Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. James Wheeler Jr. We are both in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech University in the Special Collections Library Interview Room. Today is July 11, 2003. It’s approximately 10:16 AM Central Standard Time. Mr. Wheeler, let’s talk about your early life. Tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood.

James Wheeler: Born in Nashville, Tennessee, June 16, 1941. Vanderbilt University Hospital. Born to Paul and Marguerite Wheeler. I grew up in the ‘40s. The decade of the ‘40s were spent in Nashville. Certainly during that time my daddy as long as a lot of other family members was off to World War II. In fact, my dad left three children behind – myself and my two siblings when he went off to serve in the Navy towards the end of World War II.

RV: Any siblings?

JW: Two siblings and my brother two years my junior. My sister, three years my junior.

RV: So you’re the oldest?

JW: I’m the oldest.

RV: Do you remember your father going off to war?

JW: I don’t remember him going off to war but I remember I have a memory of talking with my mother as we prepared for his return. But at four years old it’s very faint. There is a memory of his return.

RV: He was in the Navy?

JW: He was Navy, yes. Originally from Alabama. Our family was greatly impacted as so many families were during the war. My mother lost a brother in France during the war. I can remember his body was shipped back after the war. We’re talking it was probably ’46. So, I’m five
years old now. I do remember standing on the church steps at his funeral. I remembered that very well. Sundays back in the '40s pre-TV etc. and fairly poor folks, Sundays were always to grandma and grandpa's after church. My grandmother in particular suffered greatly from the loss of that one child. We, just as regularly as we went to church we went to the National Cemetery in Nashville to his gravesite. Literally, every Sunday as I remember it as a child to pay homage, if you will, to him. The pictures during that period of time show my grandmother really gaunt. She just really suffered immensely from his loss even though she had other children to include my mother and her sister and three other brothers. With one of the other brothers was in the Marine Corps during that time. She suffered dramatically from his death. Again, my early years were there in Nashville. They were a great bonding period for me. I think there's a saying that we develop in those first five years. Even though we don't remember those years in particular I think they do come to make up a great part of who we are. I knew my grandparents would lose a lot. I lost my grandfather when I was in France and my grandmother when I was in Vietnam. I came to know them over the years. I've been told and I saw it as we came over here, I guess my siblings and cousins for that matter I was a very loved child. I was the first child and I think my mother and father perhaps even lived with my grandparents when I was a baby. So there's that love that I know I felt. I think it helped mold who I am today because I have a great heart in that regard to a family thing.

RV: Sounds like it was a very formative experience for you, the tight family.

JW: Indeed it was. In fact, then at the end of the '40s there in '50 and '51 we moved. My dad needed work and we moved from Nashville initially to West Memphis, Arkansas but ultimately to Memphis where I grew up as a teenager in Memphis in the '50s. That probably made that relationship with my grandparents. I noted that my cousins back in Nashville took my grandparents and seeing war for granted. Whereas we in those days it was a six, seven or eight hour trip in an old '41 Chevy or whatever get to travel from Memphis to Nashville, which we weren't able to do that often. It was quality time when we were there. It was real special quality time with them.

RV: When did you move to Memphis?

JW: '50 to '51 time frame.

RV: Do you have more memories of kind of growing up in Memphis versus Nashville?

JW: Memphis was my teenage years. All those years of junior high and high school and athletics and girls and Elvis Presley.

RV: I was going to say you're in Memphis, Tennessee, when Elvis hits.
JW: Well this hand shook Elvis’s hand in July of 1954 and I was never the same afterwards.

RV: Where did you see Elvis? We’ll jump ahead. Tell me about that.

JW: This is ’54 so we’re just about there. My dad was an officer at the VFW post there where I was a Boy Scout and marble champion and all that stuff. It was like the annual, say, open house for the VFW. Normally, obviously kids don’t get to come to the place. It was like a Friday night, it was an old church building where the congregation used to sit was now a dance floor and all that. This particular night they had folding chairs because there was not a concert but a hillbilly band there. Elvis was part of it. This was a couple of weeks after he had first recorded his first record on 9 July of that year he recorded ‘That’s All Right Mama’ with Sun Records. 706 Union Avenue. It was just a regular night. In fact, it was the band, Elvis had two members in his band. It was Scotty Moore playing guitar and Bill Black playing bass. They were part of the Starlight Wranglers, which was a Hillbilly/Country band, just a standard old guy out there singing hillbilly country music, which is what we knew, and enjoyed. I once got to sit by Hank Williams Sr. at a free show at the Maxwell House Hotel with Eddy Arnold back in the ’40s. I was just kind of consumed with that kind of music. Anyway, at some point in the show Elvis Presley was introduced. He just looked like what we thought of as north Memphis over there where the juvenile delinquents come from. He was 19 he had his natural dark eyes and his sideburns and his hair wasn’t quite pompadour and it was kind of sticking up. Anyway nobody knew Elvis of course, it’s hard to imagine. He was just a 19-year-old kid on the show and very un-choreographed or anything like that. He started singing and I can still so help me behind me hear ladies, mommies hollering.

RV: Really?

JW: Yes, even at that point. He’d sing ‘That’s All Right Mama’. Here’s a guy the old country guy had been singing standard old country songs and here’s a guy just like nothing we’d ever seen. Was there a picture taken that night? Of course not. If there was I wouldn’t know it. There was no reason to have any cameras there for just that sort of a deal. During the ’40s polio, infantile paralysis was very prevalent, particularly in the south. I had two first cousins both come down with it. One of the two went ultimately to an iron lung. I spent a lot of time with that child when we were young. So we were very familiar with polio. Well what does that have to do with Elvis? I’m sitting with my mother with that history of polio in her family and we’re sitting about six
rows back and Elvis is singing. All he did he kind of wrapped his left leg around the microphone and it didn’t just shake like you and I would shake. It was like a rubber thing. It just went every which way as he moved to this fast song. So help me Lord, my mother turned to me and said, ‘Son isn’t it a shame that that boy can sing so good and he’s got polio’? He just seemed just like guy without his leg brace.

RV: Couldn’t control his leg.

