Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Joseph L. Pizzo and Mr. Pizzo you are in Bend, Oregon, is that correct?

Joseph Pizzo: Right, that’s correct.

RV: And I’m in Lubbock, Texas at the Special Collections Library at Texas Tech University. Sir, if you would, let’s start with some background information on yourself, where were you born and when were you born?

JP: I was born, 1948, January 1948 in Houston, Texas. And shortly thereafter we moved to Brownville, I think, maybe Crystal City, in Texas and then my dad went back into the military, he’d been in the military during World War II, he didn’t like civilian life, so he went back in the military, went to Okinawa and so from age two to five we lived in Okinawa and we had a live-in housemaid so I learned Japanese, I was very fluent when I was there. I was as fluent as a little child can. Then we went from there to France and lived on the economy in France and I spoke French fluently.

RV: How long were you in France?

JP: Three years.

RV: Three years.

JP: We were in Okinawa for three years.

RV: Okay, so basically from age five to eight in France?
JP: Right, came back to the States and lived in San Antonio until the end of 11th grade. I went to public high school in San Antonio and my dad went to Germany. He was stationed there so I went to visit him during the summer of ‘65 and I fell in love with a dependent girl and so I graduated from high school in Germany.

RV: Oh, really you ended up staying then.

JP: My landlord had been captured by the Russians, they let him go in 1956, Tiger tank driver, and so we used to talk in his living room about his experience in World War II. They said you’re coming with us; you’re going to the war. They dragged him away and he ended up being a Tiger tank driver. He wore black uniforms, the Tiger tank crewman wore black uniforms like the Schwarz SS, and the Russians ripped their soldiers out of the tank, and were shooting because they didn’t know if they were the Schwarz SS, they said, ‘No! We’re just tankers, we’re not the Schwarz SS, don’t kill us!’ So he was in prisoner of war camp until ’56. In ’66, I came back to the States.

RV: 1966?


RV: And how old were you in 1966?

JP: Eighteen.

RV: Eighteen years old. Were you influenced to enlist from your dad’s experience, him being in the military?

JP: Yes, but I knew I didn’t want to be in the Army because I saw a lower quality people and I thought they weren’t as well trained, as technically trained as the Air Force people were, so I enlisted in the Air Force, mistakenly.

RV: Where were you first, where did you go for basic training?

JP: I went to basic training at Lachlan Air Force Base in San Antonio, my hometown. And from there I went to Lowry Air Force Base, Denver, Colorado. I joined the Air Force because I wanted to go back overseas.

RV: Yes, I was going to ask you, why the Air Force or why not the Marine Corps?

JP: I didn’t want to do the Marines but I joined the Air Force and I get definitely seasick, I went across the ocean three times by rail because I get so seasick, I lost like twenty, thirty pounds every time I went across the ocean on ships, so I knew I couldn’t be
in the Navy or in the Marine Corps because I’d get too seasick on a ship. I joined the Air Force and they trained me on the only aircraft that is solely based in the continental United States which was the F-106 Delta Dart, which its sole purpose in life is to shoot down Russian bombers, that’s it’s sole purpose in life. I thought, God! I joined the Air Force to get overseas, I’m stuck here and I got stationed in Dover, Delaware and I thought I was going to be there forever.

RV: Well, let’s talk about your basic training real quick. What can you say about that, can you describe that in general?

JP: It was pretty, just rudimentary basic training. We did some PT, went to the rifle range. This was in 1966 and the M-16 had been out for quite a while at that point in time, it came out in ’61 or so and we shot the M-1 carbine, the thirty caliber M-1 carbine instead of the 556 M-16, which I thought was pretty interesting.

RV: Yes. How long were you in basic?

JP: Eight weeks.

RV: Did you feel like you received really good basic training or was it, how would you rate it?

JP: I’d say it was very good basic training.

RV: What was the most challenging aspect of it?

JP: Probably the PT and trying to learn all the acronyms for the military, the different subjects they were trying to drill into our heads.

RV: What did you see, other men experiencing really difficulties with basic training?

JP: Not at all, I don’t think there were any difficulties with basic training, really. It was just a different, just a different aspect of life. It was hard to get the routine down, to learn all the different aspects of that training and life.

RV: Tell me what kind of weapons training you had there in basic?

JP: M-1 carbine. Only thing we got to shoot. I don’t even remember doing any hand to hand or anything in Air Force basic.

RV: What was your typical day like there?

JP: We got up at Zero Dark Thirty in the morning. Went to breakfast, came back and shaved and everything, showered, whatever we had to do and went to class.
RV: What would you study in class?

JP: I don’t recall any of the classes that we had in Air Force basic.

RV: Did any of your instructors have Vietnam War experience?

JP: I believed most of our TIs did. Yes, our technical instructors.

RV: Did they talk to you about that at all?

JP: Not at all.

RV: Really, did you guys ask?

JP: I don’t recall asking. I wasn’t really that concerned about Vietnam in ’66.

RV: How much were you aware at this point of American interaction, involvement in Vietnam at this point?

JP: I think we probably saw it everyday on the TV, I just don’t remember though, that much about Vietnam at that point in time.

RV: Did you ever think that you might end up there, that you would go?

JP: I thought I probably would while I was in basic training, then when I got sent to Lowry Air Force Base.

RV: This is your advanced training?

JP: Right, my advanced training, I knew I wouldn’t go.

RV: Why?

JP: Because I was being trained to be an electronic technician or weapons control system mechanic on the F-106 fighter interceptor, which I said, like I said its whole purpose in life was to shoot down Russian bombers. The only place they were going to come was the United States. My chances of going to Vietnam were zero.

RV: What was your advanced training like?

JP: It was pretty good. We went through every, we learned basic electronics initially, then we went to the F-106 system and my job was to repair the airborne radar which would lock on to the opposing enemies bomber and I worked on the radar, the fire control computer, which is actually the whole fire control system, which is the computer, the radar, the infrared detector, which if the radar was jammed, they could lock onto the aircraft with infrared. They had two infrared missiles they could launch. The F-106 had two radar missiles, two infrared missiles and one nuclear rocket. What they could do is they could fire nuclear rocket and it went out to a certain range and just exploded, it could
take out a whole flight of Russian bombers. As soon as the pilot fired the nuclear rocket
he would put the thing in reverse basically, the other direction because the shock wave
could knock him out of the air too.

RV: Right, I can imagine. Now were you mechanically and electronically
inclined? How did you get directed into this line of work?

JP: They chose me, I don’t know.

RV: From your aptitude tests?

JP: Yes, from the AFQT, right, Armed Forces Qualification Test, they chose me
to be an electronic technician.

RV: Did you enjoy this kind of work?

JP: I enjoyed the training, and I guess I enjoyed the work. I didn’t like Delaware a
whole lot. When I got up there, it was just too many mosquitoes, too swamp like, too
cold. We were working outside constantly on aircraft, summer, winter, whatever. The
plane would be in the air for an hour and come down and take six or eight hours to repair
it. Actually, our computer had some tubes that would, that’s all the thing was.

RV: Now what kind of weapons training did you receive there; I mean you’re out
working on this aircraft?

JP: I received no weapons training at Lowry. None. We were strictly being
school trained to fix the 106.

RV: What was your typical day like?

JP: Oh, we’d get up about seven o’clock, go to breakfast, come back, shave and
everything, and march off to school as a whole flight of us, about fifty of us, march off to
school. At school we’d separate and be in our usual classes, I had I think eight people in
my class on the F-106. We were there for roughly about ten months I believe.

RV: Were you still longing to travel, get away?

JP: Yes. I said I can’t wait until this over. I can maybe go somewhere. I had no
idea where I’d be stationed; they had F-106 squadrons all across California, Delaware
and New York, Minot, North Dakota, all across basically the upper portion of the United
States.

RV: You were there from June ’67 to July ’69, is that correct?
JP: Right, that’s how it goes. I came in from leave in ’69 and they said, ‘Don’t shut your car off’ because you’re being transferred up to Lockbourne Air Force Base, Ohio. We’re putting you on the gunship program, going to Vietnam.’ I said, ‘Oh, that’s great.’

RV: How did you feel when you received that news?

JP: I felt good because at least I’m getting out of the States and get to go overseas.

RV: Now, 1969, we were completely, heavily, involved in country?

JP: Ye, we were. ‘68 was the worse year though.

RV: Yes, what did you think about going over there?

JP: Well, let me tell you I had a part-time job. A good buddy that I went through Lowry with and then got stationed in Dover with, his name was Robbie Johnigan, and he had a part-time where you could work any hours a day you wanted. You could work from three in the morning to eight in the morning, or you could work from four in the afternoon until seven or any time you wanted to work you could work because it was a twenty-four hour a day job. It was dressing the bodies that came back from Vietnam, in the mortuary. The ones who had lived east of the Mississippi came through our mortuary at Dover, Delaware.

RV: Every one of them?

JP: Every one who had lived east of the Mississippi. It was including dependents. We had a woman that came through, she died in childbirth in Germany and she and her infant child came through our mortuary. We also had a family of two, we had two couples actually that were in a Volkswagen beetle on the Autobahn and a truck fell over on them, and crushed their beetle down to four inches off the ground I guess, and they came through our mortuary too. We had a lot of civilians, well, some civilians. Any civilian who lived east of the Mississippi came through our mortuary also.

RV: Now, you got this job through your friend?

JP: Well, he just said, ‘Come on down, you can work there any time you want to.’ Well, I thought that’s a great deal, if I work a swing shift I can get off at midnight, go to work in the mortuary for four or five hours, then go home, go to bed and come back to work at three or four in the afternoon.

RV: Okay, so you got paid for this?
JP: Yes, I was paid for it. It was nothing; it was like $3.50 an hour or something.

We had from fifty to seventy-five bodies a day come through our mortuary.

RV: What was your job there?

JP: Dressing the bodies.

RV: Dress the bodies.

JP: We’d go down to the flight line and pick them up out of the hangar. There’d be a bunch of shipping caskets, these metal, silver, shipping caskets, aluminum colored shipping caskets. We’d pick them up off the flight line, put them in a truck and take them back to the mortuary and offload them and take them into the actual mortuary room and open up the shipping casket. They were in a big plastic bag, we’d put them up on the table, cut the plastic bag off them and their wrists were in gauze so they wouldn't get bruised up. They cut the gauze off of them and start putting clothes on them. We put their socks on them, their underwear, their T-shirts, then their uniform shirt, uniform jacket and uniform pants and socks.

