Harriet Langston: We’ll try again, this is our second try. Saturday, June 22, 2002, Crossville, Tennessee, Hampton Inn at the 327th Airborne Infantry Association annual gathering. This is Jim Scales, James E. Scales, and we’re taping this for the Vietnam Oral History Project through Texas Tech University, Vietnam Archive. We’re doing this by digital video and through digital audio. Thank you very much for doing this, Mr. Scales. It’s a great service to us and we appreciate it. So as long as we’re recording, let’s start with some biographical information on you.

James Scales: Okay, well, I was born in 1946, Brownwood, Texas. I lived the first few years of my life there until my dad was called up from the reserve during the Korean War in the Air Force. So from the early ’50s on, basically my dad was in the Air Force. We were an Air Force family. We lived various places, moving about every three, four years—which is typical in a service environment—including Albuquerque initially and then Japan, Amarillo, Texas; Big Spring, Texas; Dennison, Texas; Klamath Falls, Oregon. At that point I graduated in Klamath Falls, Oregon, from high school and then went to the University of New Mexico. I went there for three years and got drafted in 1967, May of 1967.

HL: So that was right after you got out of high school?
JS: No, I graduated from high school in 1964. Excuse me. I’ll back up a bit.
HL: Oh, two years of college, I’m sorry.
JS: Yeah, yeah, almost three. But got drafted in May of ’67 and went into the Army at Ft. Bliss, Texas. Spent time at Ft. Bliss, Texas, Ft. Gordon and Ft. Benning, Georgia. Then went to Vietnam in May of ’68, got back in May of ’69 and worked almost thirty-five years for Kmart Corporation in management. I lived various places during my career with Kmart, including Los Angeles, Oceanside, California; Seattle, Washington, and the last seventeen years in Great Falls, Montana. I spent about the last twenty-five years of my career as a Kmart store manager and then retired last year in October and moved back to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I currently reside. I retired in 2001 and currently live in Albuquerque.

HL: Were you ever married?

JS: Married twice. First marriage, 1967, for fourteen years. Had four kids, three boys, one girl and divorced in 1981. Remarried again in 1986 for twelve years and then divorced in 1998, no kids with the second marriage. My oldest son is married and has two sons, one is six and one is one.

HL: So you’re a grandpa.

JS: So two grandkids, right. I get to spend a lot of time with them now I’m retired. I enjoy that greatly.

HL: So you were drafted in what year, ’67?

JS: Drafted in 1967 and went through basic training at Ft. Bliss, Texas. I entered the Army in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and I was at Ft. Bliss, Texas, maybe the first few weeks of basic training. One afternoon the whole, I would say battalion—there was probably a thousand of us taken to an auditorium to listen to several Airborne soldiers and they were up on the stage talking about—looking for people to sign up and volunteer for jump school. They gave a pretty good presentation and I would say out of the thousand people, myself included, probably three-fourths of them volunteered for jump school. So while we were in basic at various times, the Airborne volunteers were monitored for certain minimum scores on physical training and physical tests and there was requirements there that were different from just graduating from basic. You had some little higher physical standards you had to maintain in order to go to the next level to eventually get into jump school. At the end of basic training, which is June or July of ’67, can’t remember exactly what, I got a leave. Then I was transferred to Ft. Gordon,
Georgia, which is advanced individual training, AIT, and I got infantry. Naturally, I volunteered for Airborne, ninety percent of the people would go into infantry. Ft. Gordon was an airborne concentration for infantry training. All the people there in the training companies were all Airborne volunteers. It was a little different, I think it was more a mentality issue, getting people in the right frame of mind to move on to jump school and eventually into an Airborne unit. Then getting all the Airborne volunteers together, pretty much cultivated that way of thinking and pretty much your attitude rubbed off on everybody else and vice versa.

HL: That way of thinking. What way of thinking?

JS: Well, you know, looking forward to jump school. Airborne was a little bit—you had a little higher physical standards, you were expected to be somewhat more, a lot more enthusiastic. There was a lot more *esprit de corps* in airborne. We started doing things that you would expect to find in an airborne unit such as—well, a good example would be any time you left your barracks for any reason, you didn't walk out the door of the barracks. You had to run out the door, jump past the step and yell “Airborne” when you’re going out the door. So little things like that that kept instilling this Airborne mentality in everybody.

HL: How did you like that?

JS: Oh, it was fine, I liked it. At first I was a little apprehensive because the last few weeks in basic I had some second thoughts about actually whether I wanted to go to Airborne. Also I had been thinking about the fact that once you go into Airborne, naturally you are going to be in the infantry. So maybe the first week there I was a little tentative about it and then it caught on and it was fine with me. Then I started getting more and more enthusiastic. It’s not something at that time to me that was a childhood dream to eventually go into the Airborne. Although as kids I remember playing army games where all the kids would play like they were paratroopers and yell, “Geronimo,” when they were jumping out of planes. So it’s not something that was entirely alien to me. Then coming up in a military family certainly exposed to a lot of military aspects of life. So a lot of the things that you encounter from my perspective were things I was familiar with and ways of thinking that I was familiar with. Growing up on air bases, you’re exposed to a fighter-pilot-type mentality. So that branch of the service could be
probably compared to Airborne as far as esprit de corps and the fact that the people in
those type units were very proud of their service and that was real similar to the Airborne.
So I had seen that and understood it and I think that was somewhat of an advantage as
opposed to somebody that came off of a wheat farm in Iowa say, and never really had any
exposure to anything military in their life. So in that regard it didn’t take long. Then I
started to really get more and more interested in it and then I liked the idea of going to
jump school, wearing wings, and just being part of that group. Eventually—at this point
in my life if somebody asks you, “What did you do?” “Well, I was in the 101st Airborne.
I was a paratrooper.” You ask the next guy, “Well what were you?” “Well, I was a
clerk-typist.” Well, at that point I decided thirty years from now when I’m talking about
it, I want to be talking about what I actually did and not what the other choices were. I
thought this was real exciting, you know, assuming I survive it all. (Laughs)

HL: Thirty years later it sounds pretty good.
JS: Yeah.

HL: So you went to the jump school at Ft. Benning?
JS: Ft. Benning, yes. We got done with AIT, Ft. Gordon, late summer, probably
sometime in September we got done with infantry advanced training. About then, late
September and then went to jump school in October. Which jump school was only—at
the time three weeks long so that didn’t take long. Meanwhile at the end of advanced
training, a group of us out of our company had been selected for a new school that we
really knew nothing about. We just heard some very sketchy comments on, from the drill
sergeants, really. At that point, the Army let you find out everything by surprise. You
weren’t really told a lot about where you were going and what you were going to be
doing. I think the thinking was, “Well, you’ll find out soon enough. When you need to
know you will know.” Toward the end of infantry training, about twenty-five or thirty of
us were selected to move on after jump school. We were going to a new type school
called the NCO candidate school, NCOCS basically. What that was is a new school that
had been developed; there hadn’t even been any graduating class yet. But it was
commonly referred to as “shake’n’bake school” and that was at Ft. Benning also.

HL: Why did they call it “shake’n’bake”? 
JS: Well, the same mentality as officers used to be called “ninety-day wonders” when they went to OCS. It was a twelve week school and it was essentially a lot of the same classes and a lot of the same field work that officer candidate school put OCS candidates through. Ours was condensed. It was twelve weeks long as opposed to OCS was six months, twenty-six weeks, as I recall. I’d found out I was going to that school after jump school. Jump school, the first part of October, weather was still nice, it was fairly cool, we didn’t have to go through ninety-degree heat with all the physical training. But we got to jump school after being bussed up from Ft. Gordon, you get out of training and my experience in the Army is you’re always going from the top to bottom. You’d get done with one school and you’re at the top and you prove yourself in one school. In this case get out of AIT, go to jump school, get to jump school and all of a sudden the only thing lower than you is the floor again. You’re always starting over again. So get to jump school and the first thing some 6’8” corporal just jumps down your throat and all of a sudden life is miserable again. You’re getting up at four o’clock in the morning, getting to bed at eleven o’clock at night. Really people treating you like you’re brand new raw recruits again so that was kind of a continual cycle in the Army.

HL: Did you resent that or how did that work for you?

JS: No. Well, you just lived with it but it was somewhat tiring. You get tired of it after a while, saying, “When am I finally going to go through some graduation where at the end I come out a real human being and I get treated like a human being?” But in the Army, you get out of basic—you start out as zero, you go from zero to hero and you get out of basic and everything is great. You’re treated like a human being at the end by all the drill sergeants. Boom, then you go to your next school, you start out, you’re right back down to zero. That’s typical and I think most people in the Army would bear me out on that. Then you’ve got to work your way back up. You graduate from that school and you’re basically a hero, you made it and you earn back your privileges. Then boom, you go back down to your next school, you’re another zero. So that’s kind of a pattern and it goes all the way to the end, where you eventually get to Vietnam and you get to your unit. You’re constantly going from zero to hero the whole time and jump school was no different. We started out in jump school; first week out of three was called ground week. The second week was called tower week and the third week was called
jump week. Ground week consisted mainly of physical training, a lot of running, a lot of
exercising, a lot of harassment which wasn’t too bad because we were such a large group.
The company that we started out with there started out with about three hundred, which
was pretty typical. Three hundred people to start out. At the end of three weeks, when
you’re actually jumping you’d lose probably—at least a hundred of those people would
quit. It would be too tough or they’d just decide they’d had enough for some reason or
another.

HL: Did you have to volunteer to quit or did they wash you out?

JS: Oh, yeah, it was easy to quit. Now occasionally there would be somebody
that would do something or a situation would come up where somebody obviously was
not capable of keeping up or handling the physical aspects of the school and in those
cases I’m sure those few individuals were selected out. But for the most part once you
started out in your training that first day, it seems like every break, you’d get a break
every hour or so, every break, right before lunch, right after lunch, middle of the
afternoon and at the end of the day, seemed like five or six times a day, the cadre would
walk around and asked if anybody wants to quit. Every time they do that, two, three, four
people would walk out. They’d just throw up their hands and say, “Hey, I want to quit.”
Nothing was said, nobody harassed them. These guys would go up front and they’d be
processed out and they’d be gone. So when you’re talking about five, six, ten people a
day doing that, at the end of three weeks, you can see it’s real easy to lose a hundred
people out of three hundred and in some cases more. Some people just get to where
they’ve had enough. But harassment by the NCOs was pretty relentless. These people
were all long-time, proven Airborne soldiers and my take on it was they didn't want
anybody wearing those wings that they didn't feel was worthy. If you couldn’t take the
physical training, the long hours, the harassment, which I’m sure was designed and had
the effect of instilling some mental toughness in people, as opposed, or including
physical toughness, I’m sure they didn't want anybody wearing those wings that couldn’t
take it. There was no problem quitting. You’d just raise your hand and walk up front,
and you were gone back to a warm bed, easy duty, plenty of time to eat your meals.