JW: Couldn’t control his leg. So that was my first little deal with Elvis. I ultimately met him back stage. We need to move on. My dad, being an officer of the VFW, when the show was done of course people left; obviously we’re having to stay around. I was 13, Elvis was 19. Still having to ride home with mom and dad. I went back to where the old baptistery used to be, backstage. Daddy’s talking to Elvis, of course my daddy who liked to imbibe offers Elvis a drink and as we know, Elvis didn’t drink. He said he would have a 7Up. At this particular point my daddy turned to me and told me to go get this boy a 7Up. Well, I wasn’t enamored quite yet with Elvis. He’s a grown man to me at 13, but I got excited that I got to go behind the bar and open up that icebox thing that continued all the beer bottles and the 7Up. So at that moment I was more excited about getting 7Up for this person than Elvis. Came back and gave it to him. Of course, this is essentially two men talking and that’s not a gig for a 13 year old. I was there as my father spoke to Elvis. I guess country acts still do it to a degree. Especially back then, every country act would always sing at least one hymn as a part of their program. Of course, as we know the only Grammys Elvis ever received were for his gospel singing. So my father talking to this 19-year-old kid said words to the effect ‘If you keep singing in hymns you’re going to make it in this business.’ That’s kind of a neat thing to look back on with my father telling who ultimately became the Elvis that the world came to know that particular statement. With that said, my friend and I, my lifelong friends to this day, we went back out front on the stage part, the raised part of the church building. Bill Black let us slap on his bass. That was a lot more exciting again for two little skinny 13-year-old boys was that. Literally, when I awakened the next day I was a rabid Elvis Presley fan. I was consumed with Elvis. I had zero music talent. It was good that I could catch balls and run fast because music wasn’t meant to be for me. All though I had a great story because I got my $9.98 Sears and Roebuck silver tone Catalogue guitar, learned my three basic chords. Really got into that venue a little bit.

RV: Did you continue as an Elvis fan all your life?
JW: To this day. I was just in Graceland a month ago. I never had the opportunity or the
good fortune to be there during his life, which is in a sense a regret. I continue. I have an Elvis
Presley part in my home office. It is Presleyville.
RV: Dedicated to the king?
JW: Truly is. By being there in Memphis I had all the original clippings, he newspaper
clippings. Interesting I was asking about clippings earlier and their longevity. All the original stuff,
those kinds of thing long before the world knew there was an Elvis. I have those. I originally had
all five Sun records. See, during this high school period I got me a nicer guitar and maybe knew
four chords by then and played a little bit with Roy, Johnny Cash’s nephew, Roy Cash. They all
lived in our neighborhood out there. Johnny Cash’s brother Roy had a son Roy who became a
Navy captain by the way. During this period, he was trying to mimic Johnny, his uncle, and played
a lot of VA hospital things. I used to go around and do a little bit of that. But zippo, zero talent
really.
RV: So music was a big influence on you.
JW: Emphatically so. I’m a huge music fan, but I’m particularly interested in the rock-a-
billy which was so much a part of my teenage years there in Memphis with all the guys there in Sun
Records, very much so.
RV: You were at the epicenter of that movement?
JW: At the epicenter, yes.
RV: That’s interesting.
JW: I was just consumed literally. My five records I let a fellow in school who could sing
and I played a little bit with him. I lent those five Elvis Sun records to work off of. Well, in the midst
of high school all this growing up and such a bonding family ship in my family as I mentioned my
dad liked to imbibe. His drinking which I’ve learned in later years now and particularly my work as
a veteran service officer. World War II men didn’t know what PTSD is. An awful lot of men suffer
from PTSD as we’ve come to know it. They escaped it in the bottle. I’m not blaming my daddy’s
drinking on all that necessarily. He certainly had a problem with the bottle and it ultimately
consumed the marriage. About the time that happened I’m 15 years old which to me was the most
vulnerable age in the world to have grown up in such a bonded a family and all that goes with
familyship for that to happen.
RV: A divorce you’re talking about?
JW: Ultimately a divorce. I don’t think I ever recovered, really. With that aside my records became incidental as life went on. Because of my athletic prowess even though I had to move across town with this uncle that I mentioned earlier that died three months after my mother. We moved in with them way south of Memphis, south Memphis. Any other student frankly would have been made to go to the local schools over there. The system worked a deal where I could come back to the school because I really was the football guy there, quite frankly, and then track unequivocally. So I lost my Sun records during all that.

RV: Did you really? That’s a shame.

JW: Well I never reclaimed them. On my 40th high school reunion, bear with me. My 30th or 40th, let me think for moment. Either way it’s been a long time. I think it was the 30th. The 40th just came three years ago. On our 30th reunion I went to Memphis with a dear friend of mine who wanted to go to a reunion. I’m not a reunion guy. The night before the reunion they had a social at the hotel. I was talking to a group of people. In that group was Sam Chapman who played bass in that particular band. So I mentioned those records. Sam said, ‘I remember those records. But lord only knows. H.B. Long probably still has them.’

RV: You were never able to confront the guy you actually lent them to?

JW: No, that was so long ago. No. That was never to be.

RV: Tell me what your dad did for a living before.

JW: My father was an electrician, a master electrician. Primarily a neon sign guy. He did it all, but certainly in the ’40s he was in the neon sign business before he went to the service. Then that’s what he did throughout his career. Although by the time the end of his career came, the neon sign was no more about to speak of. He did other electrical work. He spent a huge number of years working out of Memphis, which was our home. His neon sign company that he worked for had the contract with Kemmins Wilson who was the founder of Holiday Inn. So back in the ’50s and way into the ’60s Holiday Inns were coming up one a week, so to speak. So my father spent years on the road traveling to sites, taking the neon tubing from Memphis with him on a truck. I did that for two different summers while I was in college from Amarillo to Ann Harbor, Michigan to Mount Airy, North Carolina. He would travel the steel structures already in the ground. This is the big old Holiday Inn sign in the ground.

RV: I can picture it, yes.
JW: They called it the great sign. Cost 10,000 dollars. He would go into a given town, go
to the local union hall, hire him half a dozen electricians for the week. It was about a week’s
project, put up the Holiday Inn sign and move on to the next one.

RV: Did your mother work?

JW: My mother didn’t work until the divorce. That, of course, was a driving thing for her to
do. My mother became a store detective. She was a store detective at Goldsmith’s Department
Store, the leading department store in Memphis. At that time, of course, downtown on Main Street.
She looked for shoplifters. I asked her many, many times over the years to write a book. She
literally caught everyone from your petty thief to preachers and everything in between. She had a
little bit of everyone over the course of her career in the store detective work.

RV: Interesting, interesting work.

JW: Fascinating work.

RV: Would you go and visit her at the store?

JW: Yes, we still were young and that place had escalators back then. We would go up
on Saturdays in particular and ride the escalators. Cheap and fun entertainment at least at that
time.

RV: What kind of jobs did you have as a young boy?

JW: Did I have? I was a go-getter from early on. I delivered circulars. I don’t even know
if the average person knows what delivering circulars is. These were little advertisements that you
would place door to door. I was like 12 years old and I started doing that for the Cortesie Brothers
Cleaners there in east Memphis, near where we lived in east Memphis. Here I was like 11 or 12
when I did it starting. There were two men, two brothers. They would call my home when it was
time to do advertising and lean on this little kid to deliver these things. But the point being they
knew that they would be delivered.

RV: They could count on you.