RV: And this is all clothing supplied by the military?

JP: Yes. We had rooms full of every kind of uniform you could imagine. We had Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine everything and I saw I think nine Air Force people come through the mortuary in the time I worked there, from I guess I was there, '68 and '69.

RV: Did they arrive with uniforms on?

JP: Oh, no they arrived nude. They were nude in a plastic bag. They’d gotten embalmed in Vietnam if they came from Vietnam; the people who came from Germany were embalmed in Germany.

RV: Okay, so you were able to see some of the wounds from Vietnam?

JP: Yes, we had one guy that came through, he was running away from whatever, or he was moving the direction away from whatever got him. He had 102 holes in the back of his body from the top of his head to his heels. It was just like junk, just rocks, nails, just junk stuff they put into homemade bombs and killed him with that.

RV: Were you okay doing this kind of work, knowing?

JP: The bodies was like working on mannequins basically. I only worked in viewable; I worked in the viewable room where the people were pretty much in one piece. My friend Robbie, who got me the job, worked in non-view where there were just
arms and legs and pieces of people, I could not do that. It would have been too stressful for me. I worked, like I said these were pretty much whole people. We had one guy who was an E-4 who jumped out of a helicopter. He was, I guess, airborne person or air mobiles and he jumped up, as he went out of the helicopter it took off about one inch of his skull, sliced it off really smoothly. You can’t have any of your brain removed, without dying, it was just, like a quarter inch of the top of his skull sliced up and his head was wrapped in gauze. We put him in uniform too, shipped him off to his loved ones. We had a Marine come through, he was probably about fifty-six years old and he was a Command Sergeant Major, he had service chevrons from his wrist to his elbow and then being a Command Sergeant Major he had stripes from his elbow up to his shoulder. He had basically stripes all the way from his wrist to his shoulder. We had an E-5 that worked there with us and the guy walks in after the Marine Command Sergeant Major was dressed and he walked up to him, patted him on the chest and said ‘They got you, didn’t they Sarge.’ This guy, he was jealous of this Sergeant Major.

RV: Jealous that he was dead or jealous?
JP: Jealous that he had so many successful years in the military. That he was a Command Sergeant Major.

RV: So you had write-ups on how they got killed, or how did you know?
JP: We had a sheet that told us what happened to them.
RV: That's very interesting work.
JP: It was really fascinating, we had one guy that was shot up by his clavicle just by the collarbone, and I thought how could this guy die from being shot right there? Turned out it hit his shoulder blade in the back, his scapula and went down through his heart and lungs, ricocheted. If it had just gone through his shoulder it would have been fine, but actually ricocheted off his shoulder blade and went through his heart and killed him.

RV: And how long did you do this work?
JP: For about six months to a year I believe.
RV: And it was there in Dover where you received your orders that you would be going to Vietnam?
JP: Right.
RV: And from there you went to Lockbourne Air Force Base in?
JP: Yes, which is now Rickenbacker Air Force Base.
RV: Okay, in Ohio.
JP: In Columbus, Ohio.
RV: Right, and you were there for what kind of training?
JP: I was there to be trained on how to repair the fire control system on the C-119 K Flying boxcar gunship. This gunship had four mini-guns, four 308 caliber, or 7.62 mini-guns and two twenty millimeter cannons on it. They fired out of the left side of the aircraft. I worked on the fire-control system, which was the airborne infrared television system, the side looking radar system and the starlight scope, which were the targeting devices for those guns. The pilot had an optical site that any one of those, the starlight scope or the infrared television or the side looking radar could be inputted to his optical site to show him where the enemy was and where the good guys were.
RV: Did you enjoy working on that gunship?
JP: Yes, I did because it rarely broke; it was really an excellent system. Actually I have pictures of them firing around our Base, where it flies firing.
RV: How long did you do this training?
JP: The training I did for two months. Now, my wife is from Toronto, Canada, the wife I had at that time was from Toronto Canada.
RV: Now, is this the girl you met in Germany?
JP: No, this is one I met in Canada. My mother and my stepfather lived in Toronto, Canada, and I was stationed at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver. I went to visit them in Toronto and met a friend of theirs daughter who was Canadian, actually British subjects that live in Canada. I married her.
RV: And you were saying you went to visit her or she was with you there, she was with you in Ohio?
JP: Yes, she lived with me in Dover and then we moved to Ohio, she lived with me there and then she went to Canada before I got sent to Vietnam, and while she was in Canada she had a miscarriage and I went to visit her, be with her for awhile in Toronto. Then I went back to Lockbourne and shipped out. I was there for about two months I guess learning the system.
RV: Did you feel like you received good or adequate training for what you were going to be?

JP: Oh, yes we were completely trained.

RV: Did they tell you what you would be doing in Vietnam? I mean, you obviously would be repairing and maintaining the fire control system on the gunship.

JP: Right, they didn't tell us where we were going to be stationed, and turns out our main Base was at Phan Rang Air Base, and then we had several forward operating locations, two in Thailand, and about four in Vietnam, all over Vietnam.

RV: Okay, so you left, let’s see I believe in October ’69 for Phan Rang Air Base in Vietnam. How was that flight over for you, were you anxious or?

JP: Yes. We were. I think it was Capitol Airways, 707.

RV: Was it a civilian flight or military?

JP: It was a civilian aircraft, yes.

RV: Okay, but were you guys all in uniform?

JP: Yes.

RV: What was the mood on the plane?

JP: It was good, we landed in Alaska, a layover and there was like fourteen feet of snow outside, not that its really unusual and we got to Vietnam and it was like ninety-nine degrees and it was just all heat. It was just a real quick change from cold to heat.

RV: What were you feeling on the flight over, do you remember?

JP: I was excited about going to Vietnam. I was finally going to be able to do something, use all my training to help some other citizens of the world to combat Communism, that’s what I thought.

RV: Right. I wanted to ask you, what did you know of U.S. policy at that time, did you know exactly why America was in Vietnam and why you were being sent there?

JP: I just thought we were trying to fight Communism and to keep the Communist threat from conquering the whole world, erroneously I thought that. And we got to Vietnam and I thought, I’ll be able to help these people to start democracy in their country. I just didn’t understand.

RV: That’s not how it turned out?

JP: No.
RV: We’ll get into that later. What was your first impression when you got off the plane, of Vietnam?

JP: That it was really hot and really humid, but beautiful. We flew over the coastline, we were going about eighteen or twenty miles from the coast I guess and it was just incredibly lush, green, beautiful country.

RV: And you landed there in Phan Rang and that was your?

JP: That was where I was going to be stationed.

RV: That was your home Base?

JP: Right.

RV: And how long were you supposed to be there?

JP: A year.

RV: You had a year of duty?

JP: Yes.

RV: All right, and can you describe the living conditions there on the Base?

JP: We lived in Quonset huts, that’s what we lived in Okinawa, my family and I lived in them and so it was pretty familiar, living in that kind of a thing. All these were open bays unfortunately and the bunks about, I guess three or four feet away from each other. We had our footlockers at the end of the bunks and we had no formations or anything in Vietnam.

RV: What was your typical day like there?

JP: We’d get up about seven o’clock, go shower, shave and everything and go to breakfast and then go to our shops to find out how the aircraft were doing. Our shops were air conditioned, because they had to be because of the electronics and so it was really nice to stay in the shop as long as you could, instead of having to go outside in the ninety-nine degree, ninety-nine percent humidity weather, go out to the flight line to work on the planes. We had ground power units to hook up to the aircraft and provide the power, as if we provided, when they’re in the air, they also had air conditioning units that you hook up to keep the electronics cool.

RV: Did you have all the supplies you needed to do your work, all the equipment necessary?
JP: Actually I got my tools issued to me at Lockbourne; I took them with me to Vietnam. When I got ready to leave Vietnam I took them back to supply, they said ‘Oh, we can’t take these tools because you weren’t issued those here, you were issued those at Lockbourne, so you have to keep them, we don’t have any inventory for them, so you can have them,’ so I got to keep all my tools, which were not that many really, there were just some ratchets and screwdrivers and things.

RV: How many hours a day would you spend working on the gunships?

JP: Probably about three. Because it was a brand new system, it was Texas Instruments, I believe was the contractor that built the system. It was a brand new system that rarely broke down and we also had two tech reps that came over with us from the corporation that built the fire control system. If we had any questions about anything, we could ask them to help us out with it. The system rarely broke down because it was so new.

RV: So you didn't have a lot of repairs.

JP: I like the gunship unlike the F-106 which was built between ’56 and ’61 and it was breaking down all the time, so I had a lot of free time. I used to go to the craft shop and work on leather wallets and things and we were actually stationed with the Australian Second Bomb Squadron at Phan Rang and I saw some of the Australians at the craft shop where they were working on wallets, I said ‘Oh, this is great, how do you like Vietnam?’

Australian turned around and looked at me and said, ‘How, do you like fucking Vietnam?’ I said ‘Oh, excuse me, I didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers there bud.’ I just thought Vietnam was a beautiful place, its really too bad there’s a war going here, I’d love to be able to come over here and visit after the war.

RV: Briefly going back to the gunships, what were the most common type of repairs that you had to do on that?

JP: Probably working on the infrared television system. We had circuits that would go out, we had to replace, work on the circuitry, repair it. The radar actually was a transponder, a person on the ground had a transponder, the radar would send out a signal and it would reflect off the transponder and they would send a signal back to the aircraft. So unless the Army unit or Marine unit or Navy unit, whatever was on the ground, if they didn't have a transponder, the radar was worthless. It was truthfully, a radar that received
a signal from the ground when it was activated by a radar in the air. So it didn’t break
down very often since it wasn’t used that much. The most common targeting device we
used was the infrared television and the starlight scope; those are the two things that
mainly broke down. The starlight scope only had two things. They had a battery and
also, well three things, that battery, and oscillator and the infrared, starlight enhancing
tube. There’s nothing really to break down on that.

RV: Did the gunship have a good reputation as a weapon in combat?