HL: No time to eat your meals?
JS: Yeah. Well, as you go along, particularly the second week in jump school, you’d have to run to your area where you took a break and you’d be running with a parachute harness. Everything was designed to test an individual. You run to take your break and you’re on break time when you’re running over to the break area. Then you get a few minutes over there. You’ve got to get up after, say, five minutes because it takes two minutes to run back where you’re training. You run back to where you’re training, so you’re doing that constantly, back and forth. There's some guys that just couldn’t take it. That’s where the inducements to quit would come from. But we were constantly running. Constantly, for example, getting ready for physical training. Well, you’ve had the cadre walk through, you got ten seconds to pull your pant legs out of your boots, get ready for a run. You get ten seconds to take your helmet off, pull your shirt, fold your shirt up, take it off, and get down to your T-shirt, and pant legs pulled off. If you didn't make it at the end of ten seconds, somebody yelled “freeze” and everybody that wasn’t done had to drop and do twenty-five push-ups. So you were constantly under mental pressure for everything. Conversely when you got ready to leave and you had to get back in your uniform. You had, say, twenty seconds to put your shirt back on, button it up, tuck it in, tuck in your pant legs.

HL: So you got to wear your pant legs inside your boots?

JS: Inside and out, depending on whether you were doing physical training. If you were actually in harness training or jump training, basically you were in uniform. You had your shirt on and your pant legs tucked into your boots. When you were in physical training, all that was loosened up somewhat. But you were constantly switching from one mode to the other and then you had a very short time to do it. Then when you didn’t you were dropped for push-ups. The cadre, I will say the Airborne cadre, they were the NCOs, they were extremely professional; they were extremely tough; they were relentless. They did not bend the rules; they were all consistent and I will say that. You’d have ten cadre with you and they all did everything exactly the same. You were dropped for push-ups. Everything was so regimented, it was essentially equal pressure applied to everybody. Somebody got dropped for push-ups, had to pay a little penalty there, they always explained why you were doing it. If you were too late getting ready, getting tucked in or untucking your shirt, whatever you were doing. Nobody ever just
yelled at somebody, “Drop and give me fifty.” There was always a reason, “You were
too slow doing this.” You still dropped, but they always told you that. They were all
extremely professional, very highly motivated people. I would say average age of the,
say, E-6s, E-7s and above were I’d say late twenties, maybe thirty all the way up to what
I would consider forty-five, fifty-ish type men. They were all in top notch physical
condition. They went right through the training with us. They ran with us, exercised
with us and supervised two to three hundred privates. Rank meant nothing on the field.
We had several officers; we had some higher-ranking NCOs that were in the training with
us from various services: Air Force, Marines. We had corporals, sergeants. Several
officers, we had a lot of lieutenants. Occasionally there would be majors, a colonel or
two. Out on that training field they were treated—everybody was a private out on the
training field. You’d have a sergeant E-5 walk by and think nothing of dropping a major
for push-ups when they did something wrong or they weren’t fast enough. Actually, the
higher-ranking people, it was probably a little bit tougher on them because they were
older. Twenty year old kids, you could beat them up all day long and it doesn’t faze
them. They get up in the morning; they’re ready for another day of it. It’s a little bit
tougher when you start dealing with thirty-five-year-old people out doing that type
training.

HL: So they were treated the same as the rest of everyone else, just they came
with fewer cards in the deck, so to speak?

JS: Yeah physical cards. They were just older and it was tougher on them.
You’re talking about thirty-plus people. Up to that point, it probably wasn’t too bad but
of course the ones that had the easiest time of it that were able to weather the training and
the harassment was the—of course your recruits that were eighteen to twenty years old.
They were basically at their physical peak and it was tougher on some of the other
people. Actually, majors, colonels, they had it a little tougher because of their age. They
were a little slower to begin with. They were probably in great physical condition for
their age but they were still slower than an eighteen year old. They had a harder time.
They were treated just like privates out on the field. I heard a time or two a second
lieutenant talking back to one of the NCOs and telling him that he was tired of getting
harassed and this NCO telling him flat out, nose to nose, that his rank doesn’t mean
anything out on this field and if he didn’t like it, he told the lieutenant he could take him
to a major that would explain it to him. So those NCOs, they weren’t afraid of rank
either. They’d get nose to nose with anybody out on that training field and they had the
backing to do it, too. I would say that nobody I ever saw abused their authority in that
regard. It was all an interesting experience and I’m glad I went through it. That was first
week and I think everybody was getting pretty much used to the system, what they call
ground week. You learned, you know, a lot of physical training. You learned, essentially
learned how to fall or do landings just from basically standing in place and learning your
three or four point fall or landing position. But there wasn’t really, as I recall, any work
being strapped up in harnesses and that came in the second week. Second week was
 termed tower week and we started off learning how to put on a parachute harness. There
was a shed where we’d would go and hang in the harness, which was very painful, and
learn how to get into certain positions, basically exit positions coming out of the airplane.
Then there was one swing harness that you’d go up on about an eight- or ten-foot
platform and you’d be strapped in and you’d jump off this platform. Cadre would have
hold of a rope-and-pulley system where they’d let you swing back and forth and lower
you gradually and then you could learn how to actually put in what you’d learned as far
as landings from a gentle swing more or less. That was pretty much done in tower week.
Toward the middle of tower week, then we started graduating up to what they called the
thirty-four-foot tower. Actually, that was the most terrifying part of the whole process.
HL: Even more than the airplane part?
JS: More than the airplanes. The airplanes are up there fifteen hundred feet, you
can’t see anything. You look out and you’re looking at the horizon, you look at all these
trees and all this countryside down below you and you can’t see anything in detail. It’s
all a long ways away. The terrifying part of the thirty-four foot-tower is you’re standing
up there thirty-four foot off the ground. You can see the expressions on the faces on the
guys that are waiting in line down below and everything in your humanity is not wanting
you to go out that door. You’re hooked up and you go out that door and then you go
down a cable system down to a little landing area down, oh, three or four hundred feet
away. But to jump out of something that’s thirty-four foot up, to me was—and
everybody else that I saw—was terrifying the first few times. Plus that cable really didn’t
give much when you got to the bottom of the slack. When you went out that thing, it
stopped to the point—basically after a couple of those jumps you were working all week
with essentially the skin rubbed raw on your tendons in your crotch because you were
strapped into this parachute harness and it didn’t give. A real parachute would give when
you out the plane. You were slowed down by the parachute, but you didn’t stop. In the
tower harness you stopped. After several of those jumps out of that tower your crotch
was so raw where your tendons rub up against the skin from the inside, it was so raw it
was extremely painful. You’re in a great deal of pain. The second day was even worse
because you started to scab over in some cases. Then the harnesses were all old at that
point. If you notice old straps on an old pack or an old purse, old carrying case, when
they get old they start rolling up like rope and you can imagine strapping on something
that’s going to support your body weight with rope. It was just painful and that was just
part of the ordeal. You did that for a week, at intervals in the training, you have time
spent on the towers and you’d have to go in line constantly coming back, go through it
and keep making your jumps. The NCOs would stand down below and they had a list of
everybody that was in line. He’d yell out your number, everybody had a big number on
their helmet, and they kept track of everybody, how many times they went out the tower
and what their position was. You know, acceptable or unacceptable. To move on from
tower to jump week, you had to have two acceptable exits in a row out of the towers. So
you’d go out the tower, you’d go ride the pulley all the way down to the landing area, get
off, run back and you’re constantly in line while you were on that tower. Let’s say it was
two, three hours a day that training was going on. So you’d have to get in line and you
couldn’t get out of it. They were keeping track of every exit out of that tower. If you
didn't get two in a row you weren’t going to graduate. You had to get two in a row. You
might have fifty drops out of that tower and all those cadre were going to make sure you
had, let’s say twenty or thirty or whatever they felt was necessary to get you used to
going out that door.

HL: It took that many to get to you to the two acceptable exits?

JS: No, I’m sure they made sure everybody was going to get thirty exits. There
might have been somebody that could have done it the first two times in a row but
nobody was going to get off that easy. I’m sure they were going to sit there, checking
everybody off unacceptable and you were going to go through at least twenty, twenty-five, thirty exits. Then unless there was something they saw that was really deficient, then eventually you’d get your two in a row and then you move on. But nobody was going to get their first two exits out of the tower. “Oh, you’re okay, you’re okay, you can go sit over there. Go over to the coffee shop and drink coffee for the next three days while everybody else had to go through this because they weren’t as good as you.” It wasn’t going to come that easy, everybody was going to get a certain number of exits out of that thing. That was to me—that was one of the most painful parts and terrifying parts. For that fact it was scary. I remember sitting down below watching the first group of guys start jumping out of there, being lined up on a bench with some guys I knew and they’d start coming out of those towers and we were laughing at them when we saw their faces go white and their eyes get real big and you could tell they were terrified. We were laughing at them about how funny they looked coming out of there. Of course, it was our turn to go up and they were down laughing at us and it was the same thing.

HL: So how did you get yourself together to actually step out and do it?
JS: Peer pressure. Well, I wanted, I wasn’t going to leave jump school. It’s something I had wanted and I was there already and I had a lot of company. You know misery loves company, I guess. As long as you had a lot of friends there you were with, you could all kind of shore each other up and it’s much easier to go through it if you’re with people that are friends. I felt sorry for people that got injured and had to go back a week to a group that they didn’t know anybody. Then I think it would have been tougher. But you could push each other and bring each other along and everybody was in the same predicament. Their skin was raw just like mine and they were in as much pain and that made it tolerable. You could put up with a lot when you have a group of friends to go through it with. So I think that’s what did it. Plus, the fact that if you really want it, if you’re really serious about it, yeah you can go through it. If you’re not, I think the inclination would be to quit as soon as it got a little tough. The old saying, “If it was easy, everybody would do it.” I remembered that a lot.