JW: Didn’t throw them in the gutters and things like that. I delivered the goods. I’m sure
they had some sort of checks and balances system there in a sense to begin with. I started out
delivering circulars. That wasn’t a regular job. See we got two cents bottle for Coke bottles or for
cold drink bottles. Many a day, particularly in the summer or Saturdays during school I put on my
Boy Scout pack and headed out to work sites and places and collect bottles. Not that we were
destitute. We didn’t have any extra money but this was something, initiative that I did on my own. 

collected bottles and sold them. Then at 12 years old I was actually working in a grocery store. Beard’s Buy Right Store right there also in east Memphis. I worked there at 50 cents a day on Saturdays. Mr. Beard and his Buy Right Store. I did a lot of sacking up front. It was small store, just a couple of registers I think. I spent a lot of time out back outside the air conditioning because then, you know, you’re always returned bottles. People would never bring back a pure case of Coke bottles. They were always interspersed with Royal Crown, 7UP and Orange Crush and all that. So, in order to have them ready for the truck I spent a lot of time out back putting bottles in the right cases. I did that and at 13, 14, I started wanting a newspaper route. This same friend of mine Don who lived near us got him a newspaper route in his neighborhood. About this time we moved and I was living a little farther away. I started throwing morning papers, getting up at 4:30 with the paperboy and trying to position myself to get a newspaper route. It seems to me, I think you had to be at least 14. I was 13 so I was preparing the way for that. I finally ultimately got me. Well, I had two different morning routes over the next year or two when I was 14 or 15. I’m amazed at how the distance was. You’d have to get up at 4:30 go to the drop off area, get your papers, get them all in my bags and then pump a bicycle a good long way to where my route actually was. I ran that some years ago with my children. I forget the mileage but my three children were absolutely aghast at the distances I traveled on this bicycle throwing newspapers after getting up at 4:30. That was during the school year as well. Then I got me a motor scooter. So the motor scooter helped out in that regard.

RV: Did you work in high school?

JW: This was leading into high school. Yes, from there I graduated to the grocery store. I’m a grocery store guy. Spent a lot of years at the grocery store. Initially, of course, being what we called a sack boy. Then I graduated to stocking and checking. I did a lot of checking. It got to the point where there was some ladies, this was a big grocery store. Not in the size I guess that we have today. I had more than one customer lady who would go tell the manager on Saturday she’s ready to check out but she wanted Jimmy to check her out. I didn’t make mistakes as a general rule. That was me. I had one renowned moment in the grocery store. It was a Saturday typically very, very busy. This is back when Friday nights and Saturdays because that was payday days when people really shopped for groceries. Sundays you didn’t have an opening. This was like maybe through my sophomore or junior year. I had been very successful at that point. I was the fastest guy in West Tennessee and ultimately Tennessee. But I’m in my check register on
a Saturday morning. It’s in the spring. I was aware Mr. Bob little old bookkeeper guy, I was aware that movement went by me pretty quickly going toward the front door. Then I was aware that Mr. Bob was going out the door. I’m just kid clerk there. I may be 16 now, probably was. I finished with this customer almost immediately and there were lines. I remember pushing my little lever up, locking my register and getting out of my work spot and going outside. I’m just a kid there. As I came around the corner there’s big parking lot all the way back and there’s a cinderblock wall that separates commercial from this civilian housing community. As I turned the corner with Mr. Bob, I asked him what was going on. He pointed and there was a man climbing over that wall. In a nutshell Mr. Bob told me the guy tried to pass a bad check. Because anybody in my sight I’m going to catch, I can say that. I said, ‘I can get him’. Meanwhile the police had been called. I took off and got through that wall and was over. He had gone through this backyard and was going across the street and got into another backyard. I’m almost hurdling those backyard fences and caught him. I caught him pretty quickly. I didn’t know what to do. I’m a pretty stout little kid for an athlete. I just kind of held on to him. In short order the police came and Mr. Bob was with them and they came. I can still remember Mr. Bob walking over there. He takes the guy from me and he bends his arm real hard. I said, ‘Wow, that’s harsh you know’. Of course, they reminded me later. Some of my friends I guess said, ‘Well, Jimmy, what if you had grabbed a hold of him and he pulled out a pistol?’ I said, ‘That’s another story’. I kicked off my shoes, I had loafers on. Just typical white socks. I kicked off my shoes in this running process. It was muddy parts and all that. When I got back to the store my boss basically said I could go. I get some clean socks off the rack back in dry goods, put new socks on and got right back in my checking stand. The people were still there. I don’t imagine 10 minutes had passed. Wasn’t my business.

RV: That’s a neat story.
JW: I did grocery all the way. Gosh, even during college I did grocery store business stocking and checking.

RV: Tell me about school first, what kind of student were you?
JW: I was spelling bee champ. When I first got to Memphis from West Memphis I guess in the 6th grade I came there half way through the 6th grade so I was the new guy in school and was the spelling bee champ to make a point. I was a good student. I was very good with the English language and the words and pronunciations and all those kinds of things, in particular spelling, obviously. I continued in that realm, but when my parents divorced I flunked that grade that year.
RV: Did you really?

JW: It was that overwhelming for me. There was no way I could flunk. I’m no pseudo-intellectual. I was a very good student. I was so devastated then we had the move and travels it was crazy. I literally flunked the 9th grade, which, obviously, I didn’t get any help. Even though I was at that school until the end. As the High School Principal said at graduation night, I had brought more notoriety to our school, even used a figure of some sort. Had so much money for advertising and I’d done that. This was before that. I sure did. I had to repeat that school. They cost me a year of athletics. That’s another story.

RV: Tell me about athletics. You were very involved in sports. What did you do?

JW: Football and track, obviously. I wanted to play center but not for me. I had to work, too. I wasn’t a basketball guy anyway. So when football season was over, of course, I worked. I loved baseball but again it was hard to do both. In high school I really had a good glove. In the summer I had to work. I’d like to play I did when I was younger. I would have liked to play American League Baseball but I was always working because of the family condition. Now, I was an acceptable student after I worked through that one year. I was a good student. I was no valedictorian kind of person but I was an average good student.

RV: What were your favorite subjects?

JW: My favorite subjects? What if I said history?

RV: I’d believe you.

JW: History and English. I’m not really a math guy. But history and English without a question then. Of course at that time, too, I kind of enjoyed shop. I didn’t have a lot of direction. I never got in any trouble. I almost became a kid of the street because I had to travel so much of the distances. But I was a good guy because I was raised right, I was loved right. I spent a lot of time in church. Even though I had a lot of freedom at that age I never had any trouble. I was never in any trouble. I was a good guy.

RV: Back to the sports. So you were quite a track athlete.

