m standing there looking around and I’m still half-deaf. And there’s a whole lot of fire going on and there’s birds in the sky and there’s another bird coming in and, by God, they’re not going to wait for me to get out of that LZ—they’ll land on top of me if they have to. And I looked down and I got this popcorn round going on all around my feet. I suppose there was—basically I was a hell of a target. And I think the other guys probably appreciated that because it gave them a little bit of a break. So I ran towards some kind of big log—teak, mahogany, some kind of tropical hardwood that had been blown to make the LZ—and just threw myself at it. Landed pack first, back up against the teak, the wood, log, whatever it was. So I’m looking back at the LZ and I see rounds hitting the dirt in front of me and I’m thinking, “Oh, this is a great place to be. Wonderful.” And I’m getting little chips of wood and shit getting blown off the log, people shooting at the log. And then all of a sudden I realized that I was getting fire from
the other direction. I was getting shot at from a 180-degree line of fire. There was somebody on the other side of the LZ was shooting at me now. And I can’t really say what I did until my guys, you know—it was snipers. And my guys finally found him and took him out. All I did pretty much was run around. You know? But the LZ quieted down and the whole company formed up there on the LZ and we started to move. Now, we moved up the taller hill—the one that was on the right as we came in—and there was a path, a red ball, going up the hill. And I remember about half way up the hill was a dead NVA, not Viet Cong. He was in full uniform and well equipped. You know, helmet, belt, boots—this guy was regular Army obviously. We formed up and set up a temporary, you know, quickie perimeter on the top of the hill and—okay, so now I want to locate you here. You fly in to the LZ this hill is on the right. Standing on top of this hill looking the same direction as we flew in, right, so the LZ is below us and to our left. And we’re looking across another saddle at a slightly taller hill and the company commander says, “Okay, I’m going to keep 1st and 2nd Platoon here and establish a CP (command post).” And again I’m describing this in the language of hindsight. At the time I couldn’t have told you this this coherently. I would have said, “Yeah, my platoon went here and they all stayed there.” The whole idea of, “Yeah, he established the CP.” This is acquired as I tried to figure out what the fuck happened later.

LC: Much later after the fact. Yeah.

JH: So my platoon headed down slope into the saddle and we paused, the head of the line paused there. And I remember my lieutenant he was going to send a rifle squad up. I didn’t know this, but our assigned bunker complex was on top of that hill. We were going—again I learned this later—but we were going after the back door with a platoon-sized assault while Bravo Company had another LZ on the far side of this hill and they were going after the front door. Thank God it was them and not me. Anyway, I remember my lieutenant—can’t remember his name—hell of an officer. Really good officer. Southern guy, Mississippi, Alabama, someplace. Nice guy, too. I liked him. I thought a lot of him but I remember him putting a hand on my chest and saying, “You stay here.” It was like, “Well wait a minute! I’m going up with point squad!” He says, “No, Doc. Not this time.” And he made me sit there. So we were still stretched out
single file. So our point squad, which was, I don’t know, the lieutenant and like six guys, went up the hill and I was at the head of the column. I was the last man.

LC: Was anyone staying back with you?

JH: Oh, yeah. I had the whole rest of the platoon behind me in single file on this little trail coming down. And firing broke out and I remember sitting there and again what I saw were tracers, white tracers, and it was obviously not an assault rifle. This was a heavier gun. It might have been the equivalent of whatever their equivalent of our M-60 was, but it just didn’t—it was tracking too straight. Okay? I mean it was a long burst and it was just dead flat. And I had a round smack into the hillside behind me about a foot off my right shoulder and the next round did the same thing off my left shoulder. So it just stitched right across where I was sitting and I just happened to be sitting in the gap between the two rounds. I remember that. And my first impulse was to—there’s nothing heroic about this, it was just my job and it was my guise—I had quick releases on both of the straps on my pack. Most guys used one. But I would put on my ready bags and then I’d put on my heavies and I had double releases so I could just grab them both and just pop right out that sucker. And that’s what I did and at the same time I just pitched the rifle because I didn’t have time to be messing with that. Didn’t know how to use it anyway. And scampered up the hill and, I don’t know, some ways up the hill got my first casualty. It was a chest wound all bubbly and nasty. I was on the downhill periphery of a gunfight and chest wound or no, I wasn’t going to hang around with a man that badly wounded. I hauled him back down to the saddle and did the best I could to, you know, treat him, stop the bleeding, get him set up so he can breathe. And then looked and everybody else is just sitting there. It’s like, “What the fuck? You guys deaf or what?” And I started screaming at people, “Get up the goddamned hill! Jesus Christ, get up the fucking hill!” And people just looked at me. I have this memory of actually kicking people, and I don’t know what happened then. People started moving and so did I. Went back up the hill and just started treating people. A lot of minor gunshot wounds and shit like that, and things get real blurry at that point. I really can’t remember any kind of narrative sequence. I have a lot of little sort of nightmare snapshots.

LC: Are there any of those, John, that you want to put in here or do you want to move on?
JH: I’m sorry. Give me a minute.

LC: Sure.

JH: Tell me when.

LC: It’s on now.

JH: We’re good? All right, I’m going to avoid the cinematic horseshit and cut to the chase. At the end of the day—which was a very long day in my recollection—out of my platoon there were six of us and we had inserted with close to thirty, as I recall. As I recall, the lieutenant was dead. I don’t know what happened to him. I didn’t go to sleep until, shit, I don’t know when, middle of the night, because I had quite a few casualties to medevac. So long after we had taken our position I was still down in that saddle taking care of people and loading them on the birds.

LC: So helicopters were coming in in the dark?

JH: Yeah, and we had to basket them all out. I was very fortunate because the company medic was there. He was a great guy. He showed up about halfway through the fight and helped me deal with it because we were rather obviously getting chewed up and he stayed right there, right through. He was a good man. And that was when—and I’m not going to use his name because I’ve never contacted his family and I don’t have his family’s permission—but I had one guy who’d taken I don’t even know how many rounds. He must have been second or third guy in line but he was just all shot to hell. I mean at least a couple of chest and abdominal gunshots. I mean just a fish in a barrel—boom, boom. At least a couple, I don’t remember, and I kept him alive. I had drip IVs in both arms I’m sure and I think I even managed to set up one on his leg. Damn, did I do that? That’s hard to do in the field. Anyway, I knew I was pumping him full of all the fluid I could because he was loosing blood hand over fist or had lost. I did manage to get all the bleeding stopped. So I’m scampering around and taking care of people and I’d look at this guy, look at that guy, then I’d go back to my guy, the guy that’d been all shot up. And triage? Fuck triage. This guy’s going out on the first bird. That’s it.

LC: Now when you say “fuck triage,” I have a feeling I know what you mean but can you explain—?

JH: He was dead. I mean he was still breathing and we were technically still in a hot zone so you send out likely candidates.
LC: Likely candidates?

JH: People who are going to live. But no, I’m sorry, he was gone. Anyway, cut to the chase, as I was putting him in the basket he died in my arms. I can take you right to his name on The Wall. Been there—all right I’m good to go—three or four times. You know, poor guy.

LC: You worked hard for him, though, it sounds like. You worked damned hard for him.

JH: Yeah. Yeah I did. I kept him alive, too, right up to the basket. Towards the end of the fight, as I say, we were getting chewed up. There were only like—I don’t know how many were left. I could only see two of my guys. One guy had picked up the M-60, our gunner—our gunner’s name was Gentle Ben. He was a friend of mine. We lost him. Anyway, this other guy—who the hell was he? Jesus. Anyway, he got the gun and somebody else was working as his AG (assistant gunner) and it was put up or shut up time. Fuck, there’s nobody left and they’re still shooting at us. I mean we cut them up, too. We were fighting back. Good troops, and this son-of-a-bitch—I’m basically being his ammo bearer, right.

LC: Okay. For the M-60?

JH: Yeah, and so there’s me and an M-60 and a 16 and this son of a bitch goes Audie Murphy and decides to charge. Crazy son-of-a-bitch. Might have been the right thing to do, I don’t know, but Jesus Christ. So he stands up and does the Rambo thing. You know, he’s got the butt stock under his arm and he’s holding the pistol grip and he’s got the belt in his other hand and he stands up and screams and charges. (Laughs) Crazy son-of-a-bitch. Well, fuck! What am I going to do? I’ve got all of his bullets, you know, so I’m running along right there. And the AG is on the other side and we make it to the top of the hill and somebody turns the lights out. Boom. And thank God they were out of proper hand grenades. All they had left were satchel charges. So it’s just concussion and no frag. Boom, the lights went out. And when I blinked I look around and here’s the gunner and the AG and they’re both blinking at the same time. We all came to, thank God, at about the same time. And we’re like fifteen feet back down the hill again. And this son-of-a-bitch stands up and does it again. Jesus Christ! Same scenario. All three of us run up the hill and boom! It’s like fuck we did that three times! Dear God. What
many memories. I remember bleeding from my ears. It’s like geez! Oh, my God. But then it stopped. It was a third or fourth time, I guess, we actually stayed there and this guy’s firing, in my recollection anyway. At about that point I started seeing other guys coming up and not my platoon. Other guys. Seemed like years—I don’t know how long we on that hill. And once we were reinforced in a proper firing line I remember hearing firing, that’s when I went back down to the saddle. Started dealing with the wounded. It was, you know, hours. I had to go back up the hill more because we had couple more minor casualties. And by the time I got the last man on the bird and out it was dark and I was all alone down there.

LC: You were alone?

JH: Yeah! I was all alone. Everybody had moved up to the top of the hill we assaulted and had set up a perimeter. Shit! So, I had to—I didn’t even think about my gear. I just sort of crawled up this hill because it was steep. You didn’t walk up this puppy. You did it on all fours. I mean you could run it I guess. You could walk it but it was dark and muddy and I was exhausted, and I got up and hollered and nobody shot me. And I got inside the perimeter and walked just inside the perimeter and they’d already sorted out all of the gear that they were going to burn the next day. All the stuff left behind by all the casualties. And there was this big pile of poncho liners about twenty-five, thirty poncho liners all piled up. And it just happened to be right in front of me and boy it looked good so I just fell down. Well, I woke up in the morning with some guy straddling me, standing over me holding on to my shirt, and giving me these open-handed slaps back and forth. Wham, bam, bam! It was like, “What the fuck! I don’t need to wake up this way. Jesus Christ. What’s going on?” They didn’t know if I was alive or dead because I was like completely covered from my eyebrows south with blood. I didn’t even realize it. I remember looking at myself and wiggling my toes and they went “squishy, squishy” and my boots were soaked. It was all blood. Oh, my God. What a way to wake up. And right about then, right about the time I sort of came to and really woke up, my company commander at the time—he was also a really good officer, had my respect—anyway he walks up to me with what looks like a stick with mud caked on it. It was the rifle I’d been carrying and he’s holding it by the barrel like it was a bag of shit. He’s looking at this thing and he looks at me and he says, “Doc, is this yours?”
didn’t even think about it. I said, “Not anymore.” I got no use for that thing. I was very fortunate that he was a good officer because he could literally have shot me right there.

We were still in combat zone and I was technically, as I understand it, legally that was—well, it’s a court martial offense anyway but I had been a CO and my captain knew it. Maybe that’s why I like him. But he didn’t say anything at all. He just threw the gun on the DX pile with all the others and moved on and I never carried a weapon again after that.

LC: How’d you get out of there?

JH: Oh, we walked over the hill and then we went on patrol. We were out for—I don’t know—weeks moving around up on the Laotian border, and then we came in for a stand down. I think we had a couple of days. And then back out again—typical line infantry. We were up in the Highlands for, I don’t know, awhile and then they moved us down to Phu Thu province just south of Hue. I think that’s where Phu Bai is, but we were closer to the coast out in the flats, you know, paddy land, and running sweeps because the local Viet Cong were acting up so they sent us down to do a little patrolling, which we did. That was when I got booted out of the line infantry. I’d been bumped up to company aid man at that point. Top kick usually stayed in the rear. You know, we’re talking E-9, E-10, something like that and he usually stayed in the rear but he was out in the field with us and he was a real crusty old fart, really full of himself. We had an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) group with us. I didn’t think much of ARVNs. I softened up on them a little bit later on, but at that time I had no use for them at all. They were just a big target as far as I was concerned. And there was a guy with the CT (combat team). He wasn’t like a radioman or something. I think he was just a grunt. He was with one of the platoons. Anyway, Top Kick did not like this guy, black guy. He was sick and I wanted to medevac him and company sergeant did not—he started telling me that this guy was a ghost and that he was a malingerer and there’s no way that this fucker’s going back in the rear.

LC: What did he mean by ghost?

JH: Oh, you don’t know that term?