HL: So you made it through and you went to week three, jump week.
JS: Jump week. Not remembering a lot of the details, but essentially jump week, you’d go to the sheds, strap on a parachute and load up in C-119s, which are now
museum pieces. We’d go out and get briefed on what would happen and they’d tell us what the wind conditions were and what the drop zone would look like. In fact, they have smoke everywhere. We’d get basically briefing like that. After that, of course, a lot of time was spent, up to the moment you actually boarded the airplanes, a lot of that time was working everybody into a frenzy with the drill sergeants while you’re waiting there on your benches, sitting, waiting your turn. The cadre would walk around, yelling out to the people, “What are you?” Everybody yelled back things like, “Airborne” and “We’re hardcore” and “We’re tough,” and all this. It would basically work everybody up into a real frenzy to build motivation and excitement prior to getting on the planes. At that point, we were back up to approaching what I call the hero status, toward the end of the training. You’re in jump week and then you board the plane and the first jump to me wasn’t the scariest. I got on the plane and, yeah, I was a little nervous and excited and apprehensive. I remember a couple of people that said they had never flown in an airplane before and here they’re going to jump on the first time they had ever been in an airplane. A couple of guys got sick and there were barf bags on the plane, they’d grab a barf bag and puke and the NCO that was the jumpmaster just would come over and grab the bag, open the door, throw it out the back. So I remember that happening several times. The first jump, loaded up, went over to the drop zone and it was a little exciting when we got there. I remember just waiting while we were flying, looking at people’s faces, nobody talked much. I remember the plane being hot, vibrating a lot and the gas fumes in it and that probably is what made a few guys sick that had never flown. I had flown a lot before in my life and that part didn’t bother me and I didn’t get sick. But I was apprehensive and then it got a little exciting, a little scary all mixed in together when we got over the drop zone for the first jump. The jumpmaster yells, “Stand up.” So you have a little drill, you get up, stand up, everybody stands up facing the rear of the plane. We had two rows of guys about, I think, eight or ten on each side. Next command, hook up, hook up our line and then check your equipment. Then what you do is check the equipment of the guy in front of you, make sure his line was behind him so he didn’t have his static line hooked under his arm. That’s the main thing you did. It would rip your arm off if you went out of plane and your static line was somehow under your armpit. So you’d have to make sure when he hooked up that the static line was behind
him. Then you go through and you check everything on his chute and the next command was check the guy behind you. So everybody would reverse. So you end up checking—
two people check you and you check two people. You’d turn around and face the front of
the airplane and do the same thing: check the guy’s chute, make sure everything was in
place, straps were right and then make sure, of course, the static line was outside behind
his shoulder. That was probably one of the most important things. Assume that nobody
knew if the chute was going to open. If it didn’t open there is no problem anyway. But
you didn’t know that. All you could do is say, “Yeah, it’s strapped on. I hope it opens.”
I’d heard of a couple guys that somehow managed to have that static line under their
shoulder and suffered some pretty serious injuries, like dislocated shoulders and shoulder
pulled out of the socket, something like that. So that was the main thing. Of course, next
command is stand in the door. It’s first guy—which I think I was about six or eight back,
five, six, middle of the line pretty much. Then the command stand in the door, first guy
in line had to stand in the door for several seconds, just looking out, wondering what was
going to happen when he jumped. Then a green light comes on, and boom, go. But at
that point some of the training just kind of went out the window. I remember learning
that you kind of shuffle a certain way, a little choppy step so you can keep your balance
when you’re moving out the door and moving around in a plane. You’d have a hold of
your static line, making sure you keep it behind you. But on the way out the plane you
had a certain procedure, a certain routine. You’d shuffle up to the door, put your hands in
the door, stand a certain way, one foot in front of the other and then thrust yourself out.
Well, when it came time to actually jump all that went out the window. That was kind of
training-tower stuff. When we went out, when the guy said, “Go,” we basically just ran
out the door. Essentially once you hit the slip string, then your training kind of took over
and you tucked in real tight and did things without even thinking about it. Some of the
guys joked saying, “Well, glad I don’t have to make a night drop.” A couple of other
guys say, “Yeah, well we all made night drops,” and how many had their eyes open while
they were jumping. So we all basically jumped at night on the first jump. The second
jump—that was the first one we all come floating down and everybody is excited when
you’re floating down and you can actually talk to people. Everybody yelling back and
forth and was pretty excited about, you know, how fun it is. Actually, when you left that
plane and that chute opened and then it was kind of fun while you’re floating down. It was really interesting. You’re up there and you can see all around and it’s really like an E Ticket ride at Disneyland or the most expensive carnival ride.

HL: What altitude did y’all jump from?

JS: Oh, from about fifteen hundred feet I think, twelve to fifteen hundred.

HL: It lasted a pretty long time but—

JS: Yeah, the flight did. The jump didn’t last. It didn’t take that long to get to the bottom. Then it was a little bit of a wind. Of course, when you hit the ground, of course, the fun is over. A little bit of wind, I started getting down close to the trees and I started noticing that I was coming across them pretty fast. You don’t notice it up high, you’re just floating down and it’s great. But when you get down close to the trees, you say, “Hey, I’m coming pretty fast along here.” You get slammed into the ground and that hurts a lot. I hit my elbow and shoulder and wound up pretty sore after the first one.

Then I hit my head so hard when I got slammed backwards that I broke the straps out of the inside of my helmet and that hurt. So with all that experience under our belts the second jump was a little bit scary because you knew what was going to happen when you hit the ground. If you ever see these paratroop movies and see these guys floating down and they hit the ground and they bounce a little bit, well when they bounce a little bit it hurts a lot. So we found that out. The second jump, of course, is a little scarier but the same routine. I don’t remember, second, third, fourth jump. Second and third jump, I don’t remember too much about that other than the fact that it was windy for the first three jumps. Then one day we couldn’t jump in the morning because the wind got too high. But the first three jumps were pretty painful because of the wind. You know, you keep getting slammed into the ground. In my particular case I kept hitting this elbow.

By the third jump I kept praying that the wind would drop because I got to my third jump and I couldn't pull my slip on my chute. I couldn’t pull down the risers and try and halfway steer it. I couldn't raise my arm up above my shoulder, so basically when I was jumping I was trying to steer with one hand. I wasn’t going to say anything about it because I didn’t want to get pulled out and have to go spend a couple days in the hospital letting it recover and then get sent back a week to another class where I didn’t know anybody. I was with all my friends, I wanted to graduate with my friends and we were all
going to NCO school and I wanted to stay with them. I didn’t want to go in with a bunch
of strangers. A few of these guys I had known since AIT, a couple of them back from
basic. So that was my motivating force. So I decided, “I don’t care if both my arms are
broken, I’m jumping and I’ll just take it. I know I’m going to jump and I’m going to
come down, so there isn’t anything to worry about. It’s just a matter of whether you can
withstand that hit when you have to jump in the wind.” Fortunately for me, in the middle
of the week, after the third jump when my arm was really in bad shape, the third jump I
also landed on an ant bed. I got the heck stung out of me and then had a reaction. I
remember marching back after the third jump and I started reacting to all the ant stings
because they got down my shirt and everything. I just landed on a big red ant pile, one of
the huge ones, this sucker was about six foot around. I got stung.

HL: That must have taken some real work to do that, get yourself right there.
JS: Yeah. I just laid there and I thought, “Oh, I’m down, made it. One more
jump, two more to go and then I get to graduate.” Then I found out I was on an ant bed
so I got the hell stung out of me.

HL: So how long do you think you laid there before you realized you were on an
ant bed?
JS: Ten, fifteen seconds, twenty seconds.
HL: That’s a lot.
JS: Yeah. My shoulder hurt, or my elbow and shoulder hurt. So what happened
though when I got stung and I started having a reaction, it’s like you have hives from
head to toe and I itched. My entire skin itched for a couple hours after that. It pretty
much went away, but I remember having to march back in formation and you can
imagine being in formation marching and you’re inching from head to foot and it’s
driving you nuts. So that was my third jump. Of course, after that I was just praying that
the wind would drop and, fortunately, after that it did drop. So the fourth and fifth jump
were relatively calm, there was no wind. The fourth jump I actually could have just come
down straight and landed on my feet, which you’re not supposed to do. But at least it
was a soft enough landing where I floated down and I thought, “Well, shoot, if the fifth
jump—I’ve done the fifth jump I get to graduate. So unless I get killed, unless it kills
me, I’m done. I’ve made it.” So, of course, fifth jump we just went out and they didn’t
really check you over that close to see if anybody was injured. The last two jumps I
basically had to jump with one hand but I wasn’t going to let anything get in my way of
graduating with my friends. Of course, fifth jump we get down and everybody’s excited
because you’ve made it, we’re done and we’re over. They have a pinning ceremony,
graduation ceremony, immediately right on the field off to the side. They go through and
pin the wings on everybody and congratulate everybody and then, of course, you’ve
made that climb back up from zero to hero again. Then it’s time to go to your next
school, which was NCO school. So after about a week we went over to NCO school,
which is on the other side of Ft. Benning, went through processing. It took about a week
for the thing to start filling up and we were all, about twenty of us Airborne guys that
went over to the school and we were all put in the same barracks as the school was filling
up. Then a bunch of guys from other AIT classes were coming over and starting to fill
the thing up. They weren’t jump qualified and by then we were pretty well psyched as far
as being Airborne. It’s like putting Marines in with a bunch of other guys. The Marines
would all stay together and they wouldn’t talk to anybody else. Well, we were the same
way. All the Airborne guys took all a block of bunks in one side of the barracks and we
all congregated together and huddled together and we wouldn’t talk to anybody that
wasn’t wearing those wings.

HL: Did you actually go so far as to call them “legs” to their face?
JS: No, no, we were not that bad but we didn't speak to them. We were just
totally brainwashed, I would say, at that point and psyched. We were Airborne and that
made us more than everyone else. Everybody else who was with us, if they weren’t
Airborne, they were less than us and that was the mentality. I remember listening to a
couple of guys talking that were legs and they said, “What do you think of all these
Airborne guys around here? These guys are nuts. They won’t talk to anybody, they all
stick together,” that type conversation. But there weren’t anything like arguments or
fights or anything like that. After a while it kind of wore off to the point where we
started making friends with other people in the company. So NCO school was essentially
twelve weeks of pared-down officer’s candidate training. We went to classes in the
infantry school at Ft. Benning, a combination of classes for about the first two weeks. A
lot of it was class work and that was really great. The infantry school is probably as
modern as any college campus in the world, really a very modern auditorium-type
classrooms.

HL: Where was that at Ft. Benning?
JS: Ft. Benning. It was right next to jump school. It was built right in between
officer’s candidate school and the jump towers.

HL: That’s like on the main post.
JS: Oh, sure. Yeah.