JW: I loved football from day one. My daddy and I had thrown balls. The night my son was born, the day my son was born that night my father and I are out at midnight throwing the football that I bought for my son’s birth. My daddy gave him a Bible. He still has both. My dad was very good to me in a lot of ways of course. We threw baseball and football growing up. Just hour upon hour we did that kind of stuff. So football was really my true love. That’s why I was
never fully happy at Memphis State. Because I lived in what they called the old gym dorm and
football guys had their own really nice dorm. I would go to the locker room and all and my real love
was football. Memphis State had talked of sending me to junior college down in Sanatobia,
Mississippi and try to beef me up a little bit, slowly over two years to maintain my speed. Then I
had Arkansas State and Murray State, some different places. All told my coach and my principal
basically said, ‘Listen, Jimmy, when you go down to Mississippi State or somewhere to junior
college and break a leg son, you’re going to forget your college in that regard’. They were correct
all told really. But they overwhelmed me with that. So I chose a track scholarship which was fine,
but that wasn’t my love. It was the football. So in high school we played the old basic T formation.
I was the right halfback. I could get off tackle really quick. Not everybody but I played both ways
every game. Not only was I the right halfback and the safety I was a punter. I was, of course, the
punt returner.

RV: I was going to say you had to be punt returner with your speed.

JW: Yes, the principal guy to get the ball on kickoffs. But first of all my heart was in the
game. I loved the game. I was certainly blessed by speed to make up for some size for me. Then
I just didn’t drop balls. I just was in a sense a gifted little guy that loved the game. So I played
football throughout high school. On one hand probably should have done small college, but that’s
another story. That was my football. Track just kind of fell into place. I mean I enjoyed running
and all that. I loved to play with it in football to do certain things.

RV: You were a sprinter right?

JW: I was a sprinter. Was 100 and back then it was the 220. Of course we were in yards
back then. I was the 220 guy and of course ran those sprint medley relays and things like that.
That was what I did.

RV: What year did you graduate high school?

JW: ’60. Should have been ’59.

RV: Right. I was going to say you were the year behind. You said you got a track
scholarship to Memphis State? So you stayed home there or in Memphis and went to college?

JW: Right, I didn’t have to leave town to go to school. I spent the first year at home. Then
the second year is when I moved on campus too.

RV: What do you remember most about your experience in college?
JW: We all have our own stories I guess. I never became a part of the college crowd. There again, I was the only kid there that was working. I did my obligation to my scholarship. I worked out, of course, most everyday, required understandably. Then I went to work. I had a couple of fraternities because I was on the track team if you will that wanted me to pledge. I flirted with that. But that’s not what I do. I’m not anti-social. I’m not a loner, but I’m just not that kind of a guy. So I didn’t really get into the real meat of, I guess, what some people consider college as far as the fraternities and parties and doing those kind of things. I literally was working on the weekend as people were doing that. I did enjoy it. Now, see I wasn’t there a part of my displeasure, my silliness was not playing football. That wasn’t the forefront of my mind. I had great success my freshman year. Mr. Memphis State that year was the senior sprinter on the track squad. He had such an ego that he couldn’t handle a freshman outrunning him. He was Mr. Memphis State so he quit the track squad.

RV: Because you could outrun him?

JW: Sorry for him. Then I was told informally my friend that came with me not the Don guy. Buddy Delaney who was our miler guy and I went to Memphis State together. He informed me, I don’t even know when it was, I had scored more points my freshman year. That’s all unofficial. That’s one of the things that comes to my mind that he had done his little homework and I had scored more points my freshman year than any other freshman.

RV: Running track?

JW: Yes, in the different meets that we had. It doesn’t mean anything to anybody or anything. So the point being that was something that I accomplished though that year, which was kind of nice little memory of sorts. Had a lot of success in the 100 and the 220. They’re over pretty quickly. We were over at Arkansas State where I almost went to school or considered. I shouldn’t say almost gone. At Jonesboro, Arkansas, as our high school quarterback was there. In the spring, this was later spring they had come to our campus at one point and they had a little stud quarter back by the name of Sammy Weir. One of those guys that does it all. I had beat him both times in the 100 and the 220 on our campus. So we got to Arkansas State and it’s the 100 and I jumped the gun in the first go around. Which means, I just really got a hold of the blocks. You’re always suspect when you go away anyway, playing football with their referees or whatever. It was a pretty fast gun the second go. I just come up on set and definitely got consciously hold. Boy, I mean before we were set it wasn’t that quick of a gun before. But that starter I’m not saying that he
conversed with Sam but it just still seemed pretty obvious to me. So Sam got out of the blocks real quick. He was a fast guy and I didn’t catch him. He beat me. So my old quarterback from high school came over and told me. He said, ‘Jim, I just lost some money on you’. I said ‘Well Jackie double up because I’ll get it back in the 220’, which I did. But at that same meet, this is what’s most important in talking about my life. We had some injured quarter milers. Now as a sprinter I don’t even want to think about a quarter, that’s just too far. Although we did 330s for distance for our 220 work. But my friend Buddy, he was the miler so we always worked out. He always worked on my stride because as you well know as an athlete, a runner if you can increase your stride and still be moving the same pace that obviously increases your speed. So Buddy had always worked with me on my stride. I was the speed work for his mile. So the coach came to me and said I was going to have to run a leg of the mile relay in addition to my 100 and 220. Well, at that age, on one hand I certainly would jump at the opportunity but at the same time, being human, I hadn’t really trained for that. I don’t like to run that far, that fast if you will. That’s a tough race as you well know. The quarter to me is the ultimate race. Anyway, I ran third leg and the guy in my leg set a school record that day for the high hurdles. So, if you hear what I’m saying I’m running a long legged guy on a quarter. So, my guy handed me the baton. We were in first place, but Arkansas State was right. It seemed like there was another school. Arkansas may be more than one team. Anyone the Arkansas State guy got his baton right behind me and he’s right here as we take off. I basically am thinking, ‘Jim, you’ve got your work cut out.’ I showed the coach something he hadn’t seen before. I knew that our last guy was a guy named Gene Scanlon. He’s our normal anchor for the mile. So I knew he could handle his part if I could just hang with this guy. We went through the first curve, he stays right behind me. We come out of the curve, of course, he comes up to my side. I said, ‘I just can’t let this guy get by me because I know the bear is going to be on me when I come out of the final curve.’ Well, I stretched my little old legs out and the coach had never seen me stride because I was sprinting. Hadn’t seen me stride like that and this guy couldn’t get by me. So then we go to the curve he had to fall back in and coming out I just gutted it. The point is that’s interesting I don’t remember all the little particular things of the 100 meters, but I remember that particular race out of all those races because it was out of your comfort zone and it was a collective effort I guess you could say.

RV: Did you take this confidence and this ability to go outside your comfort zone with you in Southeast Asia? Did it help you in the field?
JW: I don’t know what I’d have done in life without athletics. I, certainly, to answer directly your question unequivocally I did that in the leading of men. Confidence in myself and that sort of thing, absolutely.

RV: What else about college can you talk about? How were academics in college? Did you do ok?