LC: No, I do, but just for other people who might not know.
JH: Oh, okay. Well a ghost is somebody who just is able to figure out how to stay out of the field and they don’t really have any job in the rear but they just kind of ghost around. Somehow or another, you know, figure out some way to keep from getting sent out to the bush. No real reason, no real job in the rear. You know what I mean. But this guy was no ghost. He was a good guy, and he had a fever of 104! And Top kick wanted to medevac one of the ARVN’s, right, and I knew the ARVN was a ghost. I’d been dealing with this character and he was just a—he had not earned my respect, shall we say. Sergeant calls in medevac, calls in a bird, and I said, “I’m putting this man on that bird.” Sergeant says, “Like hell you are.” Bear in mind, this guy’s older than me anyway. I’m guessing forties. I’m not very big, like 5’9” or something and kind of skinny. And I was only nineteen, and here’s this forty-year-old lifer who’s probably six foot, has fifty pounds on me easy, and does not like me to boot. And it’s a demonstration of just how stupid I am that I said, “God damn it you motherfucker! I’m the company medical officer!” I was a spec-5 by then. I said, “I’m the company medical officer and I decide who gets on that bird. If my man doesn’t go on that bird nobody goes on that bird.” And my company sergeant locked and loaded on me. Oh, shit! I remember that well. It’s like the weapon comes up, the bolt goes back, and he says you’re out of here. I don’t know what I said. Something. The equivalent of “What the fuck!” And he says, “You’re out of here and you’re walking. You’re gone.” Jesus. This is probably an hour, hour-and-a-half, before sundown.

LC: And how far are you from anywhere?

JH: Well, I think we were probably within, certainly within ten clicks of Firebase Saber, I think it was. It was a firebase down the road. I had a rough idea of where that was. So I said, “Okay. Might as well get shot walking through the dark than stay here and get shot.” You know? Picked up my gear and told a couple of people what was happening, guys I liked, and walked over to Firebase Saber. Got there after dark and getting in through the perimeter was kind of fun then. I stopped on—I have to say I stopped in a village on the way and drank some rice wine, played a game of chess with an old guy. (Laughs)

LC: Just walking through?

JH: Yeah, just passing through. Yeah.
LC: And how did you happen to start talking to him?

JH: Well, I stopped and he was sitting there with a chessboard in front of his little hooch, you know, his little house. I don’t know what he was doing. Practicing gambits or something, you know, and I pointed at the board and motioned like—because I was tired and I wanted to sit down for a minute. So I lost a game of chess to this guy real fast, and while we were sitting there he produces a bottle of rice wine and pours himself a glass, pours me a glass.

LC: Could you communicate with him very well?

JH: Not real well. Enough to say, “Thanks for the drink.” Mostly hand signs. And, “Thanks for the chess game.” That was about it. A lot of smiles and nods. Very polite people. Very polite people. Most people are very polite, in my experience. And then saddled up and continued on to Firebase Saber. Felt a lot better after a couple of belts of rice wine.

LC: Sure. I bet.

JH: Oh, Lord. What a scene.

LC: And just to clarify, you have no weapon?

JH: No. I was unarmed.

LC: And are you walking along a track or—?

JH: Dirt road. Yeah. Paddy land on both sides. You pass through the little clumps of trees and shit.

LC: Were you angry or frightened or—?


LC: Keep walking.

JH: Yeah. You just keep going. What the fuck.

LC: And what happened when you got toward the perimeter?

JH: Well, I stopped far enough out that I was pretty sure that they wouldn’t just shoot me on sight and just started hollering. Once they realized I was obviously, you know, not one of the locals somebody shined a flashlight on me or something. They opened up the gate. There was a dirt road going in to the firebase and they obviously
didn’t string trip wires or anything across that so it wasn’t like I had to come in through
the wire or something.

LC: Did they ask you what you were doing?

JH: Oh, yeah! Oh, hell yes! “What the fuck are you?” I mean come on! “Oh
yeah, hi guy. Find a place to crash.” No, I’m sorry. This is the Army.

LC: Right. And did they take you in to see somebody?

JH: Once I explained who and what I was. Apparently, I’m guessing that my top
kick had radioed some version of events ahead. I got myself to the aid station there,
explained my situation, ended up spending, I don’t know, it’s like couple of nights I think
it was there at the aid station helping out, being a medic. And hopped a truck back to
Camp Eagle. And when I got to Camp Eagle it wasn’t the battalion surgeon, it was the—
basically the equivalent of the platoon sergeant but he was a medic but he was like an E-6
or something. His name, spelled differently by the way, was Jimmy Hendricks, which
cracks me up because Jimmy Hendrix was a non-com in the 101st Airborne Division. I
mean the real Jimmy Hendrix was. So I never let up on that guy. I was always ragging
on him. I didn’t know about Hendrix’s military record at the time but just the name was
enough.

LC: Yeah, to give him plenty of hell about.

JH: Oh, yeah. Oh, hell yes. And he knew who Hendrix was, obviously. Other
people had been educating him but he was a good ol’ boy. He was strictly Grand Ole
Opry, you know. But you know, not dumb. He was a smart guy. He was a good guy and
he did his job well. So we had different cultures and tastes in music. Like I say: “Okay,
now what? Do the job.” Basically. Now was that beep I just heard you or my phone?

LC: Must have been on your end.

JH: Oh, okay. Somebody’s doing call waiting but I’m not going to mess with
them.

LC: Now, when you’re at Camp Eagle—I mean did anyone report you as being
AWOL (absent without leave) or anything?

JH: I wasn’t AWOL. I was ordered out from my field position by my company
sergeant.
LC: Sure. I mean but if he really wanted to smoke you he could have done that, too.

JH: Oh, yeah. Oh, hell yes. Well, actually probably not. Somebody would have busted him. I mean he could have smoked me. Yeah. Absolutely. Boom. And then afterward there would have been a mess, but who knows how that would have played out.

LC: Well, and who knows what happened after you left, too.

JH: Yeah. Well, I can’t remember if my guy got medevaced or not, which kind of bothers me now that I think about it because he was sick. He needed a hospital. Eighty-fifth Evac was our usual hospital.

LC: The 85th?

JH: Yeah, and I’m trying to remember where they were. They were south of us. It wasn’t Phu Bai—someplace south of us but not that far. I mean you could do it in a dash in a truck if you had to. But that’s where they took me the one time I had to go to the hospital.

LC: Which happened when?

JH: Had to be during my line infantry stuff. We were way south of Camp Eagle. We were called down out of the hills and we had to start walking in the afternoon and move all night and take about a three- or four-hour break. Once we got down to the flats I knew I felt shitty and we were going to hop in the trucks and trucked back to Camp Eagle. And as it worked out I had to stand at the front end of the deuce-and-a-half in the wind. I felt pretty shitty already and by the time we got back to the base I felt really shitty like I couldn’t really even pick up my ruck, you know? I mean I remember having to drag it with both hands to the end of the truck and practically drag it up the hill to the battalion aid station and basically passed out in the backroom. Ended up in the hospital with an FUO about—I think my peak was like, it was scary, like 107 or something. But I spent a few days in a hospital until they got me stabilized.

LC: Did they decide what it was or tell you?

JH: Nah. Just FUO. Who knows? God only knows. They finally busted it, you know, broke the fever, by having a couple of orderlies hold me in a cold shower. God did I feel homicidal. I was too fried to do anything except wiggle and whimper. God damn that was cold water. Oh, Lord. Broke the fever though. I caught up with my
company, I don’t know, someplace. Like I say, there’s not a real coherent narrative here.

Anyway, after I got booted out of the line infantry I got assigned to Echo Company, which was our odd lot fifth company. It was a mortar platoon and a recon platoon and I got assigned to the recon platoon, walked with them for a while.

LC: And where were they operating?

JH: The other half of the battalion AO (area of operations), wherever it was.

That’s how they’d do it. The BAT (battalion) would get an AO and they’d cut that puppy in half and they put four line companies in one half and the recon platoon in the other half. So we had a big playground. We got to wander all over the place, and I like it because—give me a minute. God damned jaw spasms. I liked it because contact is not recon’s mission and it was so different. You know, here in a line company come at us after walking with the recon it was like Jesus Christ, why don’t you just honk horns? So fucking loud. Jesus. Clanging, rattle, bang, boom.

LC: “We’re over here.”

JH: Yeah, exactly! “Hi guys!”

LC: When you were with the recon platoon how did you mix in with those guys?

JH: Nah. No more than an infantry platoon. I mean there were few guys who’d been there a long time. Some guys who—I don’t know how—had been recon straight through their tour with that platoon. But it was like a line infantry platoon. You know, you’d get an officer. He’d be there for two, three months then he’d get reassigned and move on. Very, very seldom any sense of unit cohesion even down at that level. I used the word product earlier and, you know, it was one of the great weaknesses of that Army. That there was no sense of stability that way. I suspect it was probably different for, you know, your eleven types, your eleven-bush types. I think they probably stayed in one place a lot more.

LC: And just to clarify, the eleven bush types—?

JH: Oh, infantry. You know, foot soldiers, grunts, whatever.

LC: Right. Was there much talking about things that each of you in the platoon had already experienced?

JH: Fuck no. Who wants to talk about that shit?
LC: What did you talk about?


LC: Were you getting any of those?

JH: No! Are you crazy? We’re out in the bush! Jesus Christ, you’d be lucky to see another human being that wasn’t trying to kill you. Home. You know, talk about girlfriends. Stuff like that. You don’t talk about the war. Fuck the war. We’re in the war. Who wants to talk about that?

LC: Were you getting mail at all, John?

JH: Even in the field, yeah. That was pretty good.

LC: So continuously you would get—?

JH: Pretty much. Pretty much. I mean there were times, you know. Some of the recon patrols where you don’t see anybody for a while. Or you’re moving in a small group, there’s only like five or six of you or something like that.

LC: When you’re doing that, when you’re on that kind of patrol for example, what would you guys do for water?

JH: Iodine pills or boil it if you could, you know, heat tabs. Heat tabs are nasty though.

LC: Yeah. Real nasty.