JP: Oh, they loved it; everybody loved it over there. All the ground troops loved
it. As a matter of fact, when I was in Officer Candidate School in the Army one of my
classmates, I was talking to him one day, he said that he was in Vietnam at the same time
I was, and his platoon of thirty-odd guys was being tracked by a uniformed NVA
battalion of two to five hundred guys and they’d surround them at night, and they
surrounded them one night and they thought we’re going to die and they called one of our
gunships that was supposed to be in the area. And the gunship said, ‘Don’t move,’ and
they said, ‘Right. We can’t move, we’re surrounded by two to five hundred guys. We’re
not going anywhere.’ He said, you saw the whole jungle lift up in the air and come down
flat and there was nobody alive out there. The gunships made one pass firing about ten to
fifteen seconds and just leveled the whole jungle. Turned it to nothing. It was incredible.
So it was interesting someone while I was in OCS who had actually been saved by one of
my gunships. The computer on the gunship would show where the good guys were as
well as where the bad guys were. When the guns got to where the good guys were, they
would stop firing automatically, it could pass over the good guys and automatically
resume firing when they got to the other side of the good guys. It was all built into the
fire control system, which was really handy. The pilot didn’t have to, know he was going
to hit the good guys to let off the trigger; the pilot fired it from the steering wheel, the
trigger on the control yoke in the aircraft.

RV: Were there any experiences with friendly fire there with the gunships, I mean
problems with that?

JP: We had one minor problem, a gunship was flying over, I believe it was
Cambodia or Laos and a fifty-one caliber round came up from the ground which was
Laotian or Vietnam or Vietnamese or something, I’m not sure what it was. It hit the
gunship’s wing and took off seventeen and a half feet of wing. So they flew back to Base
with half a wing, they were pretty panic-stricken. I only went up in the aircraft to check
out systems at altitude, to make sure the system was working. A lot of times the system
didn’t do the same thing on the ground that it did in the air. I only went up just
occasionally to make sure that this was working when it was in the air. I wasn’t on the
aircraft during actual missions.

RV: You never were?

JP: No, never.

RV: So, you said you worked on the gunships about three hours a day, what did
you do with the rest of your time?

JP: I went to the craft shop a lot. I bought a camera. I brought a camera with me
to Vietnam and I took pictures constantly. We had two, we called the ‘hooch maids’ that
took care of our shoes and making our beds and everything in our barracks and I took
pictures of them and just everything else on the Base.

RV: What can you tell me about those ladies?

JP: Well, one of them was seventeen years old and she was a high school junior or
senior I think, and her sister was either eighteen, nineteen or twenty, was a college
student. And they had to work, they told me they had to work to make money to help
their family out because that’s what they were doing there was work. Actually, one of
my squadron members offered one of them $50 for sex; she turned him into the 1st
Sergeant. She said ‘We’re not whores, we’re here working because we have to work to
support our families.’ I thought that was really incredible. You also think that all the
Vietnamese women were just prostitutes, it’s just not so. There were people that got
thrown in their situation and made the best that they could. When I got stationed at Phu
Cat Air Base, I was transferred to one of our four operating locations which was Phu Cat
Air Base; we had three gunships I maintained there. We had eighteen gunships that went
to Vietnam with us and we lost one or two over in Vietnam, [but I was transferred to a
forward operating location, I had three gunships to maintain there.]

RV: This is at Phu Cat?

JP: Phu Cat, right. And the lady that took care of our barracks there was probably
about forty-five years old. She moved with her husband and he was in the Army and he
went out on a mission and never came back. It was just really sad to know that that’s the way it was in Vietnam. What was really unusual was that the Vietnamese Army traveled with their families wherever they went, and they’d be in camp and they’d be with their families making breakfast, lunch or dinner, whatever and they’d say ‘Okay, guys, we’re going off to combat.’ And if the guy came back, he’s back with you, he’s alive. If he didn’t come back, you knew that your husband was gone and I guess she took a job on the Base taking care of the barracks after that he died. This is just really sad. You think of different armies taking their families with them on missions, not the United States Army, we never did that sort of thing. It was a really an unusual situation, also I was out at the dump one day throwing some stuff away [at the dump], we were hauling junk out to throw away, I saw Vietnamese troops at the dump going through our garbage getting oranges that we had thrown away from the mess hall.

RV: These were ARVN troops?

JP: Yes, ARVN troops were getting food from our dump. I remember them picking up old oranges, I don’t know what else we had thrown away. We’d throw away all kinds of stuff that was still edible, naturally and they were collecting it, for their families. I’m not sure what kind of mess facilities they had for their families in their units that they had to be out there scrounging for food in our dump.

RV: Did you get to know these women that worked in your barracks?

JP: Just cursory, like I said I knew what their ages were, what they did. They were all really nice people, and I thought since I’m in Vietnam I don’t want them saying let’s get rid of this guy in Vietnamese, and me not knowing what they’re saying so I took Vietnamese from an Australian Sergeant. We had about, just twenty people in our class at Phan Rang. I wanted to learn Vietnamese if I could and he said ‘Of course you know chaps, you will be speaking Vietnamese with an Australian accent.’ He was hilarious, he was so fluent though that two guys who were Vietnamese that were in suits and were selling some kind of supplies to the exchange on Phan Rang, happened to have their backs to him, he was speaking Vietnamese to a woman in the exchange and after about five minutes they happened to turn around and said ‘Oh, my god, he’s not Vietnamese.’ They walked over and said, ‘We have to congratulate, we thought you were Vietnamese, you speak Vietnamese so fluently.’ All the proper pronunciations, everything.
RV: Were you able to learn the language?

JP: Fairly well, yes. My wife and I go to Portland and we go to a Vietnamese restaurant in Portland and I tried to speak it, as little as I can remember. I talked to a Vietnamese girl who is probably about, I think she’s about twenty-two I guess, at this restaurant in Portland and she said I have really good pronunciation, which makes me feel good that I remember how to pronounce the words.

RV: Yes, from 1969.

JP: I think it’s probably because I learned Japanese and French that I am able to pick up languages fairly well.

RV: Right. That might be true. What else did you do, you said you went to the craft shop; you took Vietnamese language courses, what else would you do?

JP: We had USO shows; we’d go to USO shows at night and see them.

RV: Did you see anybody memorable?

JP: No, nobody at all that I can think of. When I got stationed at Phu Cat there was myself and another Sergeant. We were stationed there, working on the gunships, just two of us, to maintain the three, part of it was only three aircraft and we worked so little. We worked out of a Phantom Fighter Wing electronics shop. There’s a Phantom Fighter Wing at Phu Cat of forty Phantoms, and we had no support except through their shops, so that’s where I worked out, was their shop. Our gunships were so, these systems were so new and so well made, we worked so little that I worked as a cook in Airmen’s Club at Phu Cat, so I could see all kinds of shows, Korean bands and Australian bands and everything else.

RV: Was this volunteer or were you getting paid?

JP: No, no I was being paid.

RV: Paid to be a cook, okay.

JP: A few bucks an hour, I don’t know, plus all the food I can eat, cooked shrimp, we cooked steaks, we cooked chicken.

RV: This is basically at the Officer’s Club.

JP: No, NCO Club, it was actually Enlisted Club, not the NCO Club either, Enlisted Club. I thought it was really unusual, I’d cook steaks for people and I started noticing that all the black people, all the black troops that were there, no matter if they’re
Air Force, Army, Navy, whatever they were, they all wanted their steaks well done. Whereas white guys said, ‘I want mooing still,’ at least some of the white guys would say that, but generally all the black people wanted their steaks well done. I was trying to figure out what is the deal with this, so I started taking notes about this, I thought that’s really unusual that all the black people want their steaks well done, there must be a reason for it, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Unless the reason was, I think later I figured out when they were growing up had such poor cuts of meat, you had to have it well done in order to eat it.

RV: Okay, did you ever ask?

JP: I never asked while I was there.

RV: Did you ever encounter any race issues?

JP: Yes, we had a lot of race issues. Although, my roommate was a black Sergeant at Phu Cat, we had, probably about fifteen black guys in my unit and there wasn’t any problem with them personally, but there was a lot of race problems going on in Vietnam at the time. You’d hear about Lieutenants being fragged by the black troops in the Army. I always thought we were going to have a race riot or something in Vietnam, although I didn’t personally see it. I was out wandering out the Base one day, actually off the Base, I could actually walk through the fence and get off the Base which I did on a couple of occasions.

RV: At Phu Cat?

JP: At Phu Cat, right.

RV: Was that dangerous?

JP: No, apparently not, I’m still here. I was actually on the Base one day, I was taking pictures of this forested area, a pond or a lake on the Base, attached to the Base and there were Vietnamese out there fishing. Some of them were using poles, some were using spears, so I took pictures of them, and while I was wandering around I looked up in a tree and there was a hand grenade in the yoke of a tree and I thought somebody’s booby trapped this thing. I could have [almost] stepped on the trip link that could have set this thing off. I looked; I couldn’t see anything attached to it. I thought maybe I just can’t see it from this distance so I crawl up in the tree to the hand grenade; it was a little round baseball hand grenade. I picked it up, climbed down from the tree, looked at it; it was
fine, and I thought somebody had just stored it. Some Air Force guy probably bought it
from an Army guy or was given it by an Army guy, so he can blow up his Lieutenant or
whatever, I don’t know. So I took it to the explosive ordnance disposal and they don’t
pull the pins out of them and blow them up, they actually just blow them up without
pulling the pin because they assume what’s going to happen is some Vietcong’s could
have taken the thing apart and taken the delay out of it, so you pull the pin and it blows
up right there, without the delay, so they just exploded it. That was the only thing that I
saw that I thought was probably race related.

RV: How was that race related?
JP: That somebody was trying to blow up their, maybe some black guys is going
to blow his white or black officer. That’s the only thing I could figure was going to
happen, somebody was going to blow somebody with this thing. But why did they store
it up in the tree, it just didn’t make any sense to me.

RV: Did you get along well with your roommate there, that was black?
JP: That was SSgt. Mielo, he drank quite a bit. He drank gin a lot and couldn’t
have too much friendly conversation.

RV: How much drinking was there on Base?
JP: There was quite a bit. Quite a bit, as a matter of fact I have a picture. I just
don’t do alcohol too well, so I probably had maybe ten beers while I was in Vietnam. I
went to the Australian NCO clubs at Phan Rang, I had I think I drank a Flag Ale and a
Foster’s Ale and that was about it for me, two beers, I was done in. That could be over
two different visits to the NCO Club, I’m not sure, I just don’t drink too much, never did.