HL: Had they built Sand Hill at that point?
JS: I don’t know. This was in ’67.

HL: It’s over across the highway where they do all the basic training now.
JS: There wasn’t any basic training there when I went there. It was all OCS,
NCO school, and jump school and that was it. I think the 1st Cav had even left by then.
But the jump towers were there. It’s right in between the training areas for OCS and then
you have the infantry school which is a very big complex, which is very impressive.
Then right behind the infantry school is the jump towers I remember. So we went there,
went to classrooms for probably a couple weeks before we actually started field training.
All the classes were done by lieutenants, captains that were all Vietnam veterans. In
addition to various class work we’d do or various topics they cover, they’d always
interject some personal experiences on their previous tour from Vietnam. So we’d
always hear a little bit about that. Basically it was war stories, stuff that didn’t really
have any academic value. It’s just relaying an experience. I suppose the value there was
that when you’d heard about forty of those stories you had some idea of some of the
variety of situations you might expect to encounter when we got over to Vietnam. That
was interesting in that regard. Then they had good snack bars in all the aisles—you know
out in the hallways for the breaks. So we’d get breaks and I would say once we got to
NCO school, the zero part wasn’t quite as low as the other schools I’d been to. You
know, like jump school was extremely low. When you got on jump school—first guy
into jump school, you were subjected to harassment from your NCOs. Then the other
classes that were ahead of you would march by and yell out. The favorite thing to yell
out was, “What’s the lowest part of the chicken?” Somebody else would yell out, “The
dirty leg.” If you were marching—if some of the advanced classes were marching by a
group of new guys, so to speak. So you took some harassment there. So the zero in NCO
school wasn’t quite as low as the zero in all the other places I’d been. You know you’re
almost treated like a human being then.

HL: So you had a breakfast buffet out there, huh? Little snack things?
JS: No, they were little snack carts. You could doughnuts and coffee during the
breaks at the infantry school. You couldn’t do that out in the field. So the training there
at the infantry school was not quite, I would say it was not quite as intense as some of the
other schools I’d been to. It was almost halfway between what you would consider your
really brow-beating type training, somebody that’s extremely new. They’re somewhere,
like you’d expect high school or college classes. You were somewhere in the middle,
you were fairly well treated. You know at that point I think most of the emphasis was on
academics and leadership training, which probably has to be a little more creative than
when you’re just dealing with raw recruits in many respects. So in that atmosphere it was
a lot more enjoyable. Then we had desks set up in the barracks and we had study hours,
study periods at night, two, three hours at night where you had to study at your desk.
There was lessons, homework, and presentations you’d have to do. There was a lot of
time devoted to that and no talking during those times. In that regard it resembled, I
would say very loosely a college campus. In that regard the treatment probably was a
little better because academically people tend to do a little better if they’re not necessarily
brow beat. If they’re more interact, things are explained to them in a conversational
environment. So in that regard I liked it. Of course, moving into NCO school, you went
immediately from, say you were coming out of basic and your other schools, you’ve
made E-2 after a few months. So you went immediately from E-2 to E-4. So the day you
walked into that school you’re an E-4. Officer candidates were immediately E-5s when
they started OCS. So you get, immediately you got a jump, a couple of jumps, a couple
notches in rank and quite a bit more pay. Basically pay doubled from a private to a
corporal, so that was good. Particularly for me, I had a wife. I was married at the time
and had a wife and she was expecting so it meant I could send a lot more money home.

HL: So did you get married before you went into basic training?
JS: No, I got married about a month after I was in basic training. When I got
drafted and went into basic training, shortly after I found out my girlfriend was pregnant
so we got married a month into basic. I was able to get enough of a pass to go down, set
up a wedding. There was a chapel real close to basic training and, you know, the family
drove in from Albuquerque. My folks at the time were still living in Clovis. My dad was
still in the Air Force. They came down from Clovis, her folks came down from
Albuquerque and we got married in the little chapel right there at the, almost at the corner
of our basic training company. That was about a month after I’d been in. It was pretty
nice, got married. One afternoon shortly after that weekend, at one of the evening
formations, we were in basic and we were getting ready to get dismissed for the evening
to go to chow. I think we were going to go to chow or maybe had some things to do,
clean up the barracks or polish boots, to have time for that sort of thing. I didn’t know
what was going on but at that last formation one of the guys, one of the trainee platoon
sergeants—you know, we had our regular drill sergeant and then you had some of the
trainees, recruits, were squad leaders and platoon sergeants. So the kid that was a platoon
sergeant of our platoon, he called me out of the formation for our platoon and called me
up front. The drill sergeant was there, too, and he said, it was kind of nice, the guys says,
“Well, you got married last weekend and we all took up a collection.” So he gave me an
envelope with about thirty-five, forty bucks in it and a card. They’d all done that and
were able to do it without me knowing it and so that was kind of nice of them to do that.
I remember my wife at the time wrote a thank you note to the platoon. So the other night
when that came several days later then the drill sergeant had me read the note to the
platoon, which it was a little embarrassing but it was nice of her to write a letter. I was a
little embarrassed standing up there reading it. I would have rather posted it on the
bulletin board but at least they all heard her thank them. I think in basic training you
form some closer ties with—really tighter friendships because you’re in more of a siege
mentality. The more you are in the Army, you kind of unravel a little bit because you
become more and more of individuals within the system. But when you’re in basic they
got you all cornered. You’re like cornered rats, you know they’re trying to take you—I
mean you’re at you’re absolute zero there. When you’re cornered, thirty guys cornered
like rats, getting hammered into soldiers, you tend to from much closer friendships than
you do later on. Later on you from two, three, four, a little group of friends. There
everybody was your friend. You’d go on pass with anybody in the platoon because you
got to be equally good friends with all of them. That was my take on it. It didn’t matter, black, white, Mexicans. That’s probably the best friends you’ll ever make in the Army is the ones you make in basic because at that point it seems a lot of these, the facades are all gone, you’re all absolute zero at that point. Later on you start getting it back. Then I think later on you start seeing—like in the ’60s more and more. You made a lot of friends with blacks, whites, and Mexicans. But later I noticed it tended to go back to where you tended to see a lot of the brothers hanging out together and white guys and Spanish guys, more than I saw then. Although you still tended to make friends later on but it isn’t quite as intense as basic. Anyway that happened, and of course, by then I was married. While I was in NCO school, my wife had our child, February. In NCO school we were able to get a two-week Christmas leave, go home, which was nice. Then we graduated. We had to take final exams and we graduated. Some people, ten percent of the class I would say, maybe a little less, didn’t make it, didn’t pass. They didn't graduate, they were just processed out as a Spec-4 and they went to Vietnam as a Spec-4 or jump school or wherever their next school was going to be. But ninety, ninety-five percent of the guys in the class, probably 100, 150 people graduated. Then the top five percent made E-6, staff sergeant. The rest of us made E-5 and then we went through a training cycle at Fort Gordon. We had to come out of NCO school and then as a sergeant go through another training cycle with AIT trainees, which are right out of basic, it was the next school. In your job there everyone was assigned as platoon sergeants or squad leaders so you were actually in grade. When I went in and got a squad there at AIT, it was an actual sergeant that was in grade over that squad. I mean not like just some—you know we had a group—“Well, you’re the smartest-looking guy so you’re going to be a platoon sergeant.” They give him a little armband with stripes on it. “You look like a good squad leader,” and that’s how it operated beforehand. But once these NCO schools started graduating people and sending them out into the companies, you weren’t just a pretend sergeant, you were a real sergeant. So we went through a cycle with these guys through their training and we’d already been through it so we were one, in charge of them and then two, we slept with them, ate with them. We didn’t have to train with them. You know, they had to crawl through the mud and at least the NCOs were there supervising but we didn’t actually have to do a lot with them. When we were in field problems like
patrolling, then we actually went out with them and actually patrolled. But when they
were out doing a lot of their physical training, we were somewhat separate and we didn’t
have to actually get our face in the dirt as I recall. We administered discipline. If our
guys were screwing up, of course, then the 1st sergeant was going to be on us. So we had
to stay on the group of guys that were in our charge. We’d drop them for push-ups and
we’d punish them or reward them as the case may be. We were having to learn how to
do that ourselves and so we went through that cycle. Backing up a little bit, NCO school,
we kind of sensed what was going on when we first got there. “What are we going to
be?” We are going to come out of this as E-5s, we’re going to go to Vietnam as sergeants
and somebody along the way was going to resent us.” We were already starting to detect
a lot of resentment, particularly when we got to our training company amongst the NCOs
that had been in several years. Some of them ten, twelve years, particularly an E-6 has to
deal with another E-6 that just got out of a school that he graduated from and he’s an E-6
too, like this guy with twelve years. That sort of thing bred a lot of resentment amongst
other NCOs and we were constantly having to hear comments, “We can take those stripes
just as fast as you got them if you’re not doing your job.” A lot of these guys managed so
to speak by threat and you’re dealing with some of this undercurrent of resentment that
occasionally manifested itself in the form of a threat, which it would be pretty hard to just
take somebody’s stripes. A couple of guys screwed up during the training cycle and went
AWOL (absent without leave) or come back late from a pass, so they basically busted
them. They couldn’t bust them to private. It’d take too long and the process would be
too involved. But there were a couple of instances where they just told the guy to tag
along, the sergeant would be tagging along, he didn't have any responsibility. I think the
system was “Just get them through.” Eventually there was a time limit. At the end of the
cycle they were all going to be gone anyway so your few problem childs you
encountered, these guys knew, “We’re going to get rid of them in another month
anyway.” So sometimes things like that would happen, unless the guy did something
really terrible.

HL: So how long did that last, where you were at AIT?