JW: I did all right but then I just copped an attitude. I really had, even though I’m not laying anything on anyone but I didn’t have any real guidance. I wasn’t happy there. I look back and think how silly. All we had to do was go over to the gym and give them your receipt of what you needed. We pre-registered. We didn’t have to stand in any lines. I remember walking through the admin building on registration day and seeing these serpentine lines of people who already stood in line to get their classes. Now they’re having to stand in line to pay their money. I didn’t have to do any of that. I realized at the time, but it didn’t have nearly as much meaning as it did in later years. I got into academic trouble, in a sense, purposely. I mean, I just started working more hours and ultimately I left college early. I went back and got my degree and then had a Masters in management. But at that time I went ahead and volunteered for the draft because I knew I needed to have that done and out of the way to come back and enter the work force, etc. So I went ahead and volunteered for the draft as we called it.

RV: This is 1963 is that right?

JW: This is ’63.

RV: How’d your mom and your father feel about you going into the military?

JW: There were no real problems. Of course, there was no war going on at that particular juncture as far as that goes. But my father was remarried. He was on the road and all that, caught up in his own life in a sense. Not an overly educated man himself, either. He had no real problem with it and, ‘What’s mom going to do but whatever you think’s best, son. I support you.’ So there were no real complications at all with that.

RV: Tell me what you thought of President Kennedy. You were in college during his presidency and he’s going to be killed obviously in November ’63.

JW: I was in France when that happened.

RV: Did his presidency affect you, his inaugural speech? I’ve heard this before from veterans had some kind of impact on them were you conscious of that or what can you say about Kennedy’s presidency?
JW: Well I can speak to that. I don’t know that I as one person in Memphis, Tennessee at that point caught up in just trying to get on with life was too politically oriented. For example, I did mention we had mandatory Air Force ROTC at Memphis State.

RV: You did. Ok.

JW: We never had any in high school. My brother did at another school. Very much an American and a patriot and all those, but the military was not my gig. But I did do the mandatory Air Force ROTC. It was like taking an elective. It wasn’t anything that I was interested in pursuing. I had had that little bit of a background with the military. Certainly, I was aware of what’s going on in life in the world, but at that particular age how much importance to me, not a whole lot. Certainly, I was very much aware of Kennedy. Basically, with the Camelot effect of it all, certainly impressed as the world was with his nice appearance and his articulation. I mean the man could speak so very well. All of that but down to the political level of too much conscious thought about it I can’t say that I was there.

RV: That’s kind of why I asked the question. Just your political awareness and how involved politically were you. Tell me why the Army. Why the U.S. Army? Why not the Air Force? Why not the Marine Corps?

JW: The Marine Corps would have been a good fit for my *esprit de corps* part of my make up. There was no one selling me anything. The Army as much as anything it just kind of fit. Air Force never, even though I had been in the Air Force thing. Maybe that’s what helped me decide the Air Force was not where I needed to go. I talked with the Army and they realized that I was pursuing a business degree. They negotiated with me that I could go to finance school. Even though I’m an infantry officer it wouldn’t change a thing. Going in though, perhaps I spoke to them, I can’t remember. But I just know that I was satisfied with the Army because I had a letter stating to me that I was assured finance school, which basically I have a minor in accounting. That’s where I was oriented. So that’s the way I signed up. There was this letter, ‘Ok Wheeler, don’t let this letter out of your sight because this letter is going to take you after basic to Ft. Benjamin Harrison and finance school and that sort of thing’.

RV: Were they true to their word?

JW: They were. I almost became untrue to mine because talking about that *esprit de corps* stuff. During basic training at Ft. Polk, Louisiana we were called to the theatre one day for presentation. Remember, the military even though I had the Air Force this is really very foreign to
me. I like the regimentation of it, very regimented guy and all. We walked in there and there were
two sergeants up on stage in their spit shined boots campaigning for Special Forces. They had
what we call their dog and pony show. Figuratively speaking, I found myself reaching in my back
pocket to tear up that letter so to speak because they were talking my language. I really like the all
of what they were speaking to, the training and all the challenges and everything that goes with
Special Forces. I managed to get through that to my gain really. Because that was '63 and that
would have put me in Vietnam very early, all told. That’s yet another story. I went ahead and went
to finance school. I went to the basic course and out of that you became either a pay specialist or
travel specialist those sorts of things. They took the upper 5% of the class and kept us there for
another x number of weeks to become military accounting specialists. Then what happened there
was those.

RV: This was at Ft. Polk or at Benjamin Harrison?

JW: This is at Ft. Benjamin Harrison. We did basic at Ft. Polk and then I was off to Ft.
Benjamin Harrison to the finance school. So we went to that school. When we graduated we had
an MOS that was civilianized in the States. In other words, it wasn't just a regular pay job. It was
accounting specialists. Our MOS, our military occupation specialty was civilian in the States that
all of us were going overseas, given. Ironically, one of those fellows in this small group of us, had
orders when we got our orders, this is early fall of '63. He had orders for a place called Saigon.
Not one person on staff knew where it was so help me.

RV: Really? That's very interesting.

JW: Somewhere I don't know what level he had to go to. For the guys that were our
sergeants or our platoon sergeant, platoon leaders whatever the structure was for the school at
that strata or the second one up or third for that matter. No one knew where this man was going.

RV: That’s very revealing, very revealing.


RV: Let’s talk about basic training at Ft. Polk. When you went off to basic, tell me about
that. How did you feel?

JW: I guess there was a certain amount of anxiety of sorts. I can still remember the
Greyhound bus backing out of the Greyhound Station there in Memphis and my mother and a little
girlfriend waving as we pulled away. I see my white '59 Ford convertible sitting there.

RV: Were you missing the car more?
JW: Already. An interesting piece of our history, Richard. We were down, of course, we were going to Ft. Polk going down through Mississippi to get to Louisiana. Somewhere in Mississippi obviously lunchtime and it was all pre-programmed. They make this run everyday more or less. We stopped in a little old highway no interstate. Just old Highway 61 I guess. A little old café somewhere there in Mississippi. We white boys went in the front door. The black boys that were on that bus had to go to the backdoor of that café so help me Lord and receive a box lunch and eat out under a tree.

RV: And they were going to serve their country?

JW: Amen.

RV: You remember this vividly?

JW: I remember that vividly because there’s one more incident like that later on in basic. Now even though I had to know that was morally wrong and I wasn’t a kid now. I was 22 years old. It really set my world on fire. I was a good grocery store man. I had to know that was morally wrong. But it was the way it was. So I changed in short order here. I’m sure I didn’t get too personally tore up about it. First of all, that’s just the way life was. I mean I worked at a little old precursor to the Dairy Queen. More than once a black has come up there. Most of them would come. If they wanted some ice cream, they’d come to the back door. That’s just the way it was. It’s terrible. It tears my heart, but that’s just the way it was. I almost left the state when James Meredith made his introduction to Ol’ Miss. That was my history. Anyway we get to basic training and we get all of our equipment. It gets late, in fact it’s dark. In this particular case they divided us by height. That means I wasn’t in the first platoon. I guess I was in the fourth, third or fourth, it doesn’t matter. But the point is here it is like literally dark and this is an old fort with the old World War II barracks and stuff you know? You’ve been hustled. You’ve been on the bus and they’ve hustled you through getting your duffle bag of stuff and you don’t know right from left. I bought a book to read on that trip called The Natural Superiority of Women.