RV: So your roommate drank a lot, was there a lot of other; was there abuse I
guess that you saw of alcohol?
JP: I would say he was alcoholic. I don’t remember really any other people
drinking that much.

RV: How about drugs?
JP: Well, when I got stationed at Phan Rang initially, while I was taking the
Vietnamese course, so I don’t want to be here in the barracks when we have a wave
attack and Vietcong or NVA and me be under my bed hiding, they come shoot me, so I
volunteered to be an augmentee guard. Especially to be thrown out of the perimeter with
bullets and a gun, I can defend myself and my Base. I was trained as an augmentee, we shot M-16s, M-60 machine guns and we had a thing called the M-1 74 grenade launcher which fired the forty millimeter grenade, but it had a canister that had twelve of them in it. It actually sat on the side of the grenade launcher and it looked like an old World War Two thirty caliber machine gun with pistol grip on the back of it and this big forty millimeter tube on the front of it and you set the canister and you fire one for range and just fire the other eleven, just blu-blu-blu-bu-blu-blup and just went out there and plewww, all these nice explosions, it was an incredible weapon, I never saw it after that.

RV: What did you carry out there while you were doing guard duty?

JP: M-16.

RV: M-16. Did you have a favorite weapon?

JP: I just took whatever they gave me, which was an M-16. I’d go to the arms room and they’d give me whatever they happen to have there. The one thing I did do is I had to be out a canvas bag; I would carry as many rounds as I could in it, because I didn’t want on the perimeter dead with an empty weapon. I carried five hundred rounds of ammunition in a duffle bag, sitting on the perimeter and had to shoot back at somebody, I wanted to make sure I had some good rounds with me, a lot of rounds with me. I did go to the range quite often and try to shoot just to keep in practice.

RV: You did or did not?

JP: I did.

RV: And so I’d asked you about drug use and you said you were out on the perimeter?

JP: Oh, yes well we were out in the Jeep, it was myself and two other NCOs driving around the perimeter one afternoon and there was an old French bunker there and we happened to see somebody in it. I was on the M-60 machine gun, on the pod on the back of the Jeep and the Sergeant said, ‘Come out!’ in Vietnamese and English and nobody came out. He said, ‘Charge your weapon,’ so I charged the weapon and whoever’s in there heard me charge the weapon and he came out. It was an E-4 Army guy who had snuck away from his unit and was smoking pot. So we took him back and turned him into the security police.

RV: Did you hear what happened to him?
JP: I have no idea. I thought it was no big deal myself.
RV: Did you see a lot of drug use or not?
JP: That’s the only time I remember actually seeing anybody smoking marijuana.
As for having to do with my units, it could have been going on all the time, I don’t know.
I don’t remember seeing any of it. I saw no heroin use; I saw nothing but alcohol, which
was legal. I really saw no illegal drugs, illicit drugs, except the one guy that we caught
smoking marijuana in the French bunker. I don’t know what happened to that guy,
maybe nothing, I don’t know.
RV: What else did you guys do for entertainment?
JP: I mostly went around taking pictures of everything I could on Base. Day,
night, it didn’t matter to me, I was out photographing everything.
RV: Did you really enjoy photography before you went to Vietnam?
JP: Yes I did. And while I was in Vietnam I went to Hong Kong on my R & R,
and I bought seven cameras that people gave me money for, to buy. During the ‘70s in
Hong Kong you could buy a camera for half what you could buy it for in the States, I
bought myself two cameras and some lenses. [I bought six or seven cameras for other
people that they gave me money to buy, and they told me what they wanted.] It was
incredible, the opportunity to buy photo equipment. Even in the exchange you could get
camera equipment pretty cheaply.
RV: So you took a lot of pictures.
JP: A lot of pictures, yes.
RV: And I guess, were you able to develop them there?
JP: As a matter of fact I was the manager of the photo hobby shop at Phu Cat.
That’s another part time job I had other than being a cook and also a MARS operator. I
developed film for people and developed film for myself and printed stuff for myself too
at the lab. I did color slides, ecta chrome slides. We had that availability there and I did
black and white prints and negatives.
RV: It’s interesting; you had a lot of free time.
JP: A lot of free time, like I said our planes were pretty much working all the
time, they didn’t break down very much. If they ever did break down, I went out there
and fixed them but normally we didn't have to do anything to them because they came
back working, unlike the F-106 which came back broken every time. It seems like a ten-
month vacation to me other than when we would get attacked.

RV: It was like a ten-month vacation?
JP: Other than when we were getting attacked, yes.
RV: Tell me about those attacks what happened?
JP: Most of us were resting, one week after we got to Vietnam; we had no planes
to do work on so we had a lot of free time then. We were sleeping in till nine or ten in the
morning, our whole unit and about eight-thirty in the morning, there’s this horrendous
boom and sent shrapnel all through our barracks. Our barracks had sand bags up to about
four feet on the outside of the barracks and from then on there was nothing but the tin
roof of the Quonset hut. We had wooden shudders that pulled down over the windows
when we had sandstorms. They’d be folded up at ninety degrees to the angle of the
windows. Well a friend of mine was across from me, was sleeping with his face up, about
eight-thirty in the morning. I was sleeping too and there was this big boom and a piece of
shrapnel came through the building, it went directly through his shutter and sprayed him
with sawdust basically on his face. He had a cut over his eye; he got a Purple Heart for
that.

RV: Okay, and this was a VC rocket attack?
JP: Right, about one twenty millimeter rocket I believe.
RV: And just one round was fired?
JP: I don’t remember, I think there was just one round fired that day.
RV: Was this a common experience?
JP: Not that common. We did have one that hit, maybe they fired several rockets,
they may have had multiple launcher tubes up there on the hill somewhere, I’m not really
sure but we did get a rocket hit at the entrance of the Officer’s Club and I just can’t
remember if it was the same day or not. It’s in my diary, I just don’t remember now. I
think they hit us with multiple rockets that day. I know they did it Phu Cat one day.
RV: What, you had a rocket attack in Phu Cat?
JP: Right, and I was actually sitting in the aircraft with a Phantom fire control
mechanic tech who did the same thing on the Phantoms I did on the AC-119, I worked on
the Phantoms, just out of a sheer boredom, because our planes were working all the time,
just to find out what their system was like and he said I want to learn something about
your system. Also our equipment was pretty large, and we needed help to carry it into
the unit to our building to get it repaired, so I used Phantom techs to come out and help
me on my gunship and we were sitting in an aircraft about 6:30 one morning, and inside
the cockpit of the 119. If you’re looking at the fire control system you’re facing
backwards. We were facing back away from the windshield, you’re still in the cockpit,
but you’re facing backwards. We’re sitting there side by side, looking at the infrared
television system. ‘Let me show you how it works.’ How you scan around the flight line
and everything. And we’re sitting here facing backwards and we had headsets because
we have a big ground power unit that’s running real loudly outside so you have to have
headsets on to be able to hear each other. We heard this big booom! What was that? We
spun around; looked out the nose of the aircraft, saw this big fireball out in front of the
aircraft. I went ‘Oh my God!’ We’re being attacked, and he threw his headset off. I
tried to unplug mine so I was a little slower than he was. He went down and he was out of
the aircraft in like a snap and I unplugged mine and wore my headsets out and jumped
out of the aircraft. And found out that morning they hit us with like seven rockets, so
they used multiple launcher someplace, hit probably a hundred yards out in front of our
aircraft, which was too close for me. It was actually a loss to the aircraft, if they hit oh
darn just a little bit, where our aircraft was. Aircraft were in revetments, they had I guess
twelve, fifteen foot walls, three feet thick with dirt in them to keep, one plane from
blowing up and blowing up the next plane to it, so the blast wouldn’t go through the
revetment wall. We were pretty well protected unless they actually hit us. The Phantoms
were in a thing called ‘Wonderhuts,’ they were concrete huts they backed the Phantoms
into, so if you had one rocket hit in the front of one Phantom, it might blow up that
Phantom. Actually if it hit the roof, it wouldn’t go through the roof of the Wonderhut.

RV: Did they send out teams after the rocket attack was over, did they send out
teams to kind of find these people?

JP: We were stationed there with the, I think it was the Whitehorse Division
Koreans, I’m not really sure now, which, its in my book, which unit it was that was there,
the Koreans, probably went out to look for them, I really don’t know.

RV: What did you think of the. . . I’m sorry, go ahead.
JP: What did I think of what?
RV: What did you think of the Koreans?
JP: They were excellently trained people. We had a Korean that lived probably eight hundred yards away from me. He lived in a bunker underground and he, this guy approached me one day when I was, I don’t know who he was. He approached me when I was by the PX and asked me if I would buy him a radio from the PX. He gave me money, I went into the PX, bought him a radio, gave it to him, he said well come on back, I’ll show you where I live. So I went back to his bunker underground and he was showing me how he lived. They were slit to be able to shoot, firing ports to be able to fire out at the enemy. They lived a real rugged life in Vietnam, and while I was talking to him, a Master Sergeant came in and he said ‘Oh, Sergeant Pizzo,’ he came to attention and saluted the guy. He said, ‘I want to present to you my Master,’ instead of Master Sergeant he said Master and the way he treated the guy I think it was his Master actually. It was really a different experience compared to the Australians and the Americans. The way both the Vietnamese and the Koreans were treated by their superiors and the way they treated their subordinates too. Yes, we actually had a Korean wounded at 105 Howitzer position in bad rain and they hauled him to the hospital, he got hit in the arm by a piece of shrapnel and his Sergeant was beating him for being stupid and getting wounded en route to the hospital. That was pretty oppressed.
RV: That’s pretty tough.
JP: I’m glad it’s not that Army I’m in. Good grief.
RV: What did you think of the Australian troops?
JP: They were great and they had a lot better gear than we had too. They sent a patrol out at Phan Rang to do some reconnoitering and they were coming back, they walked through our perimeter. Any time, day or night, if you thought there was suspected enemy coming through the perimeter, you could fire a forty-millimeter grenade, high explosive grenade out, and people did it all the time from the towers that were around the Base. This Australian stepped on one of those grenades that didn’t go off when it hit the ground, and by him stepping on it he set it off with his foot. It took off two toes. Two toes, not his whole foot up to his ankle. If he’d been wearing our boots he would have, been taken his leg off, at least up to the ankle, maybe up to the knee, I don’t
know. It took off two toes because he was wearing Australian combat boots with a steel 
shank down the insole of the boot, [it only took off two toes instead of his whole foot]. 
That’s their material compared to ours and they had Canberra bombers on our Base, 
which was the equivalents of the American B-57. It held four 750-pound bombs in the 
centerline inside the aircraft. I went out and looked at those one day with an Australian, 
and they can carry two 750-pound bombs I think on each wing. I know they had them at 
the wing tips. They may have been carrying in border wings as well, so they could carry 
at least six 750-pound bombs on board that aircraft. The bombardier was also the 
navigator. He sat behind the pilot when they were flying. They were getting ready to go 
on a bomber mission, bombing, actually going into the bombing site, he would walk 
around the pilot, lay on his stomach in front of the pilot, and he had a glass bubble he 
looked out of and he also had these bombing sites equipment right here to do the 
bombing. I thought it was really interesting that the bombardier actually got up and 
walked around the pilot and the navigator then became the bombardier and laid down in 
front of the pilot to drop the bombs. It was just a completely different way of working 
things. The Australians were just incredibly great people, I really enjoyed working with 
them and being on Base with them. I said we were with the Koreans, I think it was the 
Whitehorse Division or the Tiger Division at Phu Cat that we were with. I only had the 
one experience with the one Korean Sergeant and his Master Sergeant. It was a new 
experience.