JS: Nine weeks. Then we went through a regular training cycle and then went
home for leave for a couple of weeks and then onto Vietnam. When we were at first in
NCO school, we knew when we got to Vietnam they didn’t put—most of the guys in NCO school weren’t there because they were dumb. We could figure out at somewhere along the line, encounter some resentment. When we get to Vietnam we’re going to be walking into a situation where you’re going to be given a squad and all them guys been there for six months and you get a brand new sergeant. To many of us, we’d talk about it, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that we’re going to run into some brick walls out there. So we really, we didn’t want to go to NCO school. Probably if they’d asked for volunteers nobody would have volunteered for it. We did a lot of things, pranks, almost on the level of college fraternity to try and get kicked out. Unless you did something really serious, you couldn’t get kicked out. The comment would get—when you’d do some of these things—like one example, one time during a formation we all fell out in our underwear with the whole company on the parade ground area. Our whole platoon just decided, “We’re going to go out and we’re going to fall out in T-shirts and underwear.” (Laughs) We did. We were the only platoon out there. Everybody else was in fatigues and we were all out there in underwear. This poor NCO that was in charge of us, he was just raising holy hell. We’re all over there, “What are you going to do? Send us to ‘Nam? What are you going to do? Kick us out? Please do.” So we did a few things like that, a few what you call mild riots without actually destroying anything. Mostly a lot of yelling, screaming, hyping, just seeing how far we could push them to get kicked out. Let them know, we’re not as dumb as we looked. We knew what was coming. So there was a lot of things like that coming and the standard comment was, when you screw up, you’re a little late coming back from pass, “What are you going to do? Kick me out? What are you going to do? Send me to ‘Nam?” But anyway. So we went through our cycle at Ft. Gordon, got out of that and went on leave and then, of course, went to Vietnam. Basically that was the first few months, beginning with reporting to the processing center in Travis there at Oakland, not Travis Air Force base but the Oakland Personnel Center, particularly for the E-5s and the shake’n’bakes, boom you were really back to zero. You have no experience and everybody was expecting you because there was a few people already over in Vietnam. We started really sensing a lot of their resentment right there the minute you reported. So I ran into several guys that I had gone to school with and we kind of scattered and some went to Ft. Lewis,
Washington. I went to Ft. Gordon and when we met up there then you started—we started sensing we were with a lot of privates, a lot of enlisted men that were going and they were all out of their training and basically they weren’t these scared little kids anymore. So you started having to deal with real Army issues. Then your skill as an NCO really started coming into play. I’ll back up again, I just thought of something interesting. When I left to go from Ft. Gordon—when I graduated from Ft. Benning to go to Ft. Gordon to go to my training company, I had to get all the way across the state. Here I’m a guy who’s sending most of my money home. I don’t remember how much money I had, but I think a bus ticket was twenty bucks to get across the state in those days which was probably cheap. But the Army in those days, they allowed you like six cents a mile. So they shelled out about six bucks for me for travel money and I had to buy—I ended up buying out of my—you know I had like twenty bucks to my name. So I ended up buying a bus ticket. Along with that six dollars, there was twenty dollars for a bus ticket. When I got to Ft. Gordon or Augusta it was a little too late so me and this other guy split a hotel room. In those days they were cheap, particularly in downtown Augusta. We got a hotel room for about six bucks; it was three bucks a piece. It was probably close to the end of the month. So we did that, we had enough for a dollar-and-a-half breakfast the next morning and we got a ride out to Ft. Gordon. It ended up costing me, total trip probably ran about twenty-five bucks and the Army gave me six dollars travel money, six lousy dollars. I would have said, “Here if you need it that bad you keep it yourself.” But for somebody on foot, and they just expected you to be there, “Okay, you’re leaving here Sunday, you’re to be there Tuesday.” The thought never occurred to me to be to go up to anybody and say at that point, “I need more money than this.” We just took it and thought, “Well, how are we going to get this accomplished?” A couple of us got together and we pooled our money for various things and we made it. It never occurred to us that really there was some wrong, injustice going on here until a little bit later on. We just said, “Well, this is what we’ve got to work with. This is where we’ve got to be, so how are we going to do it?” We figured out a way to get there. That’s why probably you see a lot of GIs hitchhiking when they’re going somewhere, one place to another. They probably weren’t paid enough money to get where they were
going, so they were out there hitchhiking. So that probably went on a lot more than what you realize.

HL: Well, especially in an area like that, where you’re close to one of those big posts where they’re doing training. I’m sure, yeah.

JS: Sure, absolutely. But that’s the way it was back then. So anyway, jumping ahead again back where I was to the Army personnel processing station there at Oakland, where you’re processing to get over to Vietnam. I went through that for a couple of days and eventually your name gets called out at the formations. You have to make formations every couple of hours, the rest of the time you’re just basically at your bunk sitting on your butt. But make your formations and eventually your name gets worked through the pipeline. The next load, you know they’re calling off people for the next load and eventually after a couple of days your name gets called. You get all of your gear together, what you’ve got. In my case it was a duffle bag, so you have time to pack everything, get everything secured, your belongings. You have to meet at a certain place and I don’t remember the total layout of that place. But at that point once you’re locked in and you know you’re going a certain time and a certain place, then you move to a big waiting shed. It’s almost like a hangar full of bunks, there must be a thousand bunks in there. You’re in there another day-and-a-half or so and when you go to that last staging area, boom, everybody marches in there and it’s all self contained. All the doors get locked, nobody can get in, nobody can get out, and you’re in there until it’s time to go.

HL: The rationale behind locking you in was what?

JS: Nobody can get away because you’re going to Vietnam. So you’re locked in and there’s nothing to do. At one point every morning, you’ve got to round up some guys, go in and clean the showers and the bathrooms. Other than that there is no work details, nothing to do, just bored sitting at your bunk. If you have magazines, you can read magazines, read a book and if not you’re just sitting there bored looking at the walls. But you’re locked in there and I don’t remember how long I was in there, at least a day, maybe spent the night.

HL: Did they give you shots?

JS: What?

HL: Did they give you shots or that sort of thing?
JS: No, we had that along the way, probably up to that point. We’d get shots periodically up to that point. I don’t remember any large number of shots all at once before going. But then eventually our load is, got together, drill sergeant, a cadre comes up and he says, “Okay, this group is—you know we’re going to be getting you up at five in the morning. We’re going to be out, taking buses, going out to Travis Air Force Base. You’re going to be loaded on plane,” which like at that time was a DC-8. It looked like a 707 but it was a stretch body, a little bit bigger. “We’re going to be loading you up and you’re going to be moving out to Vietnam in the morning.” They told us something, a little bit, something about it, like twenty, twenty-two hour flight. So we got out there in the morning, started loading up, got on the plane and we’re underway by seven o’clock. I remember the flight taking just twenty-two hours from West to East. At that point you’re flying, let’s say six hundred miles an hour when you’re going that direction. We probably had a tailwind with a jet stream. So it was daylight for like twenty hours, the day lasted twenty hours because you’re flying with the sun. We landed in Hawaii, which we got an hour or so off the plane at the airport, which was kind of nice. Everybody headed for a bar and we went and had a couple of beers and then I went to a gift shop and found a little ivory necklace and bought that and they shipped it—they mailed it home to my wife. So we had a little time to kill there and that was kind of nice because I had never been to Hawaii, never seen it. The next stop, we flew and we stopped at Wake Island and landed on Wake Island but nobody could get off there. I remember watching out the window, real famous World War II battle at Wake and I knew that. You could see, here and there you could see little piles of rusted wreckage or equipment around it.

HL: Just out the window?

JS: Yeah, just out the window. You couldn’t see much and then when it was taking off, you could look out and you could see a little bit of scattered debris around. So that was somewhat interesting but it was a little hot in the plane. We were there about an hour on the ground, probably for refueling, whatever. We took off there and I think the next time we landed, we landed in the Philippines and it was at night then. So you couldn’t see anything. That was probably another fuel stop but I don’t recall getting off the plane. A couple of hours past the Philippines we started getting—we got to Vietnam. I was sitting next to a guy that was going back, a staff sergeant, I remember this guy. I
was talking to him and he was going back for his second tour. I was talking to him about it and we were sitting in a part of the plane where the wing didn’t block the view so we started—once we got over Vietnam and they dropped the altitude a little bit. We were pretty curious and we were looking out the window, nobody was talking, you were just looking out the window because down below you could see off in the distance scattered flashes here and there. Every now and then you could see a little stream of red which was tracer rounds going off down in the ground, little things like that happening as you’re flying over. So you’re starting to realize, “Hey, we’re here.” You know? I was starting to get a little bit apprehensive. You’re not scared but you’re just starting to get on the edge of your seat. You know that feeling that there must be something in between apprehension and fear, a condition there. I don’t think it has a name, you start, you’re a little bit past apprehension, you’re looking down.

HL: Heightened awareness, something, yeah.

JS: Yeah, because I knew where I was going. I was going out to an infantry unit, you know. I wasn’t going to get a rear job. Some of these guys were in different job classifications. I knew where I was going so I think, “This is where I’m going to be here shortly.” So I had that on my mind and you couldn’t really think of anything else. The plane circled and eventually landed at Bien Hoa and I remember it landed and it taxied up to an area and you could see this big lighted shed off to the side with a bunch of guys there, all crowded up and looking out the window. These guys come pushing ladders, ramps, up to the side of the plane and they all got helmets on and flak jackets on and they’re in fatigues and they didn't look like they were having fun. They had these real serious looks on their face like, you know, they meant business. They weren’t there just putting in their time and days work. They were like privates, PFCs (privates first class), they were getting very deliberate about what they were doing, methodical and doing it real fast. A couple of these guys get on the plane, these privates and a couple of them get on and I remember watching them. They just get on, open the door and it’s just like a blast furnace where hot air comes in. I was close enough to the front where I felt that. These two guys get up and they just start looking around, they don’t say anything, they’re just looking. That kind of intensifies the moment. Then one of them starts speaking saying, “We’re going to unload this plane. Once we unload it, get off the plane fast. Get
over to that shed over there that’s all lighted up.” He said, “Get under that thing fast and
we’ll start processing.” He said, “What we want to do when we get off the plane, we’re
all going to move en masse in a group and get off the flight line because they like to
mortar the flight line when the big planes land.”

HL: So you were sitting ducks right there?