RV: Really?

JW: Yes.

RV: Interesting reading at the time.

JW: They took it away from me like it was so to speak like an x-rated something. This was a study, this was the real deal. I remember I hadn’t thought about that.

RV: Did your girlfriend give that to you?
JW: No, she did not. I was intellectually stimulated here. Those kinds of things were happening. About that time I heard ‘All right, god damn it.’ I looked and I saw a big old black sergeant that had a nose like Sunny Listen almost all the way across his face. Helmet liner looked too small for his big head and two little beady eyes. Sergeant First Class Brown. There’s when I started thinking what have I done? Not so much directly him. Just it all culminating at this particular point. Well, this man was the ultimate soldier. This man trained us for the next six or eight weeks immensely well. I came to love him. It was the first time I ever took any orders from a black man to make my point if you will.

RV: Did you have any problem with that?

JW: That fell aside because he was so disciplined. I can still see the way he carried his arms. He changed fatigues two or three times a day. Always breaking starch. Always had that helmet liner down over his big old broad face, but he was fair. Ok, he was hard-core but he was fair.

RV: Any other of your white fellow soldiers have a problem with him?

JW: None, that’s of any real consequence. There’s no real problems like that that come to mind. I was just mightily impressed. I regretted as the years went by that I never ever able to see this man again. I remember all this was foreign to me, foreign language. He was up for NCO of the year of Ft. Polk. He was just a very impressive soldier. He cussed like a sailor. He would show up any time day or night. 4:00 in the morning, 9:00 at night. He could go home at night and stay. He was that dedicated. He would walk through on the weekends on unprogrammed visits to see what we were doing. I’d always hear him say, ‘Outside, everybody, outside’. He just had that unique voice. He’d appear at 4:00 in the morning. Sleeping and hear that voice. Fall outside. Now, if you got on his wrong side and there were a couple what we called dilly boppers. Guys that just couldn’t walk smooth. They bounced, that’s a dilly bopper. You’ve got the whole platoon moving smoothly and there’s this guy’s head bopping.

RV: He didn’t like that?

JW: We had a little old redheaded boy. A little old skinny country boy that was his dilly bopper. He just made this boy cry on occasion. The first time I ever heard this and I hope I can say this but the first time I ever heard this was from Sergeant Brown. To this kid he said, ‘You look like a monkey fucking a football’. That was his statement. I said, ‘My God in heaven. That was his statement.’ He used that every now and then. This poor kid was bad news.
RV: When he said that, did you guys keep a straight face I guess you had to.

JW: We had to but that was like with anything as time went on he was still in the traces.

Then I became a college boy. I was a striper, I don’t even remember if it was two stripes or three.

I was, I guess, squad leader, not a platoon leader. Anyway, I had a leadership role from day one there. Didn’t have to even sleep in the bay. We had the little NCO rooms on the end of the barracks. The only time and so in that leadership role only one time did I have to pull KP, kitchen police is a nasty thing. You go on a rotating basis and somebody has to get up early and do all that and wash pots and pans. Only one time, and it was something of a conflict. One time during those eight weeks I was kept behind to do KP. I wound up being a DRO, which was a dining room orderly. As opposed to working in the kitchen and washing pots and pans and all that kind of stuff. The DRO just had to set up the tables with salt and pepper, all the condiments and things. I remember in there working, and I had had no separation from my squad or platoon as a total. I remember then marching away without me. I felt so lost because you form that bond that you literally carry through. I mean, that’s what it’s all about is that bond, looking after your guys. I just remember that emotion. They left without me and I felt so lost on an island, so to speak, by myself.

RV: Excuse me, how did you take to the leadership role? I imagine you took to it pretty well.

JW: Yes, I did. Captain of the football team and those sorts of things I’ve just always kind of excelled. I was a marble champion. I had success and I guess that helped out in a sense. I don’t mind doing even though I’m in a leadership role I’m going to do what you do. I’m not above anything. I didn’t have any problem in that role. Back then, the PT test, the physical training test, you had five events and each one you can max it at 100. Not many people max any given event. I have maxed it a number of times over the years. In recent years, I’ve been gone awhile but toward then end we were down to three events at that time. Everything’s cyclic they’d gone back and changed this that and the other. We were doing push-ups and sit-ups and whatever else. A mile or two miles I always maxed that even as a major, lieutenant colonel. At that time there were five events and that time I could max them all but one, and that was the grenade throw. That was just kind of hard to do. You had to low crawl, you had the monkey bars, parallel bars. You had to run, dodge and jump thing. The doggone hand grenade throw.

RV: You were a football player why couldn’t you get the grenade throw?
JW: I could get it there, but it's like how come Shaquille O'Neal can't do a free throw kind
of a thing?

RV: Free throw.

JW: You're the center and it was like a spider web thing. Wherever you go it in you got
two points, three points, whatever they were. But to max it to throw three grenades or whatever
there were, say there were three or five all into the center was nearly impossible. But I scored on
my first PT test 477. I remember it well.

RV: Out of 500?

JW: Yes, sir. There was a handful of us. This is my next black story. There were just a
handful of us that the sergeant made, maybe the company commander deal. We hardly saw the
commander we lived with our platoon sergeant. That was Sergeant Brown. Anyway anybody that
made 450 or greater on the PT test got a weekend pass. So as I said already, a handful of us got
to go to town. One of the guys with us was a black guy. We went to Leesville, the supporting little
community of Ft. Polk. We rode the bus into town and got to Main Street in Leesville, which was
just a classic old soldier post road thing. Four weeks, five weeks wherever we are in this process
and we are looking forward to a real meal. We go to this restaurant and they immediately told us
that we could stay but he had to leave. 1963 in a town that made its living off the United States
government and its citizens and they would not serve this man. So we all did an about face and
marched out together this time. We didn't have that circumstance in Mississippi. We didn't have
the opportunity I guess. We left and I guess we got on the bus. We went to another town. I'll think
of it in a moment. We went to another town fairly nearby for the pass.

RV: He was able to eat there?

JW: Yes. That's what we did. And it was over. This Sergeant got my attention so well.
Again I'm kind of an overdone guy. It's go to be right, got to be right thing. You probably know
what I'm talking about. I was so impressed with it all, a fellow that we had joined the Army
together, we both worked at the same grocery store for years. We went back in his car, I
remember being in the backseat of his car. Maybe it was his family somebody came down. But so
help me Lord, this is when we were in khakis and put the tie in here or sauces. Because I was in
uniform, so help me, I rode back to Memphis, Tennessee with my hat on because I was in uniform.
That's how impressive Sergeant Brown, how impressive he was.