RV: What did you think of the ARVN?

JP: I thought they were probably good too; they just didn’t care about fighting the 
war.

RV: Why not, do you think?

JP: I don’t think they believed in what they were doing. I think they did it 
because they were told to do it and I’m sure that like my German landlord they were 
snatched from their villages and you’re going to be in the Army now. They didn't have 
any real desire to fight against the Vietcong or the NVA. I’m not even sure when we were 
there, who was NVA and who was Vietcong and who was who on our Base, we had no 
idea. I know at Tan Son Nhut while we were there, the head barber, turned out he was
Vietcong, and he went and raked the hospital ward with a couple other guys ones day
with machine guns, machine gunning patients.

RV: Did you ever see any of the enemy?
JP: Not to my knowledge. But I got thrown out on the perimeter, we were
expecting wave attacks one night, and they woke me up and put me out on the perimeter
about eight o’clock at night one night, this is at Phan Rang. I had my little duffle with
500 rounds and my M-16, I think I got four clips, twenty round magazines instead of
forty round magazines like the NVA have in their AK-47s. Those things were gone
instantaneously, you pulled the trigger and they were gone, [all twenty rounds were
gone]. You’ve got to reload. So I had three magazines that I kept loaded and I had one
in the M-1 6 and I had two taped reversed so I could pull that one out and reverse the
other two and stick one at a time of those in, and I had loose magazines also in my bag.
But we got thrown out on perimeter one night. They took us out on the school bus,
dropped us off at the perimeter, we sat out there for about half an hour, they said, ‘Okay,
nothing’s going to happen.’ So they took us back in, took our weapons away from us and
re-stored them in the arms rooms. I went back to the bed, about two hours later, they
woke me back up, went back out, school bus, got my gun and everything, went back to
the perimeter and set up and nothing happened again. So they took us back to the
barracks, went back, turned the weapons back in, went back to the bed. The third time
they woke me up I staggered out of the building, and we had fifty five gallon drums that
were cut in half to use as barbecue pits, I ran into one with my shins as I was going
outside the barracks and it hurt so bad I saw stars, I actually saw stars. It hurt so bad I
just thought screw this, if we get wave attack I don’t care any more. I hustled back to
bed. Nothing happened, it was incredible and nobody came and got me. It was really
weird I thought. You’d think somebody would say ‘All right, where’s Pizzo, he should
be out here with us?’

RV: You just blew the off the deal?
JP: The attack, if there was one.
RV: And no one said okay?
JP: No one said anything; it was really unusual I thought. When I was in the
Army if one of my troops was missing from a detail I’d go look for him or send my NCO
or somebody to go look for him. It was really weird. Nobody even noticed I was gone.

Put everybody on the bus, we’re going out to the perimeter, nothing happened.

RV: What did you think of the leadership in Vietnam, beginning with your
immediate superiors and then overall?

JP: I didn’t even know I had an officer in charge of me any time in Vietnam.

Unless I screwed up somehow and then I’m not sure I don’t recall who it was that was in
charge of me. I assume the NCOs were in charge of me, but I don’t remember any
leadership or lack of leadership. We all kind of did our jobs and nobody told me about
anything I can remember. I would say that Westmoreland was there in Vietnam at the
same time I was and I thought we had good leadership at that time. Then when I went
through Officer Candidate School in the Army, Westmoreland's driver was a black guy,
he said ‘I want to go to Officer Candidate School’ and Westmoreland said ‘No problem,’
sent him off the Officer Candidate School. He graduated, so Westmoreland came to
Officer Candidate School and commissioned us. I got commissioned by a four-star
General; I thought that was pretty neat. I happened to see Westmoreland in 1984 or ’85 at
the dedication of the statue of the Vietnam Vet’s War Memorial, I was stationed in
Washington DC and he came to the dedication and he looked haggard and old. It was
really bad seeing him looking like that, compared to they way he looked when he
commissioned me back in ’73. I felt really bad for him; he was just hounded by the press
and everybody else for his conduct of the Vietnam War, although we weren’t allowed to
do anything in Vietnam without seeking civil authority approval.

RV: What do you mean by that?

JP: You had to call the local village chief if you wanted to fire cannons in the
proximity of the village. If you wanted to drop bombs from the airplanes you had to call
the local village chief and say I’m going to drop some bombs there, is that okay. Do you
have any people out in the rice fields or anything, get them in. We couldn’t conduct a
war, I had talked to people who actually would take hills and lose five or six guys taking
a hill, the next day they’d move off the hill and three days later they’d re-take the hill and
they’d lose some guys and then they’d retake the hill again and then move off of it again.
It’s worthless. My German landlord in ’65 said ‘If it was the German Army over there,
what we’d do is we’d take a whole area, move everybody out of the area, anybody's that
left is the enemy, you just kill them.’ We didn’t do that, we kind of wandered in there
took over a spot for a while and then we left it and then we’d take it over again and leave
it. This kind of a war was just despicable as far as I’m concerned.

RV: Did you have a lot of conversations with the infantry or people in the field
while you were there?

JP: Only on a couple occasions and they weren’t very happy about what they were
doing. Now it turns out the guy I’ve known since third grade, was my best friend, is up in
Vietnam in the Army, he got drafted and he ended up in Vietnam, on the border of North
and South Vietnam, a place called Dong Ha West and I’d call him periodically while he
was in Vietnam, talk to him on the phone and while I was talking to him one day and he
said ‘Oh, we’re getting a rocket attack’ and a rocket hit the top of his bunker and knocked
all the lights out. He says, ‘I’ve got to go, I can’t see anything, talk to you later.’ He was
horribly affected by the war and he said, ‘I’ll come down to Da Nang and you fly up to
Da Nang and we’ll spend a weekend together.’ We did that; it was a really great thing. I
used to have a photograph of us, I think I set the camera on the tail of a small airplane,
put the timer on and we put our arms around each other and we’re standing there smiling.
It was a self-portrait of us in Vietnam. It was really weird to have him in Vietnam the
same time I was there. He was horribly affected by the war. He still has nightmares and
we’ve corresponded all the time after Vietnam, although now he doesn’t want to talk to
me any more.

RV: He just doesn’t want to talk to you any more?

JP: No, I called to talk to him one time, his wife said, ‘I can’t get him in the
house,’ this is a new wife. [He went to Hawaii on his R & R, when he got to Hawaii] I
grew up with him and his wife. We went to grade school and high school together. When
they got married, they were just perfect, they raced cars together, he had a Chevy Two
that had a 396 engine in it, four speed, he’d take it up to drag strip and race all the time.
They did everything together, went deer hunting together, did absolutely everything
together. He was in Vietnam, she was having an affair. When he got to Hawaii on his R
& R, she told him she wanted a divorce, so he was crushed by that. His life was totally
different after that.

RV: Why do you think he doesn’t want to talk to you now, because of?
JP: I just don’t have any idea. We stayed with him several times. I was at his first
and second wedding. This was the second wedding, and I knew both his wives for a long
time, and I’ve known him forever too and he doesn’t want to talk to me anymore. His
wife said, ‘I can’t get him to come in and talk to you.’ That was the last time I tried to
call. So I send him Christmas cards, letters all the time. I quit, totally quit, because I
figured he doesn’t want to talk to me again.

RV: Do you think its Vietnam related?

JP: I don’t know, but I know he still has nightmares, and he’ll get up and swing at
the dresser drawers or whatever, it’s PTSD I’m sure.

RV: Have you had anything like that after your time?

JP: Nothing at all. Although when I was at Dover the siren on top of our hangar
that would go off at noon, and there was guy who just came back from Vietnam, a tech
Sergeant, he was walking toward us, we were going to chow, we were walking toward
him and the siren went off, he hit the ground. It’s like Wow! He must have just come
back from Vietnam. We thought that was hilarious. I want to say when I came back
from Vietnam every time I heard a thump I was on the ground for probably a year or so.
Any time I heard a siren I was on the ground too. It’s just like Pavlov’s dog training.

RV: Right, except its not food you’re getting.

JP: No, you’re not getting food, you’re getting not shot is what you’re getting.

RV: What kind of access did you have to churches and religion and things like
that?

JP: We had a church there and I went to, I guess you’d call it Christmas Mass. I
was raised Methodist, but I did live at the Catholic Military Academy for a whole
semester, went to church five times a day, but I’m not extremely religious. I do go to
Catholic mass on Christmas Eve because it was the thing to do. We had churches
available, we had pastors available. I didn’t go to church any other time in Vietnam; I do
have pictures of the church, for Christmas it was all decorated up. It was really weird, our
whole Base was just so lit up, it was like here we are in these floodlights everywhere.

RV: You mean in general every night lit up?