JH: Yeah. Real nasty. We used to—oh, here’s a good one for you, soldier joke—if you don’t have heat tabs and you’re carrying demo you can roll up a little ball of C-4 and burn it. But you got to get the size right because it’ll ignite all over the surface, right, and if it’s too big it’ll heat up the nugget, the center, enough that it’ll pop. It’ll go off. So you get a cherry who doesn’t have heat tabs and you go, “I’ve got a great trick for you.” And you’d heat up your coffee in the morning. And you roll him up a C4 ball that’s just a little bit too big and watch his—oh shit, what do they call them—silly canteen cups—I can’t remember what they’re called—anyway, this cup right. When the C-4 pops his cup will fly about ten, fifteen feet. It’s like a cherry bomb. Pa-poom! If you’re really mean you can make it big enough to blow a hole in his cup. (Laughs) Oh, my. Oh, the fun we had.
LC: Well, and, John, you know it’s interesting because when you came on, when
you first got there, guys were doing all this stuff. And so when you’ve got several
months behind you at this point you’d be doing the same thing?
JH: Me personally, no.
LC: Maybe not with the lethality that the first night guys did any of it.
JH: No, even though my second job, the job I picked up in the field, was
demolitions. I used to carry—when I was with the line infantry—you ever seen the
blocks that C-4 comes in?
LC: Yes.
JH: Okay, it’s just long enough that you can line the back of your rucksack, the
part that is actually up against your back.
LC: Okay. So you can get some support, if you will?
JH: Well, it’s nice and soft and squishy and conforms and makes your pack real
comfortable. So that’s what I had in my pack and then det cord and caps and all that shit.
LC: Now, you said you picked this up?
JH: Yeah. I learned it in the field. How to set charges—
LC: How?
JH: I just said I wanted to do it. Somebody had to do it. So there was another
grunt who’d learned it before me and he just showed me. Everybody helped out.
Everybody did something extra. I had a couple of guys who I trained, sort of cross
trained, as much as I could and they’d carry some extra bandages and stuff like that.
LC: So you’d be carrying C-4 blocks in your pack?
JH: Yeah. I figured I didn’t want to come home—I wanted to come home, as I
used to say, I wanted to still be able to count to twenty-one. You know what I mean? I
didn’t want to come home light something. That just really terrified me, so I figured I’d
rather join the red haze brigade.
LC: Now by “light something” you mean missing something.
JH: Yeah, like an arm or a leg maybe or my pecker. You know? So I figured if I
wasn’t carrying a weapon but, by God, shoot me and I’ll get your ass anyway. (Laughs)
LC: Your conscientious objector thing is warping even as we listen.
JH: It was political. It was not ethical. You know?
LC: And it was also formed in a different place.
JH: Oh, yeah. Oh, hell yes. That person was dead and gone by that point.
LC: Dead and gone?
JH: Well, I mean that dewy-eyed, bushy-tailed seventeen year old who was so sure that he knew how the world worked. You know what I mean? It’s I’d like grown-up quite a bit.
LC: Do you think that’s what it was, John, that was happening? You were growing up?
JH: Well, growing someplace. Sideways, maybe. I don’t know.
LC: Changing for sure.
JH: No. What was happening is I was going crazy because everybody who goes through that experience is nuts. And I mean clinically put them in a box, man. You know? Get the net. You know? It’s an insane environment and it always has been back to—what was the first war? I’m not talking about chimpanzees rumbling in the jungle. I mean war. At the level I experienced it you go crazy and that’s it, and anybody who says different is still crazy. You know? I mean you can’t go through that without getting seriously bent. I don’t believe it’s possible.
LC: John, did you see or do you remember individuals who struck you as way gone?
JH: Particularly crazy? Yeah. Oh, yeah!
LC: The first night that—you’ve described the guys from the first night and I thought to myself, “Well, wow, these guys—”
JH: They were pretty normal.
LC: They were normal relative to what else you saw? Okay. That’s really enlightening.
JH: No, they were pretty much par for the course. I mean you get all kinds of personalities. They were a little more—damn—rowdy than most, but not that far off.
LC: But did you see people who really—?
LC: And people you thought needed to not, they need to get out of there for the good of other—
JH: No. Well—
LC: Because you’re the medic, right?
JH: In the case of Fuzzy—
LC: This is a person named Fuzzy.
JH: Person named—yes. Sort of. Kind of a—Fuzzy had been there for at least
four tours nonstop. I mean they had to make him take R&Rs. And I don’t think he really
did. He’d been in-country for years, years—Chicano guy. And Fuzzy was—I liked to
have Fuzzy real close to me because he was seriously dangerous. He used to wear a
necklace of left ears, about sixteen or seventeen of them, and they were all his. You
know, it’s not like he was picking them up. Certified kills. Every one. Probably in the
dark, alone, on his own. Fuzzy did a lot of freelance work. Sit in a hole on a guard shift
with Fuzzy at night and he would—one time anyway, he turned to me and said, “Doc, I’ll
be back in a couple of minutes. Don’t raise the alarm when you hear me coming in
through the wire.” It’s pitch black. I go, “Hello? Say what?” And next thing I know
he’s gone, belly down, through the wire, heading out. Boom. About an hour, hour and a
half later, he came back. I don’t know what he was doing but I wondered where he got
those ears. He used to carry an M-16 and an AK-47 and the ammo for both all the time,
and Fuzzy was fucking crazy! Like I say, I made friends and stayed close. Because I
figured if anybody would get me out of a jam if one came up he was the guy. I sure as
hell didn’t want some choir boy six months in-country covering my ass. You know? I’ll
take Fuzzy!
LC: What did he make of you, do you think?
JH: Oh, he thought I was crazier than he was.
LC: Why?
JH: Because I didn’t have a gun. Well, duh! Most people thought I was pretty
nuts.
LC: Because of the CO thing?
JH: Yeah. But we were all nuts. It’s a fucking loony bin. I mean everybody’s
crazy, unless you’ve only been there a month or so. Definitely after your first couple of
exposures to contact, shit, you’re crazy. You just don’t know it most of the time.
LC: So it’s a bunch of people, men, who are essentially under so much stress that they’re crazy and all this stuff is warping out.

JH: Yeah. And it all seems normal because you get used to it. I mean, come on. Plastic explosives under somebody’s coffee cup? I still laugh at it. It still seems really funny to me. But I’m far enough away and have been through therapy a couple of times. You know, people just look at me sometimes when I tell them “funny” stories from the war. And I used to be really puzzled by it back in the ’70s. I’d tell funny stories from the war like the coffee cup trick and people would just look at me. It’s like, “Well don’t you get it? It’s really funny. You know, boom! And the cup goes up. It’s funny, right? Ha-ha.” And I started to get it sometime late ’80s, started to really realize that I’d been a little different for a while.

LC: Was it just you or do you think this went on all over the place?

JH: Oh, I think it’s universal. Yeah. I stand on what I said a few minutes ago. I don’t think there’s a human being who can go through that—and thank God I didn’t have a gun. I’d still be crazy if I’d been killing people. I would. I know I would. And you get guys, man they’re fronting real well. It’s like they’re just air tight, but I’m not buying it. If you’d been out there in the woods and seen the monkey show, you’re nuts. It takes a while to get right again. I like to think I’m right again. I have been for a while, I think. But when I look back early on and when I was there, no, I know enough to know a nutcase when I see one.

LC: And it sounds like it also sets up this kind of gulf between you, because you’ve been through this, and other people. Maybe we can talk about that later.

JH: When I was first back I hooked up with all my pals from high school who were in college then, had gone straight from high school to college, hung around with them. Did not hang around the veterans. Didn’t really make friends the whole time I was over there because I’m the guy who’d have to do triage or put them in a bag, you know, so I was friendly. I loved them but I didn’t like them. That was too dangerous.

LC: Too emotionally dangerous?

JH: Yeah. You bet.

LC: How long did it take you to figure that out?
JH: First firefight. That first ambush off of Tomahawk. But then I’m hanging with these college kids and they’re still in high school, basically. They’re where I was seventeen years old and think I know how the world works. And they’re even worse because they’re in college so they’ve got people like you and me—well not like you and me but you know what I mean—telling them that they know how the world works now because they’re in college. I can remember one young lady who we were chatting—this is real soon after I was back. It was probably less than three or four months after I was back. A friend’s girlfriend and she was saying, “I watch the news, I read the papers, I know what you went through.” I said, “No, you don’t. Just shut up. Shut up and sit down. You have no idea.” “But I do! I have an imagination.” “No, you don’t. Not even close. Sorry. Doesn’t work. Not this time.” And she refused. It was like, “No, no. I know what combat is like.” And I finally just went and got another beer basically and didn’t come back. It was like okay. There’s no point because you’re wrong. You’re so far from right you’re not even wrong anymore. I mean, sorry.

LC: What was she trying to do you think?

JH: I think she was trying to empathize. I think she was trying to reassure herself that she really did know how the world worked. I think she was, you know, the intentions were all good. There was nothing misguided, I think, and wrong.

LC: But you weren’t having it?

JH: No. And it’s not like I was angry at her or something. It was like, “I’m sorry you’re wrong.” You know? Two plus two is not five. You don’t get it, you never can get it, I can’t give it to you, nobody else can give it to you, if you weren’t there you don’t know it that way. You can know it, you know, the way say a historian can know it and you can imagine to yourself but that’s what you’re doing and that’s a different thing.

LC: Why do you think you didn’t try to say more to her other than you don’t know what you’re talking about like, “Let me tell you what it was like?”

JH: At first I did.

LC: Was it part of what you were already doing?

JH: I didn’t want to talk about it. I was dreaming about it all night, every night. I was drinking myself to sleep. I was waking up and smoking pot and drinking so I could function. Nah. Come on. It’s ugly and it’s stupid and it hurts. I mean come on. Who
would want to talk about that shit? Oh, man. I don’t want to meet them. I have met them, and most of them—you know, the guys who’ve been through it and want to talk about it, most of those guys do not have the highly admirable character of a guy like Fuzzy.

LC: What’s the distinction just for somebody who might not follow?

JH: They probably haven’t seen enough of it.

LC: So therefore it’s the glorious past, that kind of thing?

JH: Yeah, and they weren’t close enough to it. They didn’t catch the guy when he got shot. They didn’t have a round smack into—I was treating a guy, who had a leg wound, top of his right thigh, and he was still shooting and I had my ear pressed against his right shoulder to stabilize myself while I was applying the dressing. And he was bobbing back and forth like a metronome and as he was traversing back to the right he caught a round in his shoulder about—well, if you started at the bridge of my nose and moved left about six inches that’s where he got shot. And bear in mind we were going back and forth like a metronome. It’s a sound I’ll never forget because I had my ear right against his shoulder. They used to touch me for luck.

LC: Why was that?

JH: Because of things like what I just described. Touched me on the head, rub my shoulders, something.

LC: How’d they know, John?

JH: Because they were there with me and saw it! I mean come on! These guys are like ten feet away.

LC: And so they’re watching how close you’ve come—?

JH: Somebody else told them or—

LC: Something got started.

JH: Prima facie. I did fourteen months in the field and I’m a medic. I made company aid man not by merit. It was a process of elimination.

LC: Yeah. Everyone else was gone?

JH: Yeah. So I was senior. Didn’t take long—couple of months.

LC: So they would touch you?

JH: Yeah.
LC: Just like kind of pop you on the head—?

JH: “All right, Doc. See you later.”

LC: Assuming at least—

JH: I was a good luck charm. Also, and I’ll claim this, I was an excellent medic. I took care of my guys. I used to break into the battalion aid station at night to steal shit that no other medic had. And I used to read the books and the pamphlets and shit and I trained myself how to use not just one antibiotic. I had fifteen. I had sutures. I had iodine gauze. I had a full minor surg kit, you know? And I knew what to do. I knew how to lance a boil and pack it. I knew how to deal with extreme jungle rot and I’d fight for them. I’d get them in the rear if they needed to be there. You know? So I was a valuable commodity, and the guys knew this. Anyway, it’s a long time ago.

LC: Well, it sounds like you were then, as now, something of an overachiever.

JH: (Making sounds of a song) What is that? Staying alive! Oh, man. Yeah, I guess. I just took it seriously. I mean Jesus, that was my job. They were my guys. Shaped my character. I do the same thing, different world, but it’s my attitude towards my students.

LC: Exactly. And just off—

JH: And plus I’ve been cross-trained as a daddy now so I’m really over the top.

LC: You’re all about care giving.


LC: I’m going to turn it off now, John.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive. Today is the sixth of February 2006. I’m talking to Dr. John Hubenthal. John, we’re talking about your—

JH: [trumpet anthem]

LC: —your opportunity to go to beautiful Japan—

JH: To get out! Yeah. Exactly. Kyoto, I think it was.

LC: —and your decision not to do that because you were stupid, you said.

JH: Because I was stupid. Yeah. Absolutely. Nineteen years old and drastically stupid. Let’s see. I have to repeat myself here so I think I can do it pretty quickly.

Basically, I had been telling you that my tour could be divided into three parts. The first third was with the line infantry. The second third was with the recon platoon.

LC: Echo Company.

JH: Echo Company. Yeah. Recon platoon with the 1st of the 327th Brigade, and the third part was with what was called the CAP or CAP Program. Civil action patrols is what the acronym is. The reason I ended up doing my last third with the CAP was because I blew out my left knee in recon. And had a really drastic case of bursitis where my left knee swelled up to the size of a watermelon. And after, oh, a few days—probably less than a week—my lieutenant basically read me the riot act and told me that I was going to the hospital. That’s it. I couldn’t stay out in the bush. So he shipped me back to the 85th Medevac.

LC: Could you put any weight on it at all at this point without screaming?

JH: Well, it wasn’t a real pleasant experience but, you know, and it probably wasn’t wise. But I found a stick, a fairly hefty crutch-length stick, and used that as sort of—I was a three-legged creature. I put about half the normal weight that I would put on my leg on the stick and it was very silly, basically. Because, of course, I was carrying standard heavies so I had a rucksack on my back, and trying to go up and down hills and was basically doing more harm than good. Because, of course, I was slowing down the patrol and wouldn’t have been able to perform my duties because how the hell do you...
scramble around? I would have had to get down and crawl. Of course, you did anyway
but—

LC: Of course that wouldn’t have been a bad idea given your earlier experience
where—

JH: Stood up and walked! Yeah. I learned better than that after a while.

LC: The get down and crawl thing is—

JH: It’s really important!

LC: Right. It was less of a worry, really, than the fact that you might not actually
be with the guys when this happened because you’re a quarter of a klick back hopping
along.

JH: Crawling.

LC: Did anybody say to you, “Doc, you need to get that looked at?”

JH: Oh, the guys did. Yeah.

LC: I’ll bet they did.

JH: Yeah, yeah.

LC: Were you trying to treat yourself or were you just trying to—hoping it would
go away?

JH: I didn’t know what to do. I was really crazy. It’s almost like I just went into
complete denial or something. No! I don’t remember consciously thinking about it. I
remember it happening but it’s like—I don’t know. It’s a very funny mental state. I
mean I’ve already—I’m already on record for saying that anybody who goes through,
you know, the infantry combat experience is a nut case.

LC: Yes, you are because I look back over my notes and you are on record for
saying that.

JH: And this is more evidence, I guess. There was almost no rationality
connected with it. “No, I’m staying.” That’s it. And there was this really strong sense of
being the primary care taker, I guess would be the way to say it. Hey listen. Why don’t
you stop the machine?