RV: Because that was part of your uniform and you did not take it off.
JW: I was certainly authorized to have my hat off in a car. But I’m like I say a little over the top and dress right dress. That’s the way Sergeant Brown impressed me.

RV: Tell me what your typical day was like in basic?

JW: It’s been a while, Richard.

RV: In general.

JW: It was basically up early to the voice of Sergeant Brown everybody outside. You always had your rifle with you. I remember more than once standing in the early formation and somebody dropped their rifle. We had the big old M-1s before the M-14. Then you’d have to run around and say. He did little things that were kind of humorous, but it was all toward driving home the point. I remember guys running around apologizing to their rifles, as they’re having to run around the platoon, ‘M-1 rifle I’m so sorry I dropped you. M-1 rifle I am so sorry I dropped you. I promise I will never drop you again’. Just incessantly. He’s driving the point home, driving it home at the expense of the poor soul.

RV: But it worked?

JW: But it worked. Because if it worked half as well for those who were with me so to speak as to what I brought out of there, they’re better men today for it. He just impressed me immensely.

RV: What kind of weapons training did you guys have? Just basic range training?

JW: Yes, just what’s called the old KD range, the known distance range. A lot of Maggie’s drawers were flying back then, if you know that term. A lot of red flags because that meant you missed the target. You had to go down range and we fired and we’d go down in the pits and hold up the targets and mark them and do all those sorts of things. A lot of Maggie’s drawers on the KD range. Just the basic M-1 weapon. I’m sure we had to touch on some of the other stuff. Of course, in OCS, ultimately we handled all the different weaponry. But in basic training primarily rifle marksmanship.

RV: Basic training, was it like you had expected? Were you able to handle the military regimen ok?

JW: Never had any troubles with that. I guess, again, part of my upbringing. First of all, I’m dutiful to my superiors. My mother and father, I’m obedient to them. I’m reading a book now on Elvis and Gladys, his mother. Literally, the history of the family way back when. Back to Cherokee bloodlines and all. Now coming into the realm of where I came in it was literally in the
’54 range right now. One of the guys is talking about, this is later though when he was in movies how Elvis always said, ‘Yes, sir. No sir’. Even if you were just two years older. He did. Even when he was the star that he was when a lady came in the room, he would offer his chair. My analogy there I guess is that’s kind of the way I was raised. So it fell right into place. I’m the last guy at work to ever question my boss. I don’t do that. Jump? How high? Within reason. I’m not going to pull William Calley. I was at Ft. Benning during his court martial. Just happened to be on base when he was doing that. I wouldn’t go that far. But I’m a by the numbers guy. So I had no problem with the regimentation of the Army. Then again, athletics is to a certain degree is an awful lot like that. I have a dear fiend, whose name I won’t mention who’s in the NFL Hall of Fame, renowned NFLer and in a sense when he retired with a lot of records, he didn’t know how to come out of the rain without a coach telling him. His whole life had been regimented by what the coach tells you to do. I had no problem with that part of it at all.

RV: When you finished basic you knew you were going to finance school?

JW: Yes.

RV: That was understood and you carried through with that?

JW: Yes. Absolutely.

RV: You went to Ft. Benjamin Harrison?


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

JW: Alright.

RV: Continuing now, let’s talk about your advanced training at Ft. Benjamin Harrison. How would you describe it in general?

JW: Well, it was step up as far as quality of life goes, of course. We were out of World War II barracks. We’re in the more modern day at that time, cinder block facilities as that goes. Something more in a sense of a gentleman’s course. Although we’re still very brand new, private E-2 soldiers and that sort of thing. More of a gentleman’s course with what we had to do versus maybe going into advanced infantry training, which would be more in line with what we had been previously doing. There again, though, I wore stripes. So once again I didn’t sleep actually in the bay area. I slept in a squad leader’s room I guess you could say. There were two bunks beds if you will in there. Four racks total. I remember one time being reported as AWOL.

RV: Really?
JW: I’d hurt my back pretty good at one point at Memphis State on a weight program that I wasn’t supposed to be on because our coach didn’t agree with weights. I did and that was another story. I hurt my back pretty good in there. In one of the Memphis State annuals they actually took a picture of me sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Because of those little sorry bunks they had in the dorm, I usually would take mine off and sleep in the floor for support of my back. There’s literally a picture in an annual of Memphis State with me sleeping that way. My back was still bothering me certainly at this point in my life in the Army. So on a given, whatever night. It seemed like it may have been a weekend. Anyway I had taken my little thin mattress off and laid it back down back behind stuff. I was down there sleeping. So when the CQ in charge of quarters I guess you’d say came through just flashed his light around. He didn’t see me in my bunk. Wrote it up on that report that I wasn’t there. Of course, it was easily explained. I don’t know that I had any great consequences but that was an annoyance because I’m the last guy that’s going to be AWOL. That’s one of those little things that I remember during that course of time. We used to call it Ft. Ben’s Rest home, just a little play on terms. It was so much more simple in life versus basic in that regard. A different style of life. That was where the adjutant general’s corps school was then. Personnel people quite different from the combat arms guys. Just a lighter load to carry in that environment.

RV: What was a typical day like? What did you do? Was it PT also?
JW: Back then PT wasn’t nearly to the degree that it became as far as the running goes. Back then you had your daily calisthenics. The running that we came to know in the ’70s and ’80s was not prevalent at that point in the Army. I don’t remember. Of course, the running we did though we did in boots, which was the worst thing in the world you can do in those old combat boots. That’s long before running shoes and shorts and all that, the logical things we should run in were introduced. You did primarily what we call the daily dozen. Army drill number one, you go out there in formation usually a sergeant leads us in calisthenics is what they basically are. I always remember you know Army drill number one, exercise number one. Side straddle hop, starting position move. You just automatically you’re there. Ready exercise. One, two, three. We did a lot of calisthenics or our daily dozen they called it. I remember running on my own. I always run. That would tell me that we probably didn’t run. Because I used to run the golf course. It was one of those things I found dozens of golf balls. Even here, this is in ’63 I’m jogging. Perhaps not every day but I’m out there jogging on my own outside the realm of the PT program for the Army.
because frankly I liked to do that. Secondly, I require more exercise. I’m accustomed to more exercise than what I was getting with the Army. The day at Ft. Benjamin Harrison was basically classes. We’re studying accounting. We went to class in the mornings after our PT and mess hall and the same in the afternoon. We had quite a bit of homework to do, especially during the accounting course. It was quite a bit more demanding.

RV: How did you do with that academically?

JW: With my accounting work at Memphis Sate already of course it was a little different discipline of sorts, it wasn’t any big deal for me to do that. It was a demanding course. I remember it being a demanding course. When I mentioned studying at night, we did. We got some studying done. That’s pretty much within reason what the finance course was all about.