JP: Every night lit up, yes. During Christmas it was really lit up. I used to go to
the movies all the time and I got to see the movie MASH while I was in Vietnam which
was about Vietnam basically, not Korea. It was really strange to see the movie while I
was in Vietnam. It was really strange, you never knew who was going to blow you away.
The Vietnamese that could be working with you fifteen hours a day could turn out to be
Vietcong, man or woman or child, you just didn’t know.
RV: Did you have those thoughts daily?
JP: Oh, sure I always wondered if our two hooch maids were VC or something. I
thought well they can’t possibly be because they’re too nice. Well they could have been,
who knows. I do worry about what happened to them after the war was over, because
they had worked for us, both the lady who was at Phu Cat and the two girls that worked
for us and the Base in Phan Rang, I wonder if they were taken off to some prisoner of war
camp as punishment for working for Americans. I just don’t have a clue, I really worry
about what happened to those poor people, all three of them.
RV: What was the bravest action that you witnessed in Vietnam while you were
there?
JP: That’s not a good question; I don’t remember anything about any kind of
brave action at all. I just don’t recall anything about any kind of brave action that
happened. It’s like living in the States except you get rocketed and mortared
occasionally.
RV: Do you have a really memorable experience that will always stay with you?
JP: I was walking back from the photo hobby shop because I was the manager of
the photo hobby shop at Phu Cat. One night after I closed the hobby shop down and I
was walking, this is really not memorable at all, but I was walking back to the barracks,
there’s a 155, not 105, but 155 Howitzer someplace close by and it went off and I thought
I was dead. They fired the cannon and I was fairly close to where they fired it from, I saw
the flash; I thought somebody blew me up. That was about the most memorable
experience I had there. I hit the ground and I thought somebody blew me up; they
dropped a bomb or a rocket on me. It was just the cannon firing; I was just in close
proximity to it. That’s the only thing, although we did have a thing called Arc Light, do
you know what Arc Light is?
RV: Yes.
JP: We had an Arc Light, probably twenty miles from our location and I was on the top bunk on the second floor of my barracks and they had sandbags only on the first floor, I don’t think they had any protection up on the second floor at all, so it’s not protected at all if we got rockets anywhere near the barracks. But this Arc Light happened and I was sleeping, it was like seven or seven-thirty in the morning. It actually shook me out of bed.

RV: You fell off the bunk?

JP: I fell off the bunk, yes. It actually rattled me off the bed. I thought what is going on, what is that? I didn’t know what it was. I thought we were being attacked or something, I had no idea what was going on. That was my memorable experience.

RV: Who told you it was a B-52 bombing?

JP: I don’t recall, somebody explained to me what happened. I said, ‘What is that? What’s going on?’ They said ‘It’s a B-52 Arc Light mission going over.’ I don’t know whether they were dropping the bombs at Phu Cat, I don’t know what was close around there. We had to go pick up a Lieutenant one day in Qui Nhon. We couldn’t really go off the Base very much. I went to Phan Rang to the beach once or twice. We had an armored car in front of our big tractor-trailer hauled plywood covered trailer. We had an armored car in front of us, an armored car behind us but we were in plywood, big plywood box basically, while I was going to the beach, I said ‘Well, if we get hit by the Vietcong we’re in trouble, because this wood isn’t really going to protect us.’ I think it would be splinters and the bullets coming through it and we were going to get shot inside. The guys in the armored car were probably okay. But we got to the beach and I thought it was really beautiful at the beach, just incredible. There was an older NCO next to me at the beach and he had a Vietnamese girlfriend and her little Vietnamese daughter. He took the Vietnamese daughter and was playing with her in the water, so I was speaking to the Vietnamese woman in Vietnamese. She offered me what looked like an enchilada and I thought, well what does this have in it? She told me what it was in Vietnamese which was donkey or jackass and I thought you know, I haven’t had my gamma globulin shot yet. I’m not going to test the waters and eat that but thanked her for offering it to me. I talked to her for a while and it was really interesting talking to her. I wrote a letter to my wife when I got back to barracks. I said went to the beach today and a woman
offered me a piece of ass at the beach. But she did offer me this jackass, this thing; I thought it was kind of funny. It was real memorable going to the beach and seeing the Vietnamese women coming down to the beach to be with the guys. There are also some young women that came down with single guys at the beach too. They were probably about, twenty, twenty-five years old, the women that I saw there.

RV: Were they just like your escorts for the day?

JP: I don’t know? Not my escort, nobody was there with me. I don’t think these women had made plans, they were not prostitutes. I did actually when I was at Phan Rang, a Vietnamese woman said that I was dep lum, and I thought that was real nice. That means that I am very handsome, very pretty, and I said so was she. So she said ‘Would you like to go to the beach?’ I said, ‘Sure. I’d like to go and so we made a kind of a date to go to the beach but I couldn’t go at that time. So I don’t know if she went to the beach or not, but I never saw her again that I remember. I’m not sure who she was, I don’t know if she was one of our maids or what.

RV: Did you have any exposure to Agent Orange or see any of this defoliant?

JP: I used to see the Ranch Hands, that’s what we called the C-123s that dropped the Agent Orange; I used to see them fly over all the time. I don’t recall being sprayed anywhere. When I came back to the States I was an assistant manager of a Red Cross in Colorado Springs, Red Cross shelter. This was in ’85 or ’86, I guess, I’m not sure, ’87. One of the guys that was there was a black guy who had all these, basically beige spots all over his body and he said he used to load Agent Orange into the aircraft. We have a friend here in town who’s a realtor, her husband flew the C-123 Ranch Hands with Agent Orange dropping it in Vietnam and he died from horrible cancer and there’s a bunch of people I know that have died from Agent Orange, I’m sure that black guy died from Agent Orange at some point in time now. The only people that I knew of have died from it. I do know that somebody, I talked to a Marine that said they were out in the bush one day and the plane came over and sprayed them with something, I guess it was Agent Orange. I also have ex-Marine friends here in town who, he had to go through psychiatric counseling for two or three years. He weighed up ninety pounds; he is a real small guy, the butcher at Safeway. Because he was so small, he was the same size as the Vietnamese he was sent into the tunnels when they found the tunnels. He had a horrible
experience in Vietnam. He never saw a Base the whole thirteen months he was there. He was there for thirteen months in the bush living in a tent or whatever the whole time. So he had a fairly horrible experience compared to me in Vietnam. Went to Da Nang to get some parts, we had aircraft stationed at Da Nang too, and I saw our troops lived in two-story air-conditioned barracks in Da Nang, in my squadron, the 18th Special Operations Squadron. I had to walk by some Marines, they had tents and they had tubes going into the ground to urinate into. We had air-conditioned barracks that were probably fifty yards away from their tents, I think maybe twenty yards away from them. And showers, I had a shower; it was outside of my barracks. It was a complete closed bathroom, probably had eight toilets in it and probably two to four showers. It could accommodate maybe ten people, eight to ten people. We had facilities to be clean every day, unlike the Marines and the Army too. Their experience was tremendously different from mine, I’m sure.

RV: Do you have trouble relating to those veterans or vice versa?

JP: Yes, I do. I went to a Vietnam Vet Outreach unit in Colorado Springs because I thought I had some problems with Vietnam and I was in a group of about twenty guys and they were all ex-Marine, Navy medics and Army and everyone of them was an alcoholic, or they were drug addicts or had had seven or ten marriages. I’m exaggerating about that, but they had the worst marriages. They were just in horrible condition, couldn’t hold a job, and I thought this is not for me. I didn’t have this kind of experience with Vietnam. I have a good experience from Vietnam. I was only there once or twice and I left after that, thought I don’t need to be in this thing. Most people had a horrible experience in Vietnam I believe.

RV: I think it varies basically as to where you were stationed in country.

JP: Now, there’s a Tech Sergeant that I went to Vietnam with when I was stationed in Phan Rang, that my wife and I went with her girlfriend, whose a lawyer now who was living in Denver, and was dating this blind judge who’s a juvenile court judge in Denver. Because he couldn’t see, he had a limo that he bought. They said we’re going to go up to Black Hawk for dinner, do you want to go?’ So, Janet and I said ‘Yes, let’s go.’ So the wife and I and the blind judge and her girlfriend go up to Black Hawk in this limo, I thought that driver looks so familiar to me. After we ate and went out and talked to, it
was a guy I was in Vietnam with, the Tech Sergeant that I have an actual photograph of him in Vietnam. We were drinking beer one day in Vietnam in the photo. He said he went back to Vietnam once again. He said it was such a good experience that he volunteered to go back because you weren’t taxed on your pay, it was little pay, it was horrible at that time period, but you didn't get taxed on it and he got combat pay too, so it was good duty for him. He enjoyed it the first time and the second time. I’m not sure where he was the second time. We had aircraft, also at two Bases in Thailand. Some of the guys I was with actually lived in Thailand, on the economy, had girlfriends in Thailand; they had a real good experience in Southeast Asia too.

RV: What access did you have to American news while you were there?

JP: We had TV in our, actually in our squadron repair shop. We could see the war going on in black and white twenty-four hours a day. It was really such a weird thing to see this war going on, with all those people dying and we feel like we were totally safe on our Bases. And we were there in Vietnam too. It was like taking an American city and putting it in another country. It was totally sheltered, well I felt it was totally sheltered, although we’d get attacked periodically, I think I was in twenty-seven rocket or mortar attacks, I’m not sure, no more maybe. Let me take a look real quick at my dairy right here that I kept while I was in Vietnam, let’s see what it says.

RV: While you’re looking, let me ask you another question. Did you see or have any experiences with wild animals over there?

JP: I don’t recall seeing any wild animals at all.

RV: How about snakes?

JP: No, I didn’t see any. I like snakes. I’ve had all kind of poison snakes and rattlesnakes, all kinds of different pet snakes. I had like a three-foot long king snake. So snakes don’t bother me, I didn’t see any there. Let’s see I was in twenty-two rocket attacks from the 25th of October ’69 to 5th August ’70.

RV: And that’s when you left, in August, 1970?

JP: Yes, August ’70, right. Actually while I was in Vietnam I applied to go to college and since I was going to the G.I. Bill I said well, it’s pretty wonderful, I can go to college. So I applied for early out to go to college and I got an early out, a three month early out to go back to go to college. From Vietnam, a war zone, is that weird or what?
That they gave me early out to go to college from a war? I was thrilled; I thought I’ve been here for ten months, that’s enough for me.

RV: Right. You went back and immediately enrolled?

JP: Yes, I did. My wife and I moved to Houston, Texas and I enrolled at the University of Houston where my cousin was. He had a PhD. He was there in the business school teaching. He said to U of H, it’s a real good school, so I went there for a couple of semesters. My cousin, other cousin, who happened to live in Pasadena said ‘You want a job, go out to the steel mill and you can work in the steel mill, the slab yard.’ So I went out there and I worked in the steel mill for a few months. I heard these guys say ‘Forty-five more years I can retire, thirty-seven more years, I can retire, twenty-six more years I can retire.’ You’re going to stay in this place, this hot, sweaty place for fifty years before you can retire? I’m going back in the military. So I enlisted in the Army, went back in the military.