JS: Yeah. So that’s my first experience. So I thought, “Okay.” These guys had
been there and they probably had a little, it might be serious, I’m sure they saw some
incidents where planes got mortared or mortar rounds come in. So they’re dead serious
about it, but to us, we’re thinking, “Oh, my God! This happens like twenty-five times a
night.” Well, it didn’t, there were probably several incidents over a year’s time and those
guys had been there. They had the advantage of being at work, they got settled in. You
know we’re still just getting off the plane and it’s all new, so we’re a little bit more
scared or apprehensive, whatever you want to call it. So we do that. We run off, get
under the shed. Well, when we start moving down this one area, they’ve got a fence
dividing us up, we’re moving one direction and all these guys that are crowded up from
the shed behind this other gate on the other side are all dressed in their khakis, some in
fatigues, but they’re all ready to go. It’s kind of a time-honored ritual when the guys get
off the plane and go to the shed, the new guys, the guys that are going home are all on
cheering as we’re walking up, yelling cat calls and so to speak. You know, “Yay,” you
know. They’re all cheering, clapping, whistling, “Here’s our replacements! Have a nice
time boys.” All these kinds of things that made you feel welcome, you know. When we
passed them after a minute or so, these guys, they didn’t waste any time either, they told
these guys, “Get on the plane.” You didn't have to tell them twice, they were going and
boom they were on that plane like that (snaps fingers). The plane took off and then at
that point we started processing in, which I don’t remember a lot of the details. They
took us over to the 90th Replacement, which is where most people coming in at that point
collected. The 90th Replacement was this huge collecting point of all the soldiers coming
in-country and it was at Bien Hoa and it was same thing. You didn’t really have anything
to do, occasionally a detail would come up but it was easy to duck it. It was easy to hide
and not get bothered. But you didn't have anything to do all day, you just mill around.
They had Dairy Queens there, you could go get an ice cream cone, mill around, meet
people, talk to people. There was a club there, you could go drink beer. But you had to
be at formations every hour. Every hour there was formations and there would be a few
thousand people at these formations. There would be a big podium like a parade field
podium and these sergeants would get up and what they would do is just go division by
division, unit by unit and say, “Okay, the following men are going to go to such and such
transportation company, the 4th Infantry Division, the 25th Infantry Division, the 101st
Airborne Division,” whatever. All these units that they had people they were assigning
out to. You just sit there and wait for your name to be called and it took about a day-and-
a-half, two days and by that time the back of your neck got sunburned so it was starting—
you know in my case it was starting to hurt because I hadn’t been there, I was brand new.
So you started feeling the heat a little bit. You’re starting to get a little uncomfortable,
your arms started getting a little burned. You couldn’t go down and buy Coppertone
tanning oil. They didn't have skin block in those days so you got burned and it got a little
painful in the back of your neck from your shirt rubbing on it. So those were just little
things that reminded you where you were. So everyday you’re out there listening for
your name and after a couple of days one of the sergeants called off, “The following men
are going to the 101st Airborne.” He called off about twenty of us and boom, and my
name come up. You know when that happens it sends a little shiver through your spine, a
little jolt there. They tell you, “You meet over here at certain time so go get all your
gear.” We went over and met there and a truck took us over to, I guess Long Binh which
is where the 101st rear area was. There was a little P training area, proficiency training,
they put everybody through this training for a week.

HL: As I understand it, that was like a refresher course type thing?
JS: It was, it was. It was kind of a—it was a refresher course and it was a week
to get acclimated. It was a, you know, just to get used to where you were and some other
things. So we went over there and you went back, it was back from hero to zero. We
were a zero and it didn’t matter. We were there going to certain classes and mostly
listening to these guys. These guys that had been there in the first—already on their
second tour, NCOs. A lot of it was, some of it was useful and a lot of it was just BS.
Basically a lot of chance in my opinion, for them, some of them to harass new guys
coming in and particularly shake’n’bakes. They didn’t like shake’n’bakes, which wasn’t
unexpected. Then these guys would walk around and yeah they’d been there for a tour already and now they’ve got a rear job and they walk around with the Bowie knives on their belt, like what are you going to do? Use it to sharpen your pencil? But we respected them because they’d already gone through a tour there. But they’d get up and they’d tell war stories in these class meetings, so to speak. What are you going to learn at this point? You just need to get them out to their units. So we went through that for a week and a couple of those guys were absolutely crazy. They had a problem. So we’d go through training and then at night, the first couple of nights, we’d get off at least at sundown and we could meet at the NCO club or the EM club (enlisted men’s) depending on your rank. Go over and hook up with some friends that you’d run into, that you’d gone through your various training stages with. You were always running into people you knew. You could go to the club and there would always be a couple people there you knew from way back when and have a few beers. We could do that at night. Then after a couple of days then we started having to work all day, train all day and then all night until eleven o’clock, fill sandbags. So we worked until eleven o’clock, then we were back up at four o’clock in the morning. So you didn't have any energy left to go drink beer. So eventually we went up to Phu Bai to the unit after about a week.

HL: The unit, that would be?

JS: Camp Eagle, we flew up to Camp Eagle. They loaded about a hundred of us onto a C-130, took us up to Camp Eagle and then we got to our battalion and they started filtering guys out to the 1st/327th, 2nd/327th. Then once you got to your battalion then you got broken down even further into companies. Twenty or thirty of us went to D Company, which in my case was forming from scratch. They were expanding out the battalion. So we went to D Company and there was about twenty or thirty of us there and it started out in May of ’69. We had about twenty, twenty-five good guys and then all the companies had to contribute five or ten guys to bring the company up to strength. Most of the guys we had were good. I’d say ten percent of them were rejects and drug addicts, troublemakers that other companies just used this as an opportunity to get rid of them. Most of the guys were good. We had an assortment of experienced and inexperienced people. So we spent time there, just first week or two working, filling sandbags, building up the company, doing various work details around, anything from building bathroom
latrines to some class work and training. We had a first sergeant there, Alonzo, that was
on his second or third tour. He’d give us talks in the evening about what to expect out
there and they were basically just whipping the company into shape. So there was a lot
of harassment, you know we’re back to zero. All the time you were always going back to
different points where you’d get to an area where you’re new, where you had to earn your
respect back. You were in constantly in the Army going in these circles. Like a wagon
wheel, you know you’re on the top, then you’re on the bottom, on the top, on the bottom.
You’re constantly having to climb to the top, earn your respect back and now it’s started
all over again. So we stayed back there for a couple of weeks and then finally got a
company commander and the company got built up to strength with guys just trickling in.
Then we decided—we found out we were going out to the field after awhile and we
walked from—the company just started walking from Camp Eagle and walked all the
way to Bastogne. Which I don’t have how far that is, twenty miles maybe, but just to get
us out and start operating and functioning as a unit. I’m sure that was felt that was
valuable, which I’m sure it was but carrying those sixty, seventy pound rucksacks on a
hike that long down the roads, other various areas, by the time we got there we were
pretty beat up. Our feet were just raw from walking on rocky roads you know, and they
hurt really bad. But we got out to Bastogne and then started running some practice
operations for a month or so out of Bastogne. We ran a couple of helicopter assaults out,
probably in fairly secure areas. You know in that time of year, May of ’68, Tet pretty
much had probably taken the wind out of the North Vietnamese for awhile so they were
trying to take some time to regroup. So we had that whole couple months in the summer
there, month-and-a-half, two months, where we ran some practice operations, really
didn't have much of any kind of contact of any kind. We were out just basically in the
area of operations and you know getting a little more skilled at operating and doing what
we were to be doing for the rest of the tour. So along came the first big operation. We
went out, went into which was early August, we went into the A Shau Valley, Operation
Somerset Plain. We had been going through, went through a couple of days of briefings
on what to expect and who’s going to do what. It’s funny, but when you go on a
helicopter assault, it’s mass confusion. But you have what you call “lifts” and “slicks.” I
don’t know if you’ve ever heard that term before but if you had a hundred guys and you
had five helicopters, that meant that five people would get on each helicopter, so that
means twenty-five people per lift could go somewhere. So you needed four lifts. Now if
you had five helicopters, you had four lifts and five skids, or five slicks, I’ve heard them
called either one.

(Editors Note: Interruption followed by conversation that does not pertain to
interview)

JS: I could talk two hours on jump school and two hours on basic, certain aspects
of it. Although basic, for example, comparing it to jump school, you’re experiences are
starting to heighten I think as you go along.

HL: Uh-huh.

JS: So I probably could spend more time on the three hours, the three weeks there
than I could the ten weeks or twelve weeks of basic, whatever.

HL: Certainly. Well the experience it seems like it was a lot more intense.

JS: Yes, it intensifies, so I think it sears in your memory.

HL: Maybe it was just me, the jumping out of the airplane part seems to like
would heighten one’s awareness about anything. This is tape number two for James
Scales.

JS: Do you want me to start now?

HL: Yeah. Oh, we were starting before I—

JS: Okay, we were getting ready to go into the A Shau. So we started having
little meetings with our platoon leaders at night, which we would do. We would all get
together in the evening and talk to the platoon leaders. He’d go to talk to the company
commander, the company commander would have a little meeting every night with the
platoon leaders, and then the platoon leaders come back and have a meeting in the
evening with their squad leaders and platoon sergeants. So, you know, you would pass
out information and generally try to get everybody informed. Then you’d go and, as best
you could, pass your information out amongst members of your squad. So I was a squad
leader then. We had a platoon leader, our first sergeant was First Sergeant Alonzo, the

HL: The famous Charlie Beckwith?
JS: The famous, *the* Charlie Beckwith. He led the Iran raid, well known. He was a figure, which we’d heard about him, he was a legend before we ever heard about him or ever saw him. We didn’t know, “What does this guy look like? Is he ten foot tall? Does he look like John Wayne?” All we ever heard before we got out there, “Well, we’re going to the “No Slack” Battalion, Charger this, Charger that, Charger this.” We heard about him and heard about him. By the time I saw him I expected the first time I ever saw him, he’d be breathing fire and be about ten feet tall and walk like John Wayne. But eventually when we got out to Bastogne, you know, we had heard about this and never saw him for two months. The first two months I was there, or first month I should say. Then one night he came and talked to us, and this old guy come walking up like he could barely walk, like he’d been in a train wreck or something. He looked old, he looked fifty years old, gray hair.

HL: How old do you think he was?

JS: Well, I know at the time he was forty-one. But he looked ten years older than he was. But he come, conqueror not being a big guy and he cussed and he talked rough and he said, “I’m going to get you guys out there, what you all need to do is go out and grease up about ten pics and get in a couple of firefights and then you’ll all be okay. You’ll be worked in.” He says, “I don’t like these guys that whine and want to go to the IG (inspector general) because they think they’re not getting treated right.” He said, “Some private, some private,” I’m quoting now, “Let’s his shit get out in the street. In the old Army where I came from, NCO would kick his ass and get him straightened out.” He said, “I don’t like to send you for IGA stuff now, everybody is a pussy and they want to go complain to the IGA when something happens they don’t like.”

HL: That’s inspector general?

JS: Right, like complaining to the police. But anyway he was just giving his philosophy on the Army. So he talked to us a few minutes and then he left and hobbled away. So that was my first experience with Charger. So I’m getting, our first action, we got up and we were getting ready to go into the A Shau, we’d been talking about it for a long time, we’d heard A Shau, A Shau, A Shau. It was like to me, it would have had the same ring as going to the Little Bighorn with Custer. We were going to the A Shau Valley. I mean this was this real bad place out there and everybody referred to it as
Indian Country. So we were building for that all summer and finally the first part of August we started getting ready for it. We came back to Camp Eagle, had a stand down, got choppered out to the beach, spent a day at the beach, had a barbecue, real nice, drank some beer and went out. Like they said, “Go out and swim in the salt water and let it start healing your cuts.” Everything got infected over there so you have these black splotches all over your legs and arms, either from cuts or everything had thorns on it. So everything poked you, scratched you or cut you, or the leeches sucked on you.