RV: How long did it last?

JW: It had to be six if not eight weeks. What was called AIP for all intensive purposes. Then we stayed on for the extra course, but round numbers of eight weeks excuse me. Maybe 10 with the add-on.

RV: After the add-on what was going to be your duty? What were you going to do? This is when people did not know about Saigon is that current?

JW: Right. This is when we have orders. I don’t know what I’m going to specifically do yet other than I am quote unquote a military accounting specialist. I can cover a great realm. It’s going to depend upon where you end up as to what part of that you’re going to do.

RV: Where did you get your order to?

JW: Braccone, France?

RV: Was that unexpected?

JW: I’m sure that we did not know going in. My body belongs to the Army now so I’m not too riled up on what’s going to take place next because I’m at their pleasure. I don’t know that I was necessarily surprised. Maybe I was conditioned by then. Nonetheless I received orders for an Army depot in Braccone, France.

RV: This is still ’63?

JW: This is the fall of ’63 now, probably September. Near a little town Angouleme, France. About the time I got my orders or after I got my orders. I was advised by someone that I was eligible to go to officer’s candidate school because of my college, etc. and my grades, whatever the scores were that I was eligible for OCS. So that got my attention. This is one of
those lessons learned, Richard. So, I make an appointment or I asked if I might see the first
sergeant. We’re still just privates. We’re just brand spanking new literally. We’re in a student
status and we have no nothing. We’re just their students. So, I made an appointment to see the
first sergeant because I wanted to talk to him. I wanted some guidance on how I might go about
pursuing OCS. Remember I’m not an 18-year-old kid. I’m four years greater than that and there’s
something to be said for that. I went into his office and I remember it well. I’d gone through the
proper chain of command to see him. Then again, he’s an old crusty first sergeant. We’re just
widgets out here. Move them through, moving them through. Don’t want them bogged down too
much with any individual because in two more weeks you’re out of there. You’re gone. New guys
come in. He has a great responsibility. I presented to him the fact that I had been advised that I
was eligible for officer candidate school. I was very much interested and I’d like to see about
going. ‘Oh, no Private Wheeler. You have orders to France. When you get to France, take this up
with your gaining unit. Then they can send you back here to go to OCS. I was by no means
wanting to be insubordinate or non-military but I’m still learning. I’ll never forget this, Richard. I’m
standing in front of his desk, probably parade rest or something like that. I leaned on his desk and
I said, ‘But First Sergeant, doesn’t it make more sense, the government would save a lot of money.’
Wrong answer. ‘If we could go ahead and work this out now rather than the expense of going over
there and coming back.’ ‘Get the hell out of my office, Private’. I said, ‘Whoa.’

RV: End of discussion.

JW: We boarded trains; we rode on trains then. We’re going to Ft. Dix to process to go
over on a ship. Actually to go to Bremerhaven, Germany. We went to Ft. Dix, New Jersey via
train. That in itself was kind of a unique experience. We were just going from Indiana over and it
was day or night. It was kind of a unique experience to do that. I don’t even know how long. We
weren’t long processing at Ft. Dix, maybe a week, whatever it may have been. We were in the
status and they were having guys do KP. Somehow I had gotten wizened to that and I was jocking
around and maneuvering around. I would never shirk my duty, but that’s not a duty that’s just an
extra thing. I remember one time being in the PX area playing a pinball machine with another guy
or two and a sergeant came in looking for somebody to do some extra duty. I remember double-
talking. I’m really an honest person. I’d wizened up a little bit. Maybe I was a little smarter than
the 18 year olds. I talked myself out of whatever it was that extra duty was all about somehow. So
I escaped pretty unscathed during my little tenure at Ft. Dix before we boarded the U.S.S. Simon
Buckner to float to Europe. I knew I was prone to motion sickness. I knew that I was going to get sick on the high seas. This was October. The Atlantic is a pretty rough place, generally speaking during that time. I don’t know maybe Dramamine was about then. If Dramamine was alive then they didn’t let us soldiers know about it. I didn’t know about it myself for that matter. All they talked about was feeding you crackers keeping something on your stomach. I knew that ultimately I was going to be ill. I wasn’t looking forward to that. I had no choice. Let me tell you, I knew that I wasn’t as bad off as other guys because this happened. The Statue of Liberty was still in sight and guys were throwing up. Talk about a mindset. Come on, we were still basically in the harbor if you will. So help me, guys were already throwing up and you could still see the Statue of Liberty. So, ‘I said well at least I’m not as bad off as others.’ Of course, we were compartmentalized. We were down in the bowels of the ship. Different levels over here were military officers and their wives, even NCOs for that matter totally separate and distinct from us. I mean I was down in the bottom, bottom, bottom the third rack up here with the old asbestos piping just above me. Everybody had an assigned duty. If I had been assigned to the mess, to the galley, I’d have had to jump ship so to speak. I don’t think I ate one meal during that week. It was bad news. My assignment, I got assigned one sink in the latrine. Just one. So in the normal course of the day you get up early and do your duty and go to the mess hall. I remember climbing down to the mess hall and the whole ship is rocking and all that aroma flowing out of the kitchen is just too much for me.

RV: It was a weeklong trip?
JW: Eight days, eight days. Then after the meal you go to your assigned duty. In my case, clean one sink. Then we were basically herded topside. We primarily had to stay up on top of the ship during the day. It was cold. I hadn’t thought about that in a long time. It was needless to say an experience. I remember I think sitting in a big room at some point watching a movie at night maybe or something. It was eight days and I think I was close to green when we got to Bremerhaven and picked up our duffle bags and went down the gangplank at Bremerhaven, depending on where you were going. We boarded a train at night; we traveled across Germany at night so I didn’t really see any of Germany. We must have stopped wherever and guys got off. It may have just been a civilian train that we were on. I don’t remember that. I remember arriving in Paris. One of the first things I remember we’re in the train station. Those of us who are continuing south and there aren’t many of us left now. There were still a few little Army posts from Paris south down. I don’t even think I was the last guy. I’m standing at the urinal, just a big horse urinal in the
train station. I'm aware of movement to my side. I look and I look twice and it's a woman cleaning
the urinals. They do that over there. It happened to me in France two years ago. Not exactly the
same but there was woman right there in there where we were going to the bathroom. At this point
in my life a woman just right there cleaning while I'm urinating was something I remember and a
new experience. Then we boarded a bus. I always remember because later I was in Paris for two
years almost. J'adore Paris. I remember seeing the Eiffel tower for the first time as we traveled
through the city. Headed south. I'll always remember that sight. That's just something you've
seen in pictures and there it is for real. Little did I know that just over a year or so later I would be
back full time in Paris by the grace of God. Anyway, we headed on south. Ultimately got to this
little Army depot. In fact, a newspaper there was called La Foret, which meant the forest. It was
the same road in and out, amidst the forest there was this little Army depot. I