RV: And how long did you stay in the Army once you’d re-enlisted?

JP: I stayed from ’66 to ’70 in the Air Force, I went in ’71 in the Army and got run over by a drunk driver while I was on leave in 1976, and I got medical retired in ’77 or ’78. I was in the hospital for eight months, straight out of the hospital I got medically retired, so I was in for a total of eleven years, both branches. I’m retired Captain, military intelligence, Army Captain and I make pretty close to what a bird Colonel or one-star General does over twenty retirement pay, because of the percentage of my disability.

RV: Let’s go back to when you left Vietnam, how did you feel when you flew out of there?

JP: Well, while I was in Vietnam I became an anti-war protestor based on what I saw there.

RV: Really, okay.

JP: I just thought we shouldn’t be here. We’re doing bad things here.

RV: What did you do, what kind of activities did you participate in?

JP: I didn’t participate in anything. I just saw our planes dropping bombs, and doing bad things that are just not called for. When we were over in Cambodia and Laos we’d did this incursion back in 1970. We were losing like five hundred guys a day in
Cambodia and Laos. I was based at Phu Cat with my three gunships, out of this Phantom Fighter Wing; we had about forty Phantom Fighters. I walked out to the flight line one day with a Phantom fighter technician. They worked on the same thing I did, the fire control system. He was the guy I was in the plane with when we got a rocket attack. I said golly, all the fly-able planes, probably thirty-five planes, or whatever, thirty of them, they were all loaded up with these bombs, the 750-pound bombs. I said that they must be going over Cambodia and Laos right. He said no, no those are blue bombs, those are dummy bombs, they’re flying over the South China Sea, dropping them into the ocean, practicing dropping bombs. I thought wait a minute now, we drop bombs, these guys drop bombs every day on enemy targets, we’re losing five hundred guys a day over in Cambodia and Laos. Why do they need practice dropping dummy bombs into the ocean? We’re losing all these guys in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. That just didn’t make any sense to me. It’s like oh, we’re not really here to win a war. We’re here to make money for civilian industry. I got it.

RV: Is that what you came to the conclusion of?

JP: That’s what I believe [came to the conclusion of]. Our war was only to be there was to make money for civilian industry in the United States, not to win anything.

RV: That was while you were there in Vietnam?

JP: That while I was there.

RV: You figured that out?

JP: That’s right. It made me ill, actually made me ill. I’d see our gunships go up and I knew they were protecting people and I was hoping they were saving lives on the ground. But when I saw all of the available fly-able planes in our Phantom wing take off with dummy bombs, we’re losing all these guys in Cambodia and Laos and I thought there is something wrong with this war, there’s something wrong. But you can’t put these planes with real bombs to go over and drop them on the enemy. Well, does that make any sense to you at all?

RV: Only that they were trying to practice, which you would.

JP: Which they did every day.

RV: Yes, you would think at that point.

JP: On real targets.
RV: Yes. So what other activities or events happened that continued to reinforce your feeling or did anything else happen?

JP: I can’t think of anything specific that happened. I know we just, you know why hookers are called hookers right. Because of General Hooker, he had these prostitutes for his men during the Civil War, right? We had a massage parlor on both Bases I was stationed at. Why would you want to go and get a massage in nine hundred degree temperature weather with some women rubbing you down with oil or whatever, in ninety-nine degrees? That’s not a massage parlor, that’s a whorehouse. They had whorehouses on both Bases. I never thought of going into one of them, sometimes I wish I had but I never did. But after working at the mortuary, we had a guy came back from Vietnam who had not a mark on his body, he died from some horrible venereal disease that they could not cure. Let me tell you, it wasn’t AIDS, because he looked good, I don’t know what it was but I thought I’m not having sex with anybody in Vietnam after seeing this guy.

RV: So these quote unquote ‘massage parlors,’ that just further gave you distaste for what we were doing there?

JP: Yes, because I thought we’re hiring their young women for prostitutes. That’s not what they want to do, but they need to make money for their families. These other ones who chose a different way by working in our barracks, shining our shoes, making beds and stuff. I thought what a horrible way for us to treat these people. I could not understand why we were there doing this stuff. We would take over like I say a hill or something and then leave it. We’d bomb a fortification and then leave it and they’ll rebuild it.

RV: Did any of the other men you served with share these feelings?

JP: Most of them I believe felt pretty much the same way I did, that we had no reason to be there, no right to be there. I think most of the younger guys, not the senior NCOs, they probably didn’t feel that way, they probably felt like they were there for God and country, I don’t know.

RV: How long into your tour there, did you start having these feelings?

JP: Probably within three months of being there.

RV: So you applied for college basically while there?
JP: Right after I got there.

RV: Was that part of your plan, was that part of going?

JP: I thought I wanted to go to college when I get out. I didn’t think I’d get an early out. I figured there is not way I am going to get an early out from here but if I do, that would be wonderful, less chance of me getting killed over here. Like I said, I don’t remember seeing them, but maybe six or eight Air Force guys come through our mortuary and those were mostly pilots, I don’t remember.

RV: How did you feel when you left Vietnam?

JP: I felt sad and I felt glad that I had made it through the war and didn’t die. I thought, well I have to find another country another to go to die in I guess, I don’t know. But it was getting out so I guess I really didn’t worry about that happening.

RV: Why did you feel sad?

JP: I just thought the whole reason we were there was wrong and we were losing a lot of people for no reason at all. Why send all these young people and old people to war to die for industry? To have a good economy? A war is not the best way to get the economy going, yet that’s what we were doing basically.

RV: So your thoughts you said initially when you were flying over was to stop communist aggression and help South Vietnam stay independent, and that stuff had gone out the window?

JP: Yes. We were just here to make money for civilian industry and that’s it.

RV: Do you remain convinced of that today?

JP: No, I’m not sure its industry. I don’t know why we were in Vietnam; it just doesn’t make any sense at all. My wife and I went to London recently, actually last November and we took a three hour cab tour of London and the guy said ‘I’m going to take you by a place, this guy worked as not a waiter but a, like a dishwasher in this restaurant in downtown London. He was responsible for the death of about ten million people, do you know who he is?’ I said, ‘I don’t have a clue who it is.’ ‘He was a college student working as a dishwasher in a real nice, fancy restaurant in London, and I can’t remember it was like 1917-25, I’m not sure, 1920-25, 27. I’m not sure when it was.’ And I said, ‘Who is it?’ And he took me to the plaque on the wall of this hotel, it was Ho Chi Minh. That’s the guy who we should have gone in with. He was not a Communist,
he was a nationalist. We should have gone with him, not the South Vietnamese
government that changed every other day. It was totally in it for the money. It was just
incredible; the waste over there was just horrible. How can you have a photo hobby shop
and all these craft shops and everything in a war zone? Actually I went, while I was at
Phu Cat, do you know what the CLEP tests are?

RV: Yes, CLEP tests.

JP: Yes, I took the CLEP test while I was in Vietnam and I got my first year of
college while I was in Vietnam. What kind of deal is that? Who goes to college in a
war?

RV: Very unlike America’s World War II experience.

JP: I don’t think anybody did that in World War II. If they were stationed in
London they knew they were going to go to the mainland to die on Omaha Beach or
something.

RV: Did you think that Vietnam would really be that much different? You had
these expectations or maybe these images?

JP: I thought it was going to be like World War II, we were actually taking over a
piece of land and we were helping the populace there to maintain their democracy.
They’re probably poorer but freer now then they were when we were there. They are a
really poor country. But we’re over there now. IBM is over there. Nike tennis shoes
Company is probably over there too, who knows? It’s incredible.

RV: If there’s anything you could change about your experience in Vietnam, what
would it be?

JP: Just to try to get off the Base more. Actually if I was at Phu Cat, I walked
through the fence with my camera one day. This was really weird. I was in cutoff
fatigues, just above the knee and I didn’t have a shirt on and I just walked off the Base,
no gun, nothing. And there were some cattle outside the Base, right outside our perimeter
and I went and talked to these Vietnamese cattlemen and women. There were children,
they were like six to twelve, probably fifteen people in all and there were two young guys
that were probably about twenty, twenty-five years old that were ARVN reservists I
guess that’s what you would call them, or National Guard and they were tending their
cows out there. So I took a picture of these two guys that were actually in the military but
off like National Guards or whatever or they could have been Vietcong, I don’t have a clue. One of them had an ARVN fatigue shirt on. I took pictures of these guys and I took picture of all of them and they took pictures of me with all of them. I thought how weird that I can walk off the Base. If they’re Vietcong they’re not killing me, so they didn’t have the same feeling about me that I would have if I was Vietnamese. We were raping their country basically and destroying it. Can you imagine what that Agent Orange did to all their foliage over there? I’m surprised anything even grows there now. We dropped that stuff everywhere. It was just, we just basically destroyed their country, for democracy, I don’t think so.

RV: When you flew back over to the United States, what was the reception like for you, at the airport and then when you went home?

JP: I was in jungle fatigues when I got to the airport.

RV: Where did you fly into?

JP: I flew into SeaTac.

RV: I’m sorry, where?

JP: Seattle Tacoma, SeaTac. To--What’s it’s called? One of the Air Force Bases there. I was just up there not too long ago too. Well, it was Capitol Airways I think, their 707s. We flew in, we landed, we are in fatigues, we got off the plane. We’re on the Base. I went to the barracks, took off my fatigues and my boots and everything, underwear, hat, everything, threw it in the trash can and took a shower, shaved, I got the red dirt off, Vietnam was notorious for this red dirt, it takes a couple months to get it all off of you. You come back and wash it off, I put on civilian clothes and I pretended like I was a civilian, I’d always been a civilian, I’d never been in the military. Because I knew people weren’t happy about us being over there. This was 1970. It was McCord Air Force Base. McCord was in Tacoma.

RV: Did you, you flew home from there?

JP: I flew to San Antonio from there, that’s where my father and stepmother were living and my wife had gone down there to stay with them, so I met up with my family. They were really happy to see me home. But when I went to University of Houston, well after I moved to Houston there were a lot of Vietnam protests at U of H, I didn’t get into
any of them but I just thought the war was totally wrong from that point on. I still do, that’s all.

RV: America was still involved; I wanted to ask what you thought of American policy. After you came home, we were there for three more years.

JP: Right, as soon as I got commissioned in January ’73, we didn’t leave until ’75 so I could have gone back to Vietnam as a Lieutenant in the Army, which I don’t think any of my classmates of 200, who graduated went to Vietnam, I don’t think anybody did. We were winding down so much at that point in time, Vietnamization of the war!

RV: Do you remember how you felt in 1975 in April when Saigon fell?

JP: I thought it was horrible. I thought it was horrible that it fell although I thought finally getting rid of the corrupt government. Although I’m not sure, I don’t think any government is a good government. I don’t care if it was Communist, democratic or whatever, they’re all corrupt. I thought it may be better, the people may be better off, although it was worse because I had to worry about the people that I knew in Vietnam, what was going to happen to them, the people who worked for the Americans. As you saw them trying to escape over the walls of the embassy, that was just horrible. What happened to those poor people who worked for us did the, the North Vietnamese take revenge on them? I just don’t know and I worry about that. Because they did what they thought they had to do to stay alive. They didn't work for Americans because of our beliefs and our political system. They worked for us because they needed money to survive.

RV: I imagine that you probably could track them down, or at least their families.

JP: I don’t have any idea who they were, especially, I don’t even remember their first names, they’re in my book here but I don’t remember, I don’t know any last names at all.

RV: What do you think about your service in Vietnam today?

JP: What do I think about it?

RV: Yes, when you reflect upon your service?

JP: I think I did the best thing I could do at the time, for my country. I don’t know if I did anything for Vietnam. I think it was bad that we were over there. We just lost fewer people than we lost in Korea over a longer period of time though. It was just a
horrible thing; we had no reason to be there. The French were right to get out when they did. They were there for over a hundred years though, it took them a little longer to figure it out than it did us. We should never have been there in the first place.

RV: How has it affected your life since you’ve been back in the last thirty years or so?

JP: Well, can you stop the thing, this is not for public.

RV: Absolutely. Sir, could you talk about, how do you see Vietnam today, what’s your perception on the country today?

JP: I think it’s probably a good place to be able to go now, although my present wife is disabled and she uses Canadian canes to get around, I don’t think she could get around Vietnam too well. I don’t think we’d go there for vacation but I would really like to go back and see the country, how it’s doing now.

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

JP: Yes, I have, we go to Portland periodically and we go to Vietnamese restaurant there, I talk to the Vietnamese there. One is over here on a scholarship going to college. She works there at, well I guess its not family, I’m not sure if its her family’s restaurant or just a Vietnamese restaurant she works there as well as goes to college. I try to practice any Vietnamese I am able to remember. I don’t really see many other Vietnamese anywhere; don’t have a lot in Bend. Bend is actually; Oregon’s like ninety-eight percent Caucasian. Portland’s got some blacks, Hispanics and Chinese and Vietnamese, but most of Oregon is ninety-eight percent white.

RV: Have you ever been to the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington?

JP: Yes, I went there while I was stationed in Virginia with the Agency and I was actually at the Wall for the dedication of the statue, Westmoreland was there, and I saw him. Like I say he’s the General that commissioned me in ’73 and it was really tragic to see how’s he gone down hill since then. He gave a talk up there and it was just really sad. The Wall, actually a fellow who lived across the street from me in San Antonio as I was growing up, was probably about five years older than me, we weren’t really that good of friends but I felt like he was an older brother type person, even though we weren’t that close, and I’d go over and see what the sports car he was working on, that sort of thing. He became a helicopter pilot and I thought what a wonderful thing to do. I like to fly; I
was in the Air Force working on the F-106s in Dover. I put in paperwork to do a branch
transfer to the Army warrant officer flight school. I passed the physical, the eye test,
everything else, had all the paperwork in and he was shot down in Vietnam and killed. I
thought, I guess I’m not going to do that. So I tore up the Army transfer paperwork and I
stayed in the Air Force and then went to Vietnam, as a mechanic on a gunship anyway.

RV: What were your impressions of the Wall itself?

JP: It was incredible. I’ve heard some bad things about the design. It was
designed by a Chinese person or something like that and actually we have her book,
Maya Lin, I think is her name. I heard a slash in the ground, all kinds of bad stuff about
it, but the first time I was there, it was incredibly moving to see the thing. I took a
rubbing of my next-door neighbor's name and sent it to his parents. After I did that, I
went, ‘Oh god, maybe I did the wrong thing.’ Maybe I shouldn’t have done that because
they’re going to feel bad seeing his name. They were happy to get the rubbing actually.
It was funny seeing the statue there, a Hispanic person in the statue and the black person
in the statue and guess who’s in front, the white guy, the white guy’s leading or whatever,
he’s in front. It’s just this real bad symbol I think that the white folks are in charge folks.
All you other races you’re going to get in the back of the line. I like the statue and I like
the wall too. I saw all kinds of flowers and I took pictures while I was there. I saw guys
with letters that were putting at the Wall. They have a whole monster mural thing there
in DC from all the stuff they’ve collected at the Wall.

RV: Are there any songs or musical groups that remind you of your time in
Vietnam?

JP: Oh, yes. That, I just had the music in my brain and it just went away. Aretha
Franklin and what’s that song? It was on China Beach that they played, every time
China Beach, you ever remember, had you ever seen that series.

RV: Yes.

JP: It’s the song they played when China Beach came on and it was Aretha
Franklin.

RV: This is a specific Aretha Franklin song?

JP: A specific song, yes. I can get to the clues here. [Discussion with his wife]

RV: Is it Reflections?
JP: Oh, *Reflections* right, yes *Reflections*, that’s the one. *Reflections*, that’s the one that I always think about when I think about Vietnam. And I listen to oldies radio here in Bend and I’ll say this is a Vietnam song.

RV: What musical groups or any other songs?

JP: The Beatles and I just can’t remember all the different ones. It’s just incredible; every time I turn on the radio I hear songs from Vietnam. I was in Phu for that one, in the barracks sleeping and heard that on the radio.

RV: What about books on Vietnam today, are there any that you really find worthwhile?

JP: I’ve got *We were Soldiers Once and Young*, but I haven’t read that yet. I’ve got one called *Any Time, Any Place*, which was about Special Operations, which is what I was in. I’ve got *United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, Fixed Wing Gunships 1962-1972* and when we left Vietnam we gave our gunships to the Vietnamese.

RV: Right, as part of the Vietnamization.

JP: Right.

RV: Did you think that was a viable policy?

JP: Yes, I thought it was great. We gave them everything; don’t bring it back to the States. Although Hurlbert Air Force Base, or Hurlbert Field down in Florida has the gunships now.

RV: Really?

JP: Yes, although I’m not sure if they have any C-119 gunships. I don’t know if there is any of those still in existence. My wife did taxes for H & R Block. When we were in Colorado Springs and she did taxes for a guy who started a fledgling business selling models that were made in the Philippines of a different aircraft, and for Christmas she bought me a model of one of the gunships I worked on. It’s actually, the little decal that’s on the side of it, is one of the actual gunships that was at my forward outpost location. Actually what’s interesting when our aircraft came, when the 119s came through across the ocean they stopped at late in the Philippines and some flight line guy in the Philippines actually painted pictures on each one of the gunships, gave them names. One of them was ‘Supersow’ which was a giant pig with Gatling guns coming out the sides of the pig. The Charlie Brown special and Lucy’s pregnant and she’s
saying, ‘Damn you Charlie Brown’ We called the Vietcong, it’s Charlie Brown, and we had the Polish cannon which was an elephant firing I think a spear out so his snout of his trunk. And we just had, oh, we had Fly United, which was pretty graphic, it was two geese flying and they were having sex and they were flying through the air, that’s why it was called Fly United. I can’t remember all eighteen of them, they guy painted all eighteen of them while they were in Philippines before they got to Vietnam. I don’t know if I have pictures of all of them, but I have pictures of a lot of them.

RV: Do you find any of the movies that have come out since the war interesting or authentic?

JP: I saw *Platoon* not too long ago and that’s probably pretty authentic. That was pretty grim. Normally I don’t like to watch Vietnam War movies.

RV: You don’t?

JP: Not particularly. I think they’re kind of changed from what it really was.

RV: The war movies themselves?

JP: Yes, they’re kind of altered. To make them more dramatic or less dramatic.

We did such bad things to the Vietnamese people. It was just horrible.

RV: If you walked into a classroom today, to talk about Vietnam.

JP: I’d like to do that, that would be good.

RV: What would you tell the youngsters about Vietnam, about the Vietnam War?

JP: I’d tell them that we went over there for all the wrong reasons and I thought we were over there to help people and we were really weren’t. We were there to help our American industry and that it was a beautiful country and the Vietnamese people were good people but they were in a bad situation. That’s what the whole thing is really.

RV: What do you think the United States learned from the war, what kind of lessons are there there for the United States?

JP: I don’t know that our government learned any lessons from it, but I know one thing is they you need to be able to use the commander’s total power to move their troops and to do what they need to do on the ground and we didn’t do that. We had to call in ahead of time to villages and say well we’re coming through your area, so make sure you get all your people out of the field and if they were Vietcong, they were putting all their Vietcong people away, underground hideouts or something. So it was just, you have to
let the commanders, command and we did not do that, we had civilians commanding the
war in Vietnam, or running the war and they did a lousy job. I’m sure that’s what did
Westmoreland in as far as why he looked so bad because he was not allowed to actually
prosecute the war as he saw fit. None of the commanders were allowed to do that. It’s
just unfortunate. They had to do what the civilian heads of state wanted us to do back in
this country. That’s no way to run a war folks.

RV: Is there anything else that you’d like to add or say?

JP: I can’t think of anything off hand. I thought it was a beautiful country and I
loved the people. I loved the country I just thought it was not a good thing to be there
during the war. We actually didn’t lose too many people if you think how many years
you were there, from ’54 I think was the first person we lost was in ’54, ’56, all the way
to ’75, we didn’t lose too many people. We lost more people in a couple years in Korea
than we lost in twenty-five years in Vietnam or whatever it was, twenty-three years,
twenty-one years.

RV: Well, thank you sir. We appreciate it very much. This will conclude our oral
history interview with Mr. Joseph Pizzo.