HL: This was—you weren’t even in action yet, you were being destroyed by

the—

JS: No, we weren’t even in action. This is just operating out, you know going on day hikes, so to speak.

HL: Nature.

JS: Yeah, we were just out in the environment. The leeches would get all over you during the day and then everything got infected. So by the time a month or so went by you started, everything turned into brown blotches. You had it all over your lower legs and your lower arms and that’s what they referred to commonly as jungle rot. It wasn’t real serious. It was just more unsightly than anything else. If you got a real serious cut and it got infected, then you’d be in big trouble. But just scratches, bug bites, leech holes or whatever you call them, you know those things just mainly turned into brown blotches.

HL: Leech holes?

JS: Leech. Well, where they sucked you and you bled for along time. Every now and then, you try to keep them off you but every now and then you look down and one got in your shirt. After awhile pretty soon you’d look down and you’ve got a big ol’ bloody spot on your shirt which then it would just bleed forever. You’d look in there and they’d fall off once they got full of blood. You’d pull your shirt out and sure enough you’d have a leech in there. So you just had to constantly be checking. Two ways you could get them off, with a cigarette or bug spray, which you kept in your helmet, touch a drop on them and kill them right away. But whoever got point during the morning, whatever platoon or squad got point usually cleared out all the leeches for everybody else. So when you were on point, that’s when you got all the leeches.
HL: Oh, I see.

JS: You had three platoons and three squads in each platoon.

HL: How did they get there?

JS: They just come out in the rain or they sense carbon dioxide emissions from the body.

HL: They’d drop on you?

JS: They’re just like ticks. No, they’d be on leaves and they’re just like ticks. They had suckers on either end so they could hang under a leaf and have one sucker just out like a hook and when you walk by they’d just hook on. They’re kind of like wood ticks or ticks you’d see out at Cannon and Angie’s place. They’d be under a leaf and stick a leg out there and then catch on to something when it went by.

HL: So they’d get on you—I’m familiar with how ticks can get on you. It’s pretty much the same thing?

JS: Oh, yeah. Leeches in the morning, you can see them crawling all over you and you’d just be constantly brushing them off. Occasionally one would get inside or somewhere where you couldn’t see it. They didn’t really hurt but they’d just hook onto you and then they’d start sucking and you’d scratch and you’d see some blood and you knew a leech had been on you. Or they’d blow up when they got full of blood.

HL: What about the feet thing? I know a lot of people had problems with their feet. Was that a problem during this training?

JS: Not in the mountains, no. That was mainly just being tired from the walk, you know, the long walk. But the feet, as long as you keep your feet dry, which in the mountains, Central Highlands it wasn’t a big problem. When you got down in the rice paddies and they were wet constantly, that was later on in the year when they were wet constantly, then you’re feet are going to get some serious problems. Your skin would get soft and rub raw and then get infected and hurt really bad, particularly in the area of the boot, right here, right across here (gesturing to his foot), you know where your, where your, I’ll hold it up, right across here where your laces rubbed on the pivot of your foot at your ankle. So you run a real risk of rubbing the inside of your ankle, here the top of your ankle raw. Then if it got infected and you couldn’t get it dried out and get it healed, you were in big trouble then. Doctors would pass out medicine for that. But it was a real
problem, once you got that, it was hard to get rid of it. So you took really great care, trying to prevent your feet from being wet that long a period of time where that would happen. It wasn’t that difficult in the Central Highlands up there in the mountains climbing around. To me it wasn’t too difficult. Anyway you had three platoons, three squads and it basically is like Russian roulette, you’d trade off on point every day. A different platoon would take point every day. So you got point every third day. Your squad, if it was fairly easy going one squad would rotate all day in the platoon. So under the best of circumstances, you could get it, say, every nine days. Your squad would get point and basically that was Russian roulette because if anything happened the first guys were going to get blown away. If the going was particularly tough, occasionally he’d rotate squads. You know you’d rotate one squad on point and get another one up there and then—occasionally even the platoons would rotate if it was particularly tough going. You’d have to just chop your way through the vines, “wait a minute” vines is what they were called. Just the physical work involved with that, company commander would sometimes rotate platoons. Although that wasn’t too often, it usually was enough to just rotate squads within the platoon. So then at the worst of circumstances you can go down to where you were playing Russian roulette, every third day you were on point instead of every nine days. When it was dry and the terrain wasn’t that bad, the nine day scenario played out many times. When it was really tough, you know, of course you’d be out every three days, of course. Then if you were out—if we set up for a day or so and run patrols, platoon- or squad-size, patrols out to the side, of course, then you were on point all the time. Basically those situations, you’d just set up in an area, send out little patrols and it’s like dangling meat out. Basically, we were bait in those circumstances. Then jumping back ahead to the A Shau. We started having our meetings there for the A Shau. We were going to go into the bottom of the valley, a place called Ta Bat, which was an old French airfield. We warned about the possibility there was old minefields there. We got our lift and skid numbers down and they’d issue—or a lieutenant would set up. Well, you’ve got so many guys in your squad, let’s say, so you get the first slick or the third slick or wherever in the diamond it was. You’d get a helicopter number and a number of positions, depending on how many guys were in your squad, in one and then the other because there was some overlap. The next guy would pick up the other, say, if there’s
five guys, you’d get the first two slots and he’d get the next three and he’d get all the five
if he had eight on the next chopper. So you had one, two, three, four, five and the
helicopters would come and they’d land like this (hitting desk for emphasis) and pick up
guys and then they’d go fly the same way and land the same way at the LZ (landing zone)
for the most part. If it was a small LZ, they’d go in one at a time. But you’d get, you’d
be on a lift and a skid. So you’d have to go back to your squad and assign each man a
particular number, break it down. It sounds to me like—you know the first time I ever
heard it, it sounds to me like this mass confusion because you have all these helicopters
on the LZ where we were going to be picked up to be taken somewhere else, you’d have
all these guys lined up in four or five areas depending on how many choppers you were
using. They’d be from all different platoons and all different squads and they were all
lined up in a certain specific order. It was just—to look at it would seem like the most
chaotic system imaginable. But it worked. I don’t ever remember anybody being on the
wrong helicopter. I don’t remember anybody ever being on the wrong lift. All the
platoons moved together, it all just worked. It looked so complicated, it was a very
simple system. Nobody ever got left behind and everybody always wound up on the right
side of the LZ where you were supposed to be, which if possible it always mirrored
where you were being picked up from. So you see these guys, they jump off a helicopter
and run like they knew where they were going and they’d never been there before in that
particular LZ. But that’s how it worked, you’d run for the cover and then the next lift
would come and then the guys running in that direction would all be your guys. So you
all wound up all together in that particular area where you’d never been before, you’d
never seen it before and that’s how the system worked. So we went into the A Shau, we
were going in using that system. We got picked up at Firebase Birmingham, which we
were trucked to, spent the night, we were picked up by just, I never saw so many
helicopters in my life. I don’t know how many there were that were picking up our
battalion but we all had our system. It worked for platoon, company, and battalion, that
same little system. So we all got on the right chopper, we were flying for thirty, forty
minutes out to the A Shau and that was pretty scary because we did not know what we
were going to encounter out there. My squad was point for the company in that operation
when we flew into the A Shau. I was on one of the first two or three helicopters going in.
The platoon leader and the company commander always went in the first group and then your lead squad, so I was point for the company.