LC: Okay, John. The recording is back on now. I wanted to ask you why,
truthfully why, did you take a runner away from two doctors who wanted to get you out
of Vietnam?
JH: Well, I didn’t finish telling the story. Anyway, well I’ll do it then and then I’ll answer the question. Yeah. I was shipped to the hospital where they drained my knee, which I’m still fascinated by the fact that there were no tubes and little airtight containers. They just jammed this giant needle in my knee and it had a faucet on the end and they opened it up and just let it drain. At the end of that the two attending people—actually, I’m sure that one of them was a doctor and I just assumed the other one was, too, because he acted that way. But they came back once my knee was drained and told me that they could ship me to Tokyo and then write up the papers, whatever the appropriate papers would be, to have me discharged at the end of my tour with disability. And the numbers I remember were either thirty percent or fifty percent, something like that. So not only would I get out of Vietnam but also I’d get a paycheck every month for the rest of my life for permanent disability as a result of military related injury. And my response to them, which is what your question is about, was, “Oh, no. I have to get back to the field.” Now, why did I say that? Because I was the medic and those were my guys and my raison d’être. My reason for breathing was to take care of my guys and that’s about as far as my thought process went. I’m not sure thinking is the operative verb, but that was the reason. Again, I’m not sure reasoning is the right verb here. You know, these were my guys and it didn’t even matter if I particularly liked them. There were a number of them I didn’t like. But I used to wake up every morning when I was with combat or recon units in the field and many times, for about a minute, I would hold both hands out with the fingers spread at arms length and watch them. And I used to tell myself that if my hands were shaking I’d DX myself. You know? Send myself in. Which sounds weird considering the little anecdote I just told you. But that’s how my brain worked then. That’s how my thinking—again I’m not sure if thinking is the right word—but that’s how I reacted to things. These guys were going to live and were going to make it through because of me and I was responsible for the health and well-being and survival of a platoon of guys, and for a brief period for a company of guys. And how could I not take that seriously? As it turns out, I ended up taking it irrationally in the instance of my experience with my knee. But I spent months being the man who walked between the raindrops. Somebody got out in front and got hit I went and got him. And that’s why they used to touch me for luck because I did go get them and I got them back
and I never got hit. Well, you know, little frag things. Somebody offered me a Purple
Heart once and I said, “Why the fuck would I want a mistake medal? I’m sorry. Don’t
want one of those. Thanks. I’ll pass.” It was a little frag, some kind of metal in my
back. I didn’t even know it was there. Somebody else pulled it out. But I mean the only
mark on my body is a boil scar on my left forearm and that’s it—fourteen months out in
the field the whole time. But anyway, not to blow my own horn, that’s kind of
obnoxious—

LC: Well actually it’s pretty revealing. I don’t think it’s obnoxious.

JH: Well, I do.

LC: Well, okay. Yes, you’re entitled to your opinion. What I’m getting at is
earlier you said that there really wasn’t what one might think of as unit cohesion.


LC: Yeah. That clearly wasn’t what was driving this.

JH: No. I made it a point not to make friends after about my first two months. I
didn’t get real close in terms of being pals with the soldiers I was responsible for. That
was a kind of knee-jerk response. It was nothing conscious about it. I just concluded that
if I was going to have to put these guys in a body bag I didn’t want to be emotionally
close to them, but I was in this funny way. They were mine. They were, you know, by
God, if I had anything to say about it they were going to get through it and that was my
job. Oh, I don’t know, just one of those silly grinder types. Want to do the job right.

LC: Well, and there’s also underlying this I think a sense of continuity here.

Perhaps the same, and this is me speculating, but your sense of duty is clear here and it’s
also clear in your decision to enlist.

JH: Volunteer.

LC: Volunteer.

JH: You can’t enlist as a CO.

LC: I’m sorry. Yes. To volunteer.

JH: Picky, picky, picky.

LC: And that’s completely appropriate that we get the terminology accurately
recorded. The issue of duty, though, seems to be one that is kind of underpinning—
maybe decision making isn’t exactly the right word.
JH: No, I don’t think so.

LC: Response to stimuli.

JH: It’s more like, “Woof, woof.”

LC: I don’t know. But how did you actually get back to the unit from the hospital?

JH: Oh, I didn’t. I got back to the rear and as I say I tried to get myself back but obviously by then I couldn’t put any weight on my leg at all. You know, maybe a couple of steps and just really hurting like hell. Somehow I got a hold of a crutch and you can imagine me coming in to headquarters and headquarters company on a crutch. Basically AWOL from the hospital saying, “When can I get a bird out to Echo Company?” That one didn’t go very far.

LC: Yeah, what’d they do with you?

JH: Well, they were sort of in the process of figuring out whether to take me out back and shoot me or do something else with me. I don’t know what they were thinking but I did another end-run around them. Went to—what was the office? I guess it was headquarters of headquarters company and very carefully waited until nobody who’d seen me on the crutch was around and there was a duty officer at the desk. I don’t know what his title was. I didn’t hang around there much. But left the crutch outside the door and went in and got myself hooked up for an R&R in Hong Kong real fast and split. Disappeared. Went to Hong Kong for five days. Spent all the money I had. Bought some outrageous suits in very bad taste. Shacked up with a prostitute for about three days. What else? Visited the Chungking Mansion in Kowloon, which is a really memorable joint. There’s a brass plaque. Have you ever heard of the Winchester Mansion?

LC: Vaguely.

JH: Yeah. It was built by the widow of Winchester, the gun maker, and she was nuts.

LC: Checked out.

JH: Yeah. Lots of money and she was afraid that all the ghosts of anyone killed with a Winchester were coming after her. So she built a house, and I think it’s near San Jose—it’s up in northern California someplace—and she built a house designed to fool
the ghosts so they’d get lost and couldn’t find her. So it has things like stairs that go up
to the ceiling and doors that open over three-story drops and doors that open on brick
walls and, you know, rooms that you can’t get into. Crazy stuff. And it’s huge! It
covers like an acre, I think. It’s this gigantic place.

LC: Wow. What a monument.

JH: Yeah, and she was working on it from the time that her husband died,
apparently, or shortly after until many, many years later she died and just kept adding on.
I mean it’s wonderful. It’s bizarre and just totally strange. I’m sure you can imagine.
Well, the Chungking Mansion is kind of like the Winchester Mansion. It occupies or
occupied—I don’t know, it’s probably been torn down—but it occupied like a whole city
block in Kowloon. And the entrance that I went into it had a brass plaque right by the
arch, not a doorway but like an entryway, into this thing and it was in a number of
languages. English, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Asiatic characters of some kind—
I assume Chinese—and the message was the same, I assume, and basically it said, “This
facility is off limits to all military personnel.” And you go in there and the entire
clientele is the armies of the world, and navies, and what do you want to do? You know,
it’s all in here. You want to do dope, you want to do women, you want to do sheep—all
available. I was in the Chungking Mansion because a guy that I did like—he was another
medic, black guy—and he had gone to Hong Kong for his R&R several months earlier
and they found his body loaded up with enough heroin to kill about three horses. No
signs of violence but was kind of thrown out of a car is the story I got in front of the US
Embassy. And, “Here you go, dead soldier.” And I had gotten it into my head that foul
play was involved on the basis of no evidence whatsoever but I just knew this guy. I was
sure he was not a junkie. Can’t even tell you why. He was a good medic. So I was
going to go and solve the mystery. I was going to go and be Mr. Private Eye. But picture
this: the nineteen year old who’s—just picture it. I mean it’s completely delusional and I
had been asking around in bars and somebody said, “Well, you know, you want to do
heroin go to the Chungking Mansion.” So I went into the Chungking Mansion trying to
find out who killed Dr. John, we called him. My nickname was Bones. Anyway, so—

LC: What’d you find out?
JH: That there are some really fantastically bizarre bars in the Chungking Mansion. I mean the one place—I didn’t find out anything. I had a photograph of this guy and come on! This is Kowloon! “Yeah, okay, kid. Sure. I remember this guy. Uhhuh.” For all I know my friend had pulled a John Belushi on us. Who knows?

LC: But did you continue to believe the story that he was thrown out of a car in front of the US Embassy in Hong Kong?

JH: Well, that was pretty much—this is thirty years ago and I think I got that version of events from another soldier in our rear. When I asked about him, “Where’s John? Did he come back? What’s going on?” And got that version of events and then sort of fantasized from there, I guess. I just remembered that when they asked me, “Where do you want to go for your R&R?” My first thought was Hong Kong because that’s where Dr. John had gone and that’s where he had died and I somehow cooked up this completely cockamamie idea that I’m going to go and what? I don’t know what. Find out. Deliver his killers to justice. Pretty silly, really.

LC: Were you trying to take care of him in a way?

JH: I suppose so. Yeah. I suppose so. I remember being really pissed off. It’s like, “Goddamn it.” Maybe I couldn’t accept the thought that this guy really was a junky—not a junky but did it to himself. I think that’s probably an accurate description in hindsight of what was going on in my head.

LC: Was he in the same company?

JH: No. He was in a different company. Well, okay. Medics are all assigned to headquarters and Headquarters Company. It’s like the medical—because we’re not infantry. We’re medical corpsmen. We’re in the medical corps, and so there’s like a platoon structure or a company structure. Platoon is more accurate because, of course, we’re part of Headquarters Company. Which includes, as I recall, the motor pool, all of the clerical and administrative people, things like that—anybody who was not infantry, basically. And then we would be assigned to a company. So we’re the medical platoon but our platoon leader is an O-3, not an O-2. He’s the battalion surgeon. And then we’ve got an XO who’s the medical administrator, who’s an O-2, and then a senior medic. I guess you’d call him the battalion medic. That was the guy who was named Jimmy Hendricks, by the way.
LC: Oh, okay. That’s wild.

JH: Yeah. Anyway, so I was part of Headquarters Company and I’ve already forgotten why I went through that whole explanation.

LC: I was asking whether Dr. John had been in the same—

JH: Oh, no. He was assigned to one of the other infantry companies. He was with the line and wasn’t—we met on stand down.

LC: Do you know how long he’d been in-country relative to you?

JH: Longer. Longer. He had gotten there months earlier but I don’t recall exactly.

LC: Did you feel—did you have a closeness with him that was special or did that kind of get special after he was dead?

JH: I think it pre-existed it. Used to make each other laugh and that’s always a good one.

LC: Makes a huge difference, I’m sure.

JH: Yeah. And I had gone through my adolescence in southern California and there was a friend of mine. My black friend of mine in Richmond, once said to me, “Oh, yeah. California. California is so lily even the help is white.” So black people were fascinating and one of the nicest things anybody ever said to me was—well, there wasn’t a racial problem in the field. Everybody was the same color. We were all green. But when we got back to the rear we segregated pretty much and there was very definitely a black tent. Nothing official. It was purely choice. You know, the black guys would all go and they would have the black tent. I was one of the few white guys who would hang out in the black tent.

LC: Were you invited or did you invite yourself?

JH: Oh, I just invited myself but I didn’t get thrown out or harassed out. If some redneck had tried it they probably would have told that silly peckerwood to take a hike. You know? But I would hang out, drink, play cards. And one of the nicest things that’s ever been said to me was when a black guy just out of the blue walked over. I was talking with some other people and a guy I kind of knew, one of the black guys, came over and put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You know, Doc. You’re just a bleached brother.” It made me feel good. “Well, thank you. That’s quite a compliment, actually.”
It was nice being able to circulate freely in any of the environments. Possibly part of the reason I could do that was because I did hold myself aloof and I didn’t make real strong friendships. I was acting the same way with everybody. And as I say that I kind of realize I’ve done that pretty much all of my life. Like everybody, try to make people laugh, and just frankly usually succeed but not a lot of real close blood brother, blood sister, type friendships. Maybe it stems from the military experience. Hard to say.

LC: John, you said that you didn’t ever really see race emerge as an issue in the field. Were there tensions would you say during stand downs or when you weren’t there?

JH: Oh, yeah. Oh, hell yes. All the stupidities of civilian life would get unmasked on a stand down. You relax and you revert to type and all that stupid race crap would surface. And there were at least a couple times I can remember where it got ugly and dangerous. You know? Gangs of guys sort of facing off, the possibility of violence, things like that.

LC: If you saw something like that, John, what would you do?

JH: Well, actually one time myself and one of the African-American soldiers did find ourselves in exactly that position and I can remember us standing back to back. He was talking to the black guys and I was talking to the white guys and we were both saying the same thing. Which was basically, “This is a really stupid way to fuck up a pretty good party.” I don’t recall any violence stemming from the incident so I guess it worked. I was awfully drunk at the time.

LC: A peacemaker, but a drunk peacemaker.

JH: Yeah. “Now listen guys. This is a bad idea.” (Slurring for effect)

LC: Probably the only reason you had any credibility at all.

JH: Oh, yeah. We were definitely on the same channel. I mean I could smell them and they could smell me. It was just like, “Oh, stinky, he’s okay.”

LC: He’s completely hammered. Yeah. “So let’s listen to him.”

JH: Yeah. Exactly. “He speaks our language.” (Slurring for effect)

LC: Excuse me, John, since you mentioned Dr. John and his demise and so on, I think it’s worth at least throwing out there the question of drug use that might not have been under controlled circumstances or approved.

JH: You mean smoking pot and smoking opium, snorting heroin?
LC: Yeah. More that kind of stuff. More like illegal stuff. Did morphine go
missing? Did that kind of stuff?

JH: Oh. Other medics said, “Yeah they did that.” I never did. I mean that was
for wounded men, and that sounds so noble when I say it that way. But it really was just,
“Well, no. Well, duh! This is a tool. You don’t use it that way.” But I can remember
one guy who just routinely “lost” morphine styrettes, had to get them replaced. I think I
carried—I’m trying to remember. I think I only used two morphine styrettes in the whole
time.

LC: Are you kidding?

JH: Yeah. Not me myself but on wounded.

LC: Yeah. I’m absolutely following you. Only two. Wow.

JH: Well, they didn’t ask for it. I mean they’re obviously hurt and in a great deal
of pain and I would offer and they’d say, “No, I’ll pass.”

LC: It’s fair to say this if there was. Was there some nobility behind that that
somebody might be worse off? I mean was that what the thinking was?

JH: I have no explanation for it. I really don’t. I mean I probably dealt with, oh
God, I wouldn’t even want to put a number on it—call it forty, fifty, wounded guys in the
course of my tour—and nobody wanted it. A couple of guys. Well, there was one guy I
just gave it to. He couldn’t talk he was in so much pain, but, “Want the morphine?”
“No, it’s okay, Doc.” And why? I never stopped to ask myself why and today I have no
explanation whatsoever. I can’t tell you why that worked out. I mean there were cases
where the medevac was fast and it just didn’t come up. Yeah. Only used a couple of
them, I think.

LC: That’s really quite amazing. You mention I think in—I don’t know, last time
we recorded whenever that was—that you wanted to make sure that you had enough of
everything that you might need for the guys.

JH: Oh, I was a complete amoral thief and burglar. I had jimmed a window in
the aid station so that it looked okay. But I had a way to get it open from the outside, and
I would hop in the back window at night when nobody was around and steal stuff.

LC: What would be crucial to you to make sure that you had in addition to
morphine, obviously?
JH: Mostly the antibiotics that were appropriate for the infections and, you know
the fungal sort of problems that you get when you’re on the eternal camping trip in the
jungle.

LC: In other words the things that would help guys with chronic problems?
JH: Sure. Skin rashes, trench foot, boils were an infrequent problem but when
they did happen they were bad.

LC: Miserable.
JH: Yeah. I ran into a lot of resistance trying to medevac guys with boils. So I
put together my own little kit. I had my iodochloroform gauze. I had a set of scalpels. I
had injection needles. I had five percent lidocaine solution that I could inject topically so
that I could lance the boil, remove the contents, clean the wound. And if necessary, if
there was some bad rot, once or twice I would actually do a little debridement. You
know, remove some of the tissue in the boil cavity then pack it with iodochloroform
gauze. And if I could get away with a butterfly bandage I’d do that and if I had to I’d
throw a couple of sutures on it. I had my own suturing technique. Just remember to tie a
square knot because nobody taught me. I had to learn it myself. What I would do is I
would roam through the pharmacy at the aid station and grab a bottle of this or that, get a
rough guess of what it was, and then I’d open it and take out the little sheet of paper—

LC: The patient information.
JH: Well, actually more physician information and I would read it and puzzle it
out and try to figure out what it was—

LC: Used for.
JH: Yeah. Used for. And if it looked like something I could use I’d steal it.
LC: You said you had difficulty getting medevac—
JH: Medevacing boil guys. Yeah. That was not a big problem. I was the medical
officer for whoever I was walking with and I made that pretty clear.

LC: Yeah. This is your call, really.
JH: Exactly. It’s my job. But there were times that I can remember when my
officer, the military commander—because technically it’s a separate chain of
command—basically said, “That’s not enough. He stays.” To be honest I’d medevac a
guy at the drop of a hat. It’s like, “Okay. Oh, cool. Let’s get you out of here.”
LC: Hm, that sounds suspiciously like the doctors.

JH: Well, it was, you know, mildly—I don’t know what adjective is. I almost
said treasonous but that’s a different—

LC: Yeah. I wasn’t—that wasn’t where I was going.

JH: Let’s say not exactly strike troops. Zero defects.

LC: Well, you would keep your kit together and you would keep your kit stocked.

And I think it would be pretty good if you had to be in an infantry platoon to be in the
infantry platoon where the doc was ready.

JH: The medic was a thief!

LC: Yeah. That would work for me, actually.

JH: Well, it’s funny. I was unusual in that regard. Other medics would look at
my kit on rare occasions because, of course I didn’t want to let people see what I had.
That’s big trouble. But occasionally other medics would look in my kit and they’d go,
“Holy shit! How did you get this stuff?”

LC: Would they also ask you why you had it?

JH: No. That was pretty obvious.

LC: But I mean what utility it might have. For example, this kind of drug, this
kind of antibiotic especially good for XYZ.

JH: No. Mostly the response was, “You got all kinds of crap in here that nobody
else has.”

LC: “How can I get this?” Would they be interested?

JH: Surprisingly, rarely.

LC: Really?

JH: I can’t think offhand of a single instance where another medic asked me that.

I think their response would be closer to, “That looks like trouble.” Smart people didn’t
want trouble.

LC: You’d been coloring outside the lines.

JH: Yes. Yeah. I think I already provided lots of evidence that I’m not smart.

LC: Let’s take a break there John.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m trying to keep a straight face while interviewing Dr. John Hubenthal. Today is the sixteenth of February 2006, and John we’re going to talk water buffaloes.

JH: Do you know that duck egg laid sideways can support fifty pounds of pressure?

LC: This will be very useful when someone does a search of our oral history database for duck eggs. Little known facts.

JH: And the Vietnamese word for duck, if I remember correctly, is vịt. That one just came out of the blue.

LC: Right. It’s just another random—

JH: Don’t quote me. That’s not a footnote, kids. Don’t hang on to that one.

LC: Right. Look it up.

JH: Exactly. Okay, okay, okay. I’m a member of a civic action patrol in, I believe, Phu Tu Province, which is just south and a little east of Hue. And the patrol that I was part of was living in a triangular compound, an old French compound, with, I don’t know, thirty to fifty ARVN troops. It’s a type of tent the Army puts up. There’s a half-wall of sand bags and then a GP (general purpose) large inside that. That’s where the ARVN was. We were in a GP medium just open all around closer to the wall. A road ran along one side of the triangle. And a few clicks away, not far really, because we walked there so go figure—took about an hour-and-a-half as I recall to walk there—and there happened to be an Australian unit. God knows what they were doing but—

LC: They were being American allies.

JH: Well, yeah that, too, but—

LC: But what were they doing all the way up there?

JH: What their military mission was God only knows. Anyway, I remember kilts and bagpipes. They were constantly supplied in the field with beer.

LC: That makes them popular.
JH: Oh, beating down the door. Man. I mean don’t get me wrong Bammy Ba (Vietnamese beer or Ba Mu’o’i Ba) pretty good stuff but they had, you know, like pub beer. Hot damn! And so me and the gang leader of the civic action patrol, about a six-foot twenty-something full of himself guy—I liked him, big black guy. I mean the language is—damn it what’s the word—you know when it’s the wrong language for the time. My brain’s going. Anyway, it would be the wrong American slang but his attitude was a lot like, “Y’all are my posse now.” You know? I mean that’s sort of where he was coming from. He was a hoot. He was really funny, but like so many con men he wasn’t a bully. He was a con man, even though he was huge. He could have been a bully, but he wasn’t really. He was a con man. He was a street smarty, you know? And he and I got along and he would actually tell me, “Yeah, that one worked pretty good, didn’t it?” He was a pal. He was a good guy.

LC: Where was he from?

JH: Ah, Jesus. Not the Deep South but maybe Memphis or something. I don’t know. I don’t even remember his name. I did for years and years but it’s gone now. Anyway, so he and I decided we’re going to do a little scouting around at the Australian compound. And we walked over and scouted it up real good and listened to the bagpipes. I mean there was some supposed—we had to just jigger paperwork at battalion headquarters to do this. I mean it was that silly. We had to have a reason, a request, to venture out into the landscape.

LC: Well, this is the Army.

JH: Yeah. And this is, you know, flatland damned near—I mean it’s not the mountains, okay?

LC: No, right. Yes.

JH: So we’re making our way back across the rice paddies and somebody’s buffalo had wandered loose and downwind of us. You’re legging it now. I mean we didn’t mess with the dikes because the buffalo didn’t. It was straight-line travel right through the paddies and I’m sure you can imagine he left a wake in its path. Oh lord.

LC: And those puppies can move fast huh?

JH: Yes they can for such big critters. I’ll tell you. They’re not ambiguous about their intentions.
LC: No. Yeah. That’s a load coming at you. Now, what did you do to piss him off? Just exist?

JH: Exist. Smell wrong. “God damn round eyes, big nosed bastards!” Buffalo didn’t like us, at least not south of Hue anyway.

LC: And of course you don’t have a gun. You don’t have any—

JH: No, I don’t have a gun. He only has a sidearm and we’re both drunk.

LC: Well, now that answers my question of how you could run so far with your busted out knee.

JH: Nothing so clarifies the mind as the certainty that one is to be hung in the morning. Considering the alternative it seemed like a good idea at the time.

LC: Right.

JH: And don’t ask me how. Oh, Lord.

LC: So you two legged it out of there.

JH: We got just far enough ahead of him and hit the road because we were shortcutting through the dikes. I mean this is before we met the buffalo. We looked at the map and said, “Well, I think we can go—” Words to that effect and off we go. Well, we got to the road before the buffalo, and I think the buffalo sort of ran us out of the front yard, too. But there were a few minutes where, “That water’s not so deep and it doesn’t smell bad at all. It’s real easy to run through this mud. Why I can do this all day.”

LC: You said you had more than one run in with these big guys.

JH: Yeah, the other one was with, it had to be the line infantry. Must have been because there were other guys—yeah, it was line infantry real early on and it was during monsoon, or at least bad weather anyway. We were basically—I forget which constitutional amendment it is, but it’s the one about quartering troops. We were violating that one big time. We just moved in. It was like, “Okay, you men in here.”

The local dai wei was with us. But that doesn’t mean that these were all—you get it.

LC: I do. How incommodious was this for the—?

JH: I was the only man in the house that I was in. No, I’m not going to call it a hooch, thank you.

LC: Good. Thank you. Yes.
JH: And they gave me the front parlor and that’s it. They gave me the front parlor, which was also mom and pop’s bedroom. And the whole family—a single-digit large number—piled into a family bed in the back.

LC: How long did this go on?

JH: I don’t recall it being for as much as a week. Some days. Okay. So it’s raining like hell, I’m wandering around the village just being bored because I had nothing to do, and it was one of those rice-wine situations.

LC: Those happen. Yes.

JH: And I think it was also a chess game. Same as the guy on the road to Firebase—it wasn’t Tomahawk. Tomahawk was the first one.

LC: I can go back and look.

JH: Maybe Saber. Might have been one of the Sabers—limited vocabulary in high command. “This is one is Big Gun! This one is Boom! This one over here is Big Gun!” “You already used Big Gun.” “That’s all right. It’s over here.”

LC: Well, Tomahawk, it’s all of a theme.


LC: A game of chess, a little wine.

JH: I mean I didn’t mind losing. I would have lost anyway. A little more wine, a little chess, a little wine, little wine, little chess, little wine. Yeah. Anyway, there’s a compound where they kept the buffalo in the middle of the village and there was more than one buffalo in there. I was cross-eyed by then and some of the local guys came and found me because one of the buffalo was sick and they knew that I was the medical guy.

LC: Oh, boy. Branching out.

JH: And, boy, I sure want to help. So I go into the pen and they show me and it’s a buffalo trying to give birth. Standing there with the calf about half out obviously in distress—all the other buffaloes mingling around. All the others, what, two, three? This wasn’t the Hearst Castle.

LC: Right.

JH: And in my semi-stupor I guess I’m looking at the buffalo and saying, “Okay buffalo is trying to give birth. What do I know about birth? Nothing. What do I know
about buffaloes? Nothing. What’s going on?” Of course the back of the buffalo is a
bump and it’s not symmetrical close to the buffalo’s hindquarters. And it’s not a big
bump but by golly it’s there and it’s close enough to be one end of the calf and the calf is
not moving. All right, let’s apply a little physics, and I gave it a double-fisted hammer
blow. Boom! And hit the bump as hard as I could and the calf slid out. Oh, Lord.

(Laughs)

LC: Another of your great successes.

JH: I’m just indomitable. You just get out of the way.

LC: A new career yawned before you.

JH: “Because I’m a steam roller baby.”

LC: Did you then get—

JH: Well, we went back to chess. Yeah.

LC: That’s what I would have done, too. Got anymore of that wine?

JH: Nothing crossed my mind until about ten o’clock the next morning when I
sort of put the pieces together and shook my head and went out and bought two ducks for
the local family. I think I was thinking, “Okay, I’m going to pay them off. No more
veterinary work. Don’t tell anybody.”

LC: Right. Just pay him up front. This won’t happen again.

JH: Well, also there was that sense of, “Jesus Christ! Look what’s happening
here!” I’ve just taken over half their house all to myself with the best linens. You know?
Of course I’m going to buy them a couple of ducks. But anyway, that’s my other buffalo
story.

LC: On the semi-serious side of this—

JH: Don’t sweat the small stuff, right? And it’s all small stuff.

LC: Right. What would be the impact on a village do you think of having the
troops, American troops, just appear and move in?

JH: Oh, scare the shit out of them. Scare the shit out of them! I hope that dai wei
wasn’t a complete fuckhead. I would have hoped that he would have at least given them
a half-hour’s notice, you know, but I don’t know. Nobody acted hostile. Everybody
acted not hysterically freaked out but who knows? But very reserved at first. I think
that’s probably the most accurate way to describe it.
LC: Was it creepy weird of just uncomfortable?
JH: I just decided it wasn’t going to be creepy weird or uncomfortable and I smiled a lot. I like to think that I tried to get them to swap rooms with me or something but they, you know—I know that I bought a couple of ducks for them.
LC: Were you living—?
JH: I mean dead ducks like dinner ducks.
LC: Sure. Yes, yes. For food. Yeah. Were they cooking and you were eating with them or—?
JH: Yeah. Yeah.
LC: From their food?
JH: Yeah. Yeah. I tried not to. Partly because they used a whole lot of local kimchi and also because they do things like pluck the duck, cut off the head and the feet or the legs rather. This is a plucked duck, and clean it of course. But then to prepare it for table they just start at one end of the entire bone-filled carcass with a big old cleaver and just chop that puppy up, throw it in the fry pan. So it was a little crunchy for my taste. I remember that meal. And who knows? Maybe they ruined the duck on purpose because they were insulted. You know? I don’t know.
LC: Did you get that vibe?
JH: What do you get? No, I didn’t get that vibe, but it still was surprising. No, I actually tried not to eat their food. I had rations. But we’d eat at the same time and for them to eat the only place that was big enough was the room they gave me. So we did eat in there.
LC: Was it strange that only one American would be put into each house? I mean from a security point of view—
JH: Well, I’m weird, I’m a medic, and I don’t carry a gun.
LC: Right. Well, that makes you even more vulnerable in some ways. How were the other guys set up?
JH: Ones and twos. Yeah, ones and twos. We were spread out. Usually two, I will say.
LC: And staying out of the rain primarily.
JH: Yeah. Hell, I’d grown gills by then. I once had to—you know how you hang a coat right on a hook?

LC: Yes.

JH: Better yet, you ever seen people hang chairs on a rail? On a wall? I once spent a night hung up on a tree branch that way.

LC: Why?

JH: Because we were to march in and occupy an area as our area of operations. Start of monsoon? Down on the flats again. Probably Phu Tu. We always seemed to go to Phu Tu. It’s the only name I remember. You know, a little coastal province just south of Hue. Let’s see. We’re all on deuce-and-a-halves and we rolls down one of the dike roads and as we’re rolling the water’s rising. The water’s rising and we’re rolling and rolling and it’s like Texas. That’s how it feels. When the water got all the way up to the top of the dike road and then hit the truck’s axles. The truck driver said, “I’m going home. I don’t even know where I’m driving anymore. No point ruining a truck.” So, we get out and continue on walking and the water keeps coming up—and this is a company formation, too. This is not a platoon. When the company commander found enough of a rise in the hill that he was pretty sure he could stay dry he said, “All right men. Set up a perimeter.”

LC: “Around me.” I can hear it.

JH: “Around me.” Well, every place I went around the perimeter—and that includes the full platoon, which is like fifty percent of the perimeter—the water was at least waist high and where I was supposed to be it was a little above my chest high. So I whacked off a limb on a tree with somebody’s machete and took off my belt. Slung it under my armpits and had a great big kid we called Ski. And I walked up to him with my belt around my chest like that and said, “Ski I need a hand.” He said, “Sure, Doc. What’s up?” I said, “Come here for a minute.” Then we walk over to my whacked off branch and I said, “Would you hang me up there?” “Sure Doc.” And he hung me up there and I crossed my arms and went to sleep.

LC: With the water just kind of rush—?

JH: It was just floating.

LC: Floating around your hips maybe? How high up?
JH: No, no. Imagine securing yourself about four inches above the surface of a swimming pool in that position. You just kind of float.

LC: Wow.

JH: Yeah. It was actually very comfortable.

LC: I’ll bet.

JH: My waterbed.

LC: My homemade waterbed.

JH: The water drained off quick. Who knows what was going on? Flood situation or something, I don’t know.

LC: Had you ever seen anyone do this or did you just figure—?

JH: No. It’s just the logical conclusion. I’m not laying down. Hell, I’m not laying down. I can’t find a tree big enough to climb up into and wedge myself into a fork and I wanted to go to sleep. I was tired. I mean nobody was going to pull a guard shift. Nobody was going to sleep. Everybody was just going to walk around in the water all night. Craziness.

LC: Miserable.

JH: Yeah.

LC: That was pretty smart, though.

JH: Think so? It worked. I had a bruise between my shoulder blades when I woke up but—

LC: Small price to pay.

JH: There you go. Oh, Lord.
LC: This is Laura Calkins and that over there is John Hubenthal and today is the twentieth of February 2006. John, please continue. We were talking about just when you were leaving the service. Leaving Vietnam.

JH: Honk!

LC: Leaving Vietnam. Yes. You haven’t gotten your actual horn yet.

JH: I haven’t got the horn yet but I have found out where I can get a Harpo horn. There’s a shop in downtown Boston that probably sells them. Anyway.

LC: Well, I hope you get it before next week so that you can hear anyway—

JH: Save me the effort of doing my goose imitation. Yeah. I had just gotten through saying that with regard to my education in-country in Vietnam—you had asked me if there was any sort of before-and-after effect. And as I said I didn’t have a lot of expectations or preconceptions about what war was like or what the actual experience of the Vietnam War would be like. I don’t know what to say about that. It’s sort of neither here nor there. What it meant was, to repeat myself, I was very much a tabula rasa when I went over. I knew it would be warm and expected jungle and didn’t—by the time I was actually en route, in transit, I knew what the Army was like because I’d been in for half a year, or thought I knew. I knew what Army training was like, anyway. Thought that was the Army and of course it’s not. Further complicating all of this is in my own estimation when I, for maybe a year or two, when I came back I was—I could get real poetic about this—but I was not in the best of mental health when I came back. You know, I’ve already made my case about the deleterious effects on one’s mental health of going through, particularly, jungle combat. I mean I can’t imagine what it’s like in Baghdad. But I do know what jungle combat is like and it’s not something that a sane and sensitive person would want to go through. So I don’t know what to make of my own response. I began almost immediately after being released, you know, from the service, almost immediately began trying to unlearn everything about it. Because of the PTSD element of my particular case I didn’t really want to think about what I had just been through. I did become active in the anti-war movement again, but not real vigorously active. I
participated in marches but didn’t do any of the actual organizing. Certainly was a
member of the VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War) and stayed in touch with the
local chapter in Santa Barbara where I was living. But did not hang out with other
veterans. Did not socialize. Spent as little time as I could around other veterans because
I wanted it to go away. It hurt too much. Now, I do have a couple of significant
memories about my, you know, the way people here at home responded to me. The first
one happened before I had even gotten out of uniform. Here’s how I left the service. I
was at CAP location in Phu Tu Province and the date of my DEROS (date of estimated
return from overseas) was coming up and here’s what happened. A truck came out to our
location and told me to pack up my stuff. And I got in the truck and rode back to Camp
Eagle, just south of Hue, and spent a day doing processing—you know, paperwork,
running around. Then they stuck me on a C-4 and flew me down to Tan Son Nhut. At
Tan Son Nhut I was put in a transit barracks, TDY barracks, and stayed there for a night.
And then was put on a plane that flew directly to—I mean non-stop from Tan Son
Nhut—to Ft. Lewis in Washington. When I arrived at Ft. Lewis we went through
customs, and again we were put in another TDY barracks. As I recall, they gave me a set
of dress greens. I certainly didn’t own any. You know, a pretty uniform. And I can’t
remember how the arrangements were made, whether I actually did anything or not. But
after a night at Ft. Lewis I was on a plane flying south to Los Angeles. And that’s it.
That’s the total transition time. It was like four days from Phu Tu Province to LAX (Los
Angeles International Airport.) No, “How are you doing? Are you read for this?” None
of the touchy-feely crap at all. You know, I probably still smelled like paddy water, you
know, when I got picked up. But when I was in the airport there in Washington waiting
for my flight I was pretty much a deliriously happy camper. I had my CMB (Combat
Medical Badge) on and I had my two rows of decorations. And I even, just for the hell of
it because, God damn it, I was going to wear it. Even though I had my medical brass, I
put on the blue infantry braid. So technically I was out of uniform but, God damn it, I’m
going to wear that sucker. I think I earned it, you know?

LC: Absolutely.
Anyway, I was in the lobby just at loose ends with my sort of half-full duffle bag waiting for my flight—no, no wait. I’m screwing up the story. It wasn’t in the lobby. That’s right. No. We were on the plane and—

LC: So you’re on the civilian flight down to LA?

JH: Yeah. The civilian flight down to LA and the stewardess came by. I had the window seat and there was a middle-aged kind of bad-tempered frumpy guy sitting next to me and we had just taken off. We had just gotten airborne and the seatbelt light had gone off and I was staring out the window and just mindlessly content. I was home. I’d made it. I was out. I’d survived it. And the stewardess came by and I was twenty years old and she asked me if I had just gotten back from Vietnam and I said yes and I sort of burbled—I can’t remember exactly what I said. It was like, “Yes and I’m so glad. It’s so nice to be home. God bless America.” And she didn’t even card me but she just asked me if I’d like to have a drink on the house. I said, “Oh, hell yes.” She brought me my drink and I was even happier and I turned to this middle-aged guy next to me and I said, “Yeah, boy. What a great country. I’m just so happy to be back.” His response was something like, “Well, you should be. But you drug addict cowards are the reason that we’re losing that damned war.” Try that one on for size. (Laughs) I mean this was not your, you know, lefty. This was like the pre-Cambrian version of the Swiftboaters. I guess that’s how I would try to describe it. This guy had it in his head—I guessed later, long time later—that the reason the war was going badly was because of the quality of the troops. Boy, he just didn’t have any compunction at all about just dumping that one right on my head. Needless to say there was no conversation after that. I was still young enough and inexperienced enough that I didn’t even consider saying, “May I have another seat?” Because I literally did not know you could do that on an airplane. I had just turned twenty. I’d spent two birthdays in the field, and when I went in—I mean come on, I was eighteen when I went in—I was still a baby. Well, I mean—you know what I mean.

LC: I do know what you mean. Yes.

JH: I mean civilian life I hadn’t even begun to figure out adult civilian life. I’d never experienced it. Went straight from being Mom and Dad’s kid to the war and, boom! Back out again.
LC: Just for points of reference, this is probably July or August—
JH: No, it was August.
LC: August of 1970.
JH: August twentieth. I used to know the hour. I used to know the minute.
LC: Wow.
JH: When that bus rolled through the gates at Ft. Lewis on its way to the airport, I used to know the minute. I made it a point to check.
LC: Well, I bet you did actually, and I think I probably would have done exactly the same thing.
JH: Listen, I kissed the tarmac when I got off the plane.
LC: Talk about a turning point. I mean did you really literally, John? Did you actually get down on your knees?
JH: Yes, yes. I walked off that plane, Tiger plane, and dropped my duffle and dropped to my knees and kissed the asphalt. I was so glad to be back.
LC: And your service requirement was complete at this point?
JH: Well, I still had my inactive. That ran through until like ’75. They could have called me up, but yeah, my active component was complete. Well, that’s why I stayed fourteen months instead of a year was that whole five month thing.
LC: But you were on inactive duty status until sometime in ’75?
JH: Seventy-five, I think it was. Yeah.
LC: How appropriate is that?
JH: You wouldn’t have been able to tell it from looking at me.
LC: Yeah. Freebird.
JH: Really. I’m going to get hairy real quick.
LC: Well, John, I mean that’s kind of a frightening story probably from a hacked off Nixon voter, would be my guess.
JH: Probably. That’s been my guess. Oh, and I put it out on the internet once. I wandered into some kind of bizarre ditto-head freper web site. And was reading all this stuff about dirty hippies spitting on the troops and I just couldn’t resist. I said, “Well, no dirty hippie ever spit on me and I don’t know of any documented evidence of that but,” and put up my little comment.
LC: Which drew what response? Do you remember?

JH: Well, the last time I checked was about two months ago. And I did that at least a couple of years back. And when I last checked they were still frothing about it, claiming I was a liar and I mean it’s the only thing I ever put up in that area and they were still getting little comments about it here and there. I’ve had about three letters in the Boston Globe in the last six years. And one of them was about the fungibility of fundamentalist violence and I basically was comparing people who, the guy who shot the abortion doctor to Osama Bin Laden. That was a couple of years ago, three maybe, and that one’s still—you can find it.

LC: Still hacking people off.

JH: Yeah. Exactly. They’re still coming back to it. It’s funny.

LC: Very interesting. John, let me ask about Kent State and the—

JH: Now when did that happen?

LC: It happened in May of 1970. I’m saying May just slightly—yes, because I think the invasion began, well, I’m sorry, the incursion into Cambodia—sorry, I got to be real careful—came in—

JH: Right. Like they were finally admitting it. Like they hadn’t been in the Parrot’s Beak for a year.

LC: Something like that. Yeah. I think that was the end of April and was announced here first of May or second of May, something like that. And the following weekend, of course, there were large protests in Washington and then the events at Kent State. Had you known about that? Had you heard about that while you were in-country?

JH: No, not when I was in-country. No, no. Listen, the Simon and Garfunkel album, Bridge Over Troubled Water. I didn’t know there was a song on that album called, I think, “Why Don’t You Write Me.” And the lyrics go: “Why don’t you write me? I’m out in the jungle. I’m hungry to hear you.” I didn’t know that song existed, although Armed Forces Radio played all of the rest of the album, until I got back to the States.

LC: Is that right?

JH: Yeah.

LC: Did you have your own radio while you were over there?
JH: Well, you can tune a prick-25 to Armed Forces Radio. So we would do that.

LC: And did you learn anything besides all the other songs on the Bridge album? I mean what other kinds of stuff did they play? Did they play Motown? What did they play?

JH: Oh, American pop radio. Yeah. You’d hear Hendrix and Stones and Motown. I mean it was erratic, but go watch Good Morning Vietnam.

LC: And that’s pretty representative?

JH: Well, you know the soundtrack is. Yeah. Yeah, we had music. I mean if you were in a place where music was safe. Yeah we had music.

LC: By safe you mean you could have it turned up?

JH: Well, there were places that I went where you wanted to be very quiet.

LC: Yes, exactly. Yes. That’s what I was thinking.

JH: And you didn’t want to smoke a cigarette at the wrong time because you might not know who was downwind. You know, I mean, come on. You know.

LC: Yes, yes. But when you were like on—I don’t know if you got much stand down time—

JH: I don’t recall getting a lot of stand—it was regulated, every couple of months.

When I was with the line I think I got at least two and maybe three stand downs during the time I was with the line. I had, oddly enough, more experience with the rear when I was with Echo Company because our missions were generally shorter because we’d go out and we’d go out as a platoon. They way they’d work it is that they’d take our AO, the whole battalion’s AO, and they’d cut it in half and they’d put the four line companies in one half and they’d put the recon platoon in the other half. And then after a while we’d swap. We would basically look around. (Laughs)

LC: And be darn glad if you didn’t find—

JH: Well, as I said, I think earlier I liked being in recon because contact was not our job. Our job was to avoid contact and that was cool. I mean yeah, I’ll do that! Go out and hide in the jungle? Yeah! Shoot! Or maybe don’t shoot. No, I never heard a weapon discharged the whole time I was with recon. Yeah. Not once. Not, you know, at work. Of course, when you’re in the rear you might hear training stuff but—
LC: One thing that I didn’t clarify, and it might be interesting to do so, John, is did your guys have any interactions with what generally are called booby traps? But of course had lots of different iterations. Did you ever—I don’t know—

JH: We were coming down a red ball once when I was in the line. We were coming down a red ball once lickety split. Still there?

LC: Yes, I am.

JH: Okay. Funny telephone sounds. We were coming down a red ball once and the guy in front of me in line was a cherry. He was a new guy. And you know the drill. If there’s a trip wire, basically, our drill was you’d stand as close as possible to it and point at it until the next man in line acknowledges it and that’s how you pass it up the line. Well, the cherry didn’t get it. He acknowledged his signal and just kept booking. So I come rumbling down this red ball and I hit the trip wire. Oh, Lord! It was just tight enough and I hit it fast enough that I ended up on my nose with my heavies wrapped around my head, and it was a pretty steep slope, too. I mean it was a long fall for me. Not ninety degrees. I had a bloody nose. And as I’m going down I hear this like blasting-cap size, ka-pop! Well, there was an unexploded about five-hundred-pounder and they’d rigged up something in the nose that was designed to set it off, basically act as a detonator. Well, I hit the trip wire so fast that I pulled their detonator device out of the bomb as it was going off so it didn’t work. Oh, God. Can you imagine?

LC: No wonder they touched you for luck. Oh, my God! I’m serious, John. I think I might have to come up to Massachusetts and touch you for luck, I’m serious.

God, that’s terrible and yet amazing!

JH: Oh, no! That’s wonderful!

LC: I mean—God.

JH: God, how can you say that’s terrible? What, you don’t like me?

LC: No. I like you a lot. I hate for this to have happened to you.

JH: Well, actually, I’m kind of glad—I mean consider the alternative.

LC: It could have gone one of two ways and this was the better way clearly. But how did anybody find out that it was a five hundred—I mean did you guys see it?

JH: Everybody heard the pop. Not everybody, but people real close. I mean this is an infantry platoon spread out at proper distance so we’re all like ten, fifteen feet apart
and we’re moving fast. So probably two other guys heard it, and the guy behind me saw me take a header. And I got up and here’s a fucking trip wire on my ankle and I guess went into shock! (Laughs) Anyway, dropped my load and started investigating. You don’t pull on that puppy. Once I got it off my ankle with my breath held.

LC: Yes, great care I would think. Yes. Summoning all your finesse to do so.

JH: Yes. And speed. Well, you know, one of the things that intrigued me in the military, one of the occupations that I was irrationally attracted to was EOD (explosive ordnance disposal). And I was a CO so I couldn’t do it, which made no sense to me that—

LC: Right. You’d think they put you right in the front of the line for that.

JH: Yeah. Exactly.

LC: I mean, I’m sorry but—

JH: This is disposable. This product is defective. Let’s use it here. Oh, God.

Anyway.

LC: Why did you think you might be able to do better or maybe even had a feeling—?

JH: I had no idea. I just wanted to do it.

LC: You were just off your nut, or what?


LC: That’s fair enough.

JH: I just thought, “Man, that’s the cool job. That’s the way cool job. Defusing bombs, cool!” Yeah. Off my nut. I can’t explain it. Anyway, we traced the wire back and saw—for decades I’ve been calling it a five-hundred pounder but I don’t know how big it really was. It was a big cylindrical airplane bomb.

LC: How was it situated? Where was it? Do you remember?

JH: Okay. Coming down the trail I hit the wire. It was weird. It must have been real old. I’m assuming, because there was no like active crater sign that I recall. And it was like five, ten feet, just far enough off the trail that it was effectively concealed. It was too big to roll around. And when we traced the wire back we put two and two together. Here’s the wire and here’s this gadget that has obviously gone off about, I don’t know, two feet in front of this big cylinder.
LC: Do you remember the guy behind you? Who was it? Do you remember?

JH: No. Some guy. I remember him looking at me and me looking at him and it was one of those situations where you want to be quiet but it was very hard. We both laughed about it. Let’s put it that way. In our own way. It wasn’t the way I laugh now but it was definitely cracking up. It was like, “Holy shit, look at this!”

LC: That was close.

JH: Basically. I once walked into a clearing and the guy behind me was a good troop. He was a good soldier. He was an old guy, right, probably twenty-three or something. But big round, fat guy, one of these Sydney Greenstreet types, even though he’d been in the bush. It’s like he just didn’t—I don’t think any of it was fat but he was a big round guy. Sydney Greenstreet. So I walk into a clearing and a sniper opens up and I see the, I’ve always called it popcorn. That’s not common slang I don’t think. But when a bullet hits the forest floor everything jumps. So I saw the popcorn in front of me and froze, locked up. It was like, “Holy shit! What do I do?” And there was another shot. I didn’t see where that one hit and that one got me moving and it was a clearing so I just sprinted. Run! And I ran and threw myself under a bush and there was a third shot and I have no idea where that one went. “Alaska” was his nickname. Alaska behind me—wait for it. Alaska behind me cuts loose with a three-round burst or something and the sniper falls out of the tree. I thank him of course and he said, “Yeah. I saw him after the first round.” I said, “Why didn’t you shoot him?” “Well, I was waiting for a good shot.” I said, “Thanks, Doc.” Oh, Lord.

LC: Did the guy actually drop out of the tree?

JH: Yeah, I heard him fall. I didn’t actually see him.

LC: Did anybody go over there and make sure?

JH: Yeah they did.

LC: You’d already had enough huh?

JH: Yeah. I’d seen dead people and hurt people enough. No big thrill for me. Besides, I had to wait for my pulse to return to something like normal. I sort of stood there, sat there, or something and shook for a while. Anyway—

LC: John, in that situation if that—

JH: If he’d waited for a fourth shot I wouldn’t be here.
LC: Right, yeah. Yeah. I’m glad he didn’t wait. I’m glad he just went ahead and, even if it was suboptimal just go ahead and take the shot.

JH: Well, hell, I was a good decoy. I was a prime target apparently, too, because if you look at a line infantry set of heavies you can tell who does what. You know who the gunner is, you know who the AG is, you know the radioman, and you know who the medics are just by looking at what they’re carrying. It’s pretty distinct once you get used to looking at Army infantry rucksacks, right? Okay. If you’re going to ambush infantry moving in line, you want to take a weak spot and you want to be effective. Well, I’m a medic, which means I’m about third in priorities. They want officers, they want communications, then they want the medic. But I’m a weak spot in the line because I’m unarmed. So you can bang away at me all day.

LC: How long did it take for you to get the idea that medics were a priority target?

JH: Oh, I was told probably my first, oh I don’t know, certainly my first month on the line. They even told me there were bounties. So a Viet Cong or NVA troop could pull down biggest amount for an officer, next for radio, and then me. And anybody else is just product. (Laughs)

LC: Right. They’re sort of all basically—

JH: Fungible.

LC: Yeah, and replaceable.

JH: Well, gunners—wait a minute—gunners were a big deal, too. But the problem with gunners and radiomen is that somebody else can pick it up.

LC: Pick up the equipment.

JH: Yeah. You can’t pick up the Louie’s bars

LC: Right, or the skill. You can’t pick up the skills of the medic.

JH: Yeah. Oh, I cross-trained as many people as I could.

LC: And was that SOP (standard operating procedure) or your—?

JH: That was just me. That was just me.

LC: And how many guys would want to listen to that?

JH: Not many.

LC: That’s what I was thinking.
JH: One or two maybe, in a full platoon.

LC: And did you kind of just identify who you thought those people might be?

JH: No, no. Just a conversational thing. We’d be hanging out and they’d go, “Oh, what do you do, Doc?” I’d say, “Well, come on over.” Just real casual and walk them through as much as they wanted to hear. You make sure everybody has their own functional field dressing, for example.

LC: Like a pressure dressing?

JH: Yeah exactly.

LC: Everyone would carry their—everyone would carry one of those?

JH: Everyone in my platoon did. I don’t care what the Army says.

LC: What did the Army say? Was that standard?

JH: Oh, they said the same thing. But I know that there were other platoons where the guys would go, “I don’t want this.”

LC: One less thing I have to carry.

JH: Exactly. And they’d just pitch it.

LC: What were the things that they wouldn’t pitch even though they could? I mean was it—?

JH: Well, food obviously and water and if you could get your hands on extra poncho liners, those were a hot item.

LC: Because of the rain?


LC: And what would the use of that be? I actually don’t know.

JH: That’s what you sleep in. Oh I’m sorry. A poncho—Army ponchos, when I was in the service, the poncho itself is a big rectangle of waterproof fabric. The poncho liner is like a blanket. And it was, for the day, some sort of high-tech insulator, Thinsulate-type thing. They weren’t very thick but they were pretty good. I mean they were very lightweight and surprisingly warm, even when they were wet.

LC: So like it would be the dimensions of the poncho?

JH: Yeah exactly, and then it had little ties at the corners and at midpoints so that you could basically put on a heated poncho if you wanted to. But you’re not going to sleep in a sleeping bag, for God’s sake.
LC: Well nobody’s dragging those around right?

JH: Well, also, you might have to get up fast in the night. How fast can you get out of a sleeping bag as opposed to throwing off a blanket?

LC: Right, exactly.

JH: So if you could get extras of those—I always had two or three—and they were easy to get. You just had to get to the rear.

LC: Where would you carry them and how would you carry them?

JH: Oh, in the pack. I mean everybody packs their own pack. Everybody has their own load.

LC: Their own system of where they keep their stuff.

JH: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It’s like your room. It’s where you live. I kept Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in a waterproof bag right on top inside of mine. That’s what I would read when I had the chance.

LC: What else was an absolute must have in there for you?

JH: Oh, let’s see. Damn, I haven’t thought about my pack for decades. Poncho liners, rations, canteen cup—if you could have a couple of those that’s cool—any non-standard food you might get if you were in the lowlands. You could pick up—damn it, what do they call it? Those oriental curly noodle instant—

LC: Like ramen noodles?

JH: Ramen! That’s the word. Yeah. You know, packs of ramen, any kind of condiments that you might want, and personal effects. If you’re carrying around photographs or stuff like that you don’t have them in your pocket. Oh, what else—and the hardware that goes with this. Maybe some heat tabs.

LC: And those were for—?

JH: They’re like little Sterno tabs and you could cook on them and they don’t give off any smoke. And they’re not hot enough and they stink like shit.

LC: Right. That was one of the problems with them, yeah? They stink.

JH: They stink! You better know who’s downwind when you fire one of these up because, God, there’s no mistaking those things. Just ghastly! And all your food, my food, would taste like heat tab if I had to cook on one.

LC: Mm, mm.
JH: Yeah. Yummy.

LC: But you had Walt Whitman with you.

JH: I did. Mostly for show, I think. It was a talisman or something because I don’t recall—I still have the book. Came across it the other day, and inside it’s one of those modern classics editions and inside the front cover it says something like “Property of Doc Bones Hubenthal.”

LC: Really? Wow.

JH: Yeah. Still floating around.

LC: How does it make you feel to look at it now when you came across it?

JH: Stinky old book. I looked at it and it was a moment of, “Wow, it’s still here.” Then I threw it back in the bookcase and moved on. It’s a long time ago.

LC: Yeah, it is.

JH: I wouldn’t get rid of that experience for the world and I’m inordinately proud of it and I don’t revisit it. That may sound paradoxical but that’s my mix on it, you know? I don’t like to talk about it but by the same token I have complementary Bronze Star license plates on my truck. And when people say, “How’d you get the Bronze Star?” My stock response is, “Just unlucky, I guess.” When people ask me, “Why’d you put the plates on?” I say, “Well, ever since I did that I haven’t gotten a parking ticket.” (Laughs)

LC: John Hubenthal, the mercenary.

JH: Oh, that cold-blooded veteran!

LC: Absolutely. It’s quite consonant with everything you’ve said, John.


LC: I’m bored. End of the session.

JH: Oh, touché! (Laughs)

LC: Go ahead, John.

JH: The only other person, who dumped on me very shortly after I returned in 1970, was a guy at a bakery. And they had advertised for someone to work in the bakery and I went and filled out the job application, and of course it was a stock job application. The kind you’d buy in an office supply shop, I guess. And so at the bottom there was a little space for military service, and I was really proud of it. This is a very, very hip, not to say hippie, bakery. You know, real groovy, real organic.
LC: And I’m thinking Santa Barbara area?

JH: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. And so I filled in the military stuff explicitly noting that I had served as a conscientious objector. And I handed it to the gal and she took it into the back where the business owner was to let him read it. And this guy came out and just went ballistic. I was a Nazi baby-killing—well, you can imagine.

LC: He actually used the words baby killer?

JH: Yes he did. He did call me a baby killer. That’s the one that really stuck with me. Yeah. Called me a baby killer and, “How dare you come into my shop?” And on and on and on. I stood there with my mouth literally hanging open for a while, maybe a minute, and then just walked out. I mean what are you going to do?

LC: Was he still in full flight when you walked out?

JH: Oh, yeah. I could hear his voice for several steps away from the door. And again, like robbed on both sides. It was like, “Hell, nobody wants me. So I’ll just go someplace else. I’ll just go do my own thing.” And I noticed on this point, and this is a sore point for me—this is one that has bothered me right down to the present day—the educational experience up to that point in my life had been painful and stupid for me. I don’t know if I told you, but when I was fifty I was diagnosed as not ADHD but ADD. And, you know, attention deficit disorder didn’t exist when I was a kid going through school. And so—but the bottom line was they were pretty sure I was bright but I must be a nut case and school just didn’t work. I think I’ve already told you about my high school experience. Oh, and I have to put this on record. I’m stealing this from a book I read a while back. But I love the anecdote about the teenage girl who was being counseled for her ADD. And the counselor’s going on in this very supportive and patronizing tone and finally she stops him and says, “Hey wait a minute. I don’t have an attention problem. You’re boring.” And you know, teaching in the arts, things like dyslexia, ADD, ADHD are pandemic, just so you’ll know. And I give that anecdote to all my students when they self-identify. Anyway, after the war I didn’t want to go to school. I knew about the GI Bill but school? Get real. I’m not going there. Been there, done that, don’t want to go back. That was my attitude. Had no intention of seeking any kind of formal education at all. So I had—I love this—I had unemployment benefits because somehow technically being discharged I was laid off.
LC: How did you figure that out? I don’t think I’ve ever heard that before.
JH: Yeah. I don’t know, to tell you the truth.
LC: Somebody must have clued you or something.
JH: Well, maybe I was trying to—you know those evil hippies—I was probably trying to scam the welfare state. Food stamps—
LC: I know your type.
JH: Oh, yeah, yeah. Just slimy. Put me right back under the rock.
LC: Or overpass.
JH: Or something. Yeah. Anyway, I was drawing unemployment benefits but I didn’t like it. You know? I wanted to work. I was just laying around the house. And my sister was renting a house with a friend of hers and they let me rent a back room. And they were willing to put up with my—how shall I put it—my nocturnal noises. The room was way in the back of the house so it didn’t bother them. They were able to sleep through it, I guess. So I’m running around town filling out job applications. I’d get the paper every morning and tootle around and could not get an interview. Period. And I mean this went on for half a year. Couldn’t even get an interview.
LC: And were you listing your military service on everything?
JH: Absolutely! With pride, in detail. One of the VVAW guys and I were talking at a certain point and I asked him, “Have you had any trouble finding work?” And he said, “No, man. I got a pretty good job.” He was working at one of the factories out on the west side of town. And I said, “Damn. I must smell bad or something because, man, I can’t get a job.” And he looked at me and laughed and he said, “Are you putting your military record on the apps?” And I said, “Well, yeah!” I mean, “Yeah! Right? I’m proud of that shit.” And he just laughed. He said, “You idiot. Try leaving it off.” And I did. I went to a defense contractor, Delco, out on the west side. Actually it’s in Goleta, way west of Santa Barbara. And there was an opening for a janitor or something, some bum-fuck job, night shift janitor or something. And I left my military record off the app and got an interview. First one. The only time I left off the military stuff. I mean I would do things like I would come prepared—after a while when I got into the routine of applying for a job. I not only would handwriting my military stuff I would staple a photocopy of my DD-214. Because at one point I thought, “Well, maybe they think I’m
lying about this and that’s why they’re not giving me an interview.” My thought was
that, One: I was filling in an almost two year gap in my history. You know, “What have
you been doing for the last two years buddy?” Because there was nothing else I could
put there. And, Two: I was angling for the sympathy vote. “Oh, a returning veteran who
has served his country honorably. We’ll hire him.” Right? I mean that’s how I was
thinking. Anyway, I got the interview and, things rightly or wrongly, things sort of went
“click” in my head. And so I went to the interview with all of my decorations in my
pocket. And there were these two guys from personnel waiting to sort of do the corporate
low-level interview thing. It was like, “Tug before lock, kneel, are you properly
humiliated? Maybe we’ll be nice and pay you too little to work too hard so we can abuse
you,” and you know. Anyway, well, I walked in and these guys started into that song and
dance. And I pulled out all of my decorations and a copy of my DD-214 and I threw the
paper at them, slapped all my medals down, named them all off, and then went into a
brief, but pungent, analysis of the situation, shall I say. Lots of adjectives. Lots of
military adjectives. And walked out. Uh-oh, stepped on his meat again. Didn’t get the
job, obviously. I was pissed. I was just furious. And so the world—what thirty-five
years later—has been graced with Dr. Hubenthal! At that point I think I figured I’m
going to be institutionalized eventually anyway, so I might as well pick the nicest
institution around. And enrolled in school and never looked back, basically. Well,
except for the ten years as a chimney sweep.

LC: But we’ll cover that later.
JH: Oh, why? That’s too far away.
JH: Worked out that way.
LC: This is one guy that you had treated—?
JH: Yeah. Traumatic amputation lost on his surviving arm he lost two fingers and
his left arm just below the shoulder.
LC: And you did go and see him?
JH: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely. You know, I didn’t do damage during the visit.
But basically he was taking care of me, I think, and that was it. Didn’t do any others.
Minor frag wound, yeah—serious shit like that. He was great. He was unbelievable. He
was so strong and so, “Hey, man! I’m going home!” It was like, “Fuck! Jesus.” This is
the guy who wore his wristwatch on his left arm. Had his arm taken off by an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) as he was throwing a hand grenade. So he’s prone, he’s down on the ground, and his left arm is sticking straight up and, you know, I saw it. Took an RPG right at his elbow and luckily—wait—shape charge so none of the frag or anything hit him. It all just kept going. And, you know, instantaneous shock and I get to him and get him tied off and got a dressing on his right arm. Now that I think about it, I don’t know how he lost those fingers but they were gone. You know, and got him stabilized and got an IV in him and in a safe place where I could get back to him. When I did get back to him he was just coming to and I was getting ready to give him some morphine. And there was another guy, not a wounded guy, close by. And this guy, Tommy, was saying, “Give me my arm.” His left arm was laying above him three or four feet away and he says, “Give me my arm.” And the other guy is looking at it just completely like, “What?” I mean it was like, “I beg your pardon, please?” Oh lord. Because he wanted his wristwatch. He ended up getting medevaced without his wristwatch. Nobody, not even me, “I’m sorry, sit down, shut up, I’ll buy you a new one. Don’t worry about it.” And I gave him the morphine and he basically passed out, and the story I heard from—the way the medevac worked is they flew him from in the field to whatever firebase. God knows. Big Knife! Loud Gun Firebase! Something stupid. Oh, God. And I guess they were grouping them up and putting them in a shithook (Chinook) and then flying him out to the 85th unless they had to go right away, and this guy was stable. So they unload him from the Huey and they’re getting ready to put him on the shithook and run him down to the coast. And the battalion surgeon, my battalion surgeon, comes walking down and he was a great guy but he was a complete dweeb. I mean just this geek. Let him smell the cork and he was dead drunk and just this kind of geeky, little, “Hee, hee, hee,” Poindexter guy. Right? He was a hoot. Oh, Lord. I remember I bought him—somewhere somehow I came across a book with a tape recording. It was like a nature thing with a tape recording of frog calls and just because he was such a dork, “Here, Doc. Maybe you’d like this.” And I remember wandering in to the battalion aid station one evening and he’d been drinking. Which means looking at a beer for this guy, and he had the frog sounds playing and was just out of control. Hilarious. Laughing so hard tears are coming down
his cheeks and he can’t stand up. Can hardly breathe. That was one of my fondest memories. It was like, “Oh, dear God. Where’s the movie camera when you need it?”

LC: Yeah, that’s a classic.

JH: Yeah. Well, anyway, this guy—this is the guy right? He’s like 5’6”, weighs about a hundred pounds, dorky big Coke-bottle-bottom glasses, and just this dweeby air to him. And he comes along to Tommy who’s stirring again, stretched out there on the ground waiting for the helicopter, and leans over. I mean he’s a good doctor. He leans over to check in and see how the guy’s doing and Tommy sits up like a jack in the box and says something to the effect of, “I want my fucking wristwatch.” And cold cocks him with his right hand. Knocked him on his ass!

LC: Oh, my God.

JH: And then immediately falls back again, you know, out. Oh, Lord. Oh, God.

That’s a funny story.