HL: How did you manage to get that assignment?
JS: I don’t know, just lucky.
HL: It was the Russian roulette thing again.
JS: Yeah, Russian roulette. It was up to the lieutenant whoever he wanted to assign that to. So we went in there and I thought, when I found that out, I thought, “Shoot, we’re going to land there and we’re toast. I’m toast. I’ll be lucky if I live through the day.” I didn’t know if I’d even be alive at the end of the day. Well, it turns out we went in there and there was gunships and firing and everything going on all over the A Shau Valley, which once we got into the valley it was—I’m not going to say—it’s not the biggest battle of the war. But from my perspective, getting into something like that, the biggest operation I had ever seen up to that time, my thoughts about it were we’re going into Dante's Inferno. We got off the helicopter, I mean there was nobody firing at us as far as it being a hot LZ where we were concerned, but there was gunships all over firing up the tree lines all around us. Occasionally you could see some green tracers which were NVA (North Vietnamese Army) coming from various spots. You didn’t know what was going on around you really, all these gunships were flying in and they were blasting certain specific areas and you’re in the middle of all of that and you really don’t know what’s going on. It’s just noise, a lot of visual pyrotechnics and noise going on all around you and it’s—at the same time you’ve got to get down and figure out where you are and which direction you’re supposed to go and start going that direction. So the fear factor was there but somehow you just worked through that. You kind of put it aside. There was fear but for some reason you’re with your friends, you’re with a lot of people. You’ve all got a job to do, so it seemed like in those circumstances the fear factor did not inhibit your ability to think. So we moved out and got to a spot. You know, it started raining and went through some real tall elephant grass, got cut up pretty bad, everybody complained about that. That stuff will slice you up. It’s just serrated edges on the grass and it’s really terrible to go through. Your throat’s dry because you’re scared and you’re thirsty and so we moved out. After we were on the ground for awhile it seemed like it got a little easier. You know, once you’re into it—it’s like getting into the game more or
less. So we got there, started digging in at the end of the afternoon in a particular position. Then started getting our area set up and then got—I don’t remember, the CO (commanding officer) called everybody together and he said, “We’ve got to move. We’ve got to go another position. We’ve got to go back where we were, to the Ta Bat Airfield and set up a perimeter around that because there’s some other units coming in the next day. So we’ve got to secure the airfield.” We were going to be out there all night in a flat, unprotected area at the bottom of the valley, so that was a little scary. Plus it was starting to rain and everything was getting muddy and it was hard to navigate. So Ta Bat, you know getting back to the minefield—I made a minefield comment earlier. Well, when we got down to the bottom there you could see a bunch of mines that the dirt had been washed over the years off them, so they were laying around. You know, you would see them scattered here and there and some Bouncing Betties and various other type of mines. Well, we got back there, set up our perimeter, it was cold and raining all night and we slept basically in the mud on the ground, like sleeping in a plowed field in the rain so nothing really happened that first night. The next morning a bunch of ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), Vietnamese soldiers came in and took off. So then we operated for a few days. I don’t really remember where, but up in the hills and we were moving back, I think, in the same general area where we had started to set up the first night and ran into, I don’t know what it was, trail watchers, or a group of North Vietnamese that we were coming over the top of the hill. We were not on point, another platoon was on point and we heard some shooting. All of a sudden shooting started, so we stopped and I remember being close to the company commander and overhearing him talking to the platoon leader of that platoon. He had one wounded and a couple guys shot and asking him, “What did you run into? What’s up there?” He says, “I don’t know, there was just some guys up, you know some unit. Something is up at the front of the— or top of the hill.” Colonel Buckhorn got a couple guys hit and I remember hearing him say, “Well, how bad is the guy hit?” The lieutenant, he didn’t say anything else, just KIA (killed in action) over the radio. “How bad he is hurt?” The reply was, “KIA,” and that just sent shivers up everybody's spine then. That kind of made my blood run cold when I heard that. We were the second platoon in the line and the first platoon was up and they had got hit. Well, we came over right behind him. So we set up on the front edge of the
hill close to where they were. My squad set up its machine gun right here and a group of
us were there and we started shooting across to where we were trying to visualize or see
what was going on. We were shooting in various areas. We held off, this other platoon
sent another—you know they went back up the hill and there was still shooting. Another
guy got hit, but he wasn’t killed, he was just wounded. At that point the captain pulled
everybody back. We were still firing up the area where we thought they were. He called
in an airstrike; this was late in the afternoon. So the next morning, you know, we were
talking, I heard them talking. We had our little meetings where we found out what was
going on. Our platoon was going to go up the next day. He was going to pull that other
platoon back and we were going to go up the hill the next morning. But before going up
that next morning, he was going to call in another airstrike before we went up and just see
what happened. He was a very good, competent CO, Captain Deist, D-e-i-s-t. He was a
very hot-tempered guy but he was somewhat small, diminutive size. A very intellectual
type I would characterize him, very smart, very competent. He called in airstrikes; he
called in artillery all the time, told us his philosophy was that we were just out there to
count bodies. He was going to kill them with artillery and air strikes. He didn’t believe
in really getting into firefights that much. He said we were just there to count the bodies
when we got done with the air strikes. He said, “I’ll spend a million bucks to make sure
you get home.” That was his philosophy which I appreciated that. As a person I didn’t
particularly like him. He was very hotheaded and he was very—he was what you call a
butt kicker when he got mad. You know a very hot temper, he was kind of slow to boil
but when he did he was very hot tempered. He could be what somebody might construe
to be verbally abusive at times. You know I guess he had his reasons but I still, I didn’t
like him. I thought he was highly competent, but I personally didn’t like him. But I felt
he was trying to get everybody home so I appreciated that. But I heard him setting up the
airstrike. In the mornings, he got it going, the first jet come in and dropped some
ordnance and then something went wrong. I looked up and a jet was coming right at us,
our side of the hill. This jet got closer and it’s pretty obvious when they’re coming right
at you and he's on the radio. I heard him start screaming, “What’s that guy doing? He's
flying right at us!” I mean he was screaming. He was very animated and very—he’d just
explode at times and he didn't have any qualms about yelling. He was yelling in the
radio, “What’s that guy doing?” Well, while this was all going on this jet coming right at us didn’t do anything, didn’t drop anything, coming right for our side of the hill where Second Platoon was. Well, he passed us. He’s in there screaming at this little Piper Cub controller, “What’s that guy doing? Get him out of here! This airstrike is over! Cut it off, stop it! Get those jets out of here!” I think he sensed something was wrong and he was just going to stop it right there. He didn’t want to pull back and say, “Oh, well, you got the wrong hill, buddy.” I guess he figured, “These guys are disoriented,” and he wants them gone, “We’ll just take it from here.” (Phone ringing.) Is that mine? Oh, I’ll just let it go.

HL: Okay.

JD: But his jet went over us and then he came down and then he went back, turned around and he came back on the second pass where the other platoons were that came in after us. They pulled back to the far side of the hill. Well, that’s when he unloaded. He dropped some ordnance and everybody has a different story, rockets, bombs, I don’t know what it was, napalm. It wasn’t napalm but it was either bombs or rockets but he unloaded a bunch of them on the other side of the hill.

HL: The right side of the hill? The correct side of the hill?

JS: No, the wrong side. We were on one hill. He was on the wrong hill but he dove at our company, he came back and he turned around and came back and he unloaded on us, just on the different side of the hill where our company was. It was just a matter of which platoon was going to get it. If he’d had dropped his ordnance the first time, where it looked like he was coming right down our throats on our side, he’d have got our platoon and wiped us out. We’d have most of our KIAs over here, but he came back and got the other two platoons. So when he unloaded, you know a bunch of dirt, I remember dirt flying over on top of me on the other side of the hill. He flew by, and the CO, I heard him all the time screaming, “What’s that guy doing? Get that son-of-a-bitch out of here! This air strike is over! Call him off! Get him out of here!” He’s yelling all the time this is going on. Well, once that happens, then it took a minute to shake it off, just took a couple of seconds to sink in what happened, what has happened. Then all of a sudden the screaming started and guys yelling, “Get over here! We need help! Medic!”

Then just screaming, I just heard just screaming, nothing but screaming. So I ran over to
the other side of the hill and the first guy I ran into, I jumped up and I had a big fallen
tree between me and the other side of the hill where the bombs were dropped in that
direction. So ten feet away on the other side of the hill, there’s one of our medics has got
the other lead medic, he’s got him in his arms. When I jump over this tree, like ten feet
away, this guy is laying there with his right leg is just shredded. It’s like somebody has
just slit it with some kind of slicing machine. His foot’s laying off here, it’s all
connected, but it’s just shredded where he got hit. Then he evidently had been hit in the
back. But he was a real well-thought-of medic called Edward M. Stewart. But he got hit
and he was there in his arms and he was dying, basically. This medic had his head
cradled in his lap. I saw him and the guy was just staring out ahead. But I ran over past
him and all these guys were yelling for bandages, anything to help take care of wounds.
So I run back and get my bandage. I mean, like what are you going to do with one lousy
bandage that you carry in your pack? We’re just in the middle of that and everybody is
just stunned and doesn’t know what to do. I hear the captain on the horn calling back to
the rear saying, “We’ve been hit by our own air strike. We got all kinds of wounded,
dead. We need MEDEVACs out here right away.” I heard him talking on the radio that
they were going to round up every medic and every doctor they could find back there and
send them out to our company. So you know meanwhile, you’re just trying to find
somebody and comfort them. There really wasn’t much you could do about it. One guy I
know from emails, he found a guy and he just sat there with him, trying to make him
comfortable. He said the guy just told him while he was there, he said, “I want a
cigarette.” This other guy lit up a cigarette for him, then that guy found a guy and just
was there with him, giving him a cigarette. But this friend of mine was relaying to me in
email here thirty years later, he says, “Well, this guy I was with, while he was laying
there,” he tells me, he says, he had something like his leg blown off or whatever, he’s
hurt pretty bad, but he says, “I’ve got to take a shit,” this guy laying there. So Nelson
Ramos was his name, he just says, “Well, I didn’t know what else to do so I just took his
pants down and he’s laying there,” he says, “The guy, he just takes a shit right there. So I
had my shovel,” and he says, “I got it away, threw it away. Then cleaned him up as best I
could, pulled his pants up and he was comfortable at least while he was laying there
waiting for the MEDEVAC.” Captain Deist while all this was going on, it took about
thirty minutes. We were about a thirty-minute flight from the rear and so it took about
half an hour, a good half hour to do that. So he grabbed me and he yelled at me, he said
he knew there was a little clearing a hundred feet away from where the company was. He
told me, he just yelled at me, he says, “Get somebody and go down and start bringing
those choppers in.” So I got one guy and we went down where this LZ was, oh, you
know, 100, 150 feet away. So two of us went down there and that was a little scary
because we didn’t know what was going to happen once this company is debilitated here.
That’s going to invite some counterattack or we didn’t know what was out there. So we
didn’t know if somebody was going to come after us in our time of weakness here. So
that was a little bit of a concern being waiting down there in that chopper pad for thirty,
forty minutes, in this clearing and you don’t know what’s out there, and it was just two of
us. Finally he said, “Well, you know, choppers are coming in and we don’t have
anybody to put down there. All these guys are wounded all over the place down there.”
Wounded, dead, for all I knew there was ten or twenty guys left, I didn’t know. So I
went down there with this other guy and pretty soon a bunch of choppers start coming in
and circling. The first one comes in and what I had to do, what the guy on the ground
did, was you put your arms out and basically provide a reference point for the pilot to
come in. He centers on you and you’re down there and you’re basically using a series of
hand signals which nobody teaches you. You just learn from experience and watching
other guys. So down there bringing this chopper in forward, just like backing up a truck
more or less or a car in a garage and bring the guy in. He’s centered on you, where you
are is the line he’s supposed to fly in on, so you don’t have to be moving left or right, just
forward or back. Then when he gets—you’re watching his skids and when you bring him
in, you got your arms out and you start giving it this and he knows, boom, that’s when he
sets down, so that’s what I was doing. There were several chopper loads of medics and
supplies. A medical doctor came out from the rear and he was on the first chopper. So
they start throwing stuff out and the doctor gets off and medics and they didn’t need us to
do anything, they had plenty of medics to haul medical supplies up there. So this is like
thirty, forty minutes and that’s when these guys started getting their first medical
attention. So by then several of the guys were dying and there were several obvious dead
killed instantly. The medic I passed, Stewart, with his leg shredded, by then he had died.
So somebody had drug him over to the LZ where I was there. They hadn’t bothered to close his eyes so he was just laying back, just staring up in the air like that which was spooky. Not unlike a lot of movies that portray it. But these guys come in and they’re covered up with ponchos, well the choppers come in, I don’t know if you ever see in the movies where the choppers come in. The first thing they do is the blow all the cover off the dead. So you’re constantly going back and about the second time, you figure, “We better weight this stuff down or tie it on so they don’t get blown off.” But that’s what happened the first time, it blows all the ponchos off the dead guys. So we did that. It took about a half or three-fourths of the day to deal with that.

HL: Okay, I’m going to stop this for a second.

JS: Okay. (Editors note: Conversation not relevant to interview until end of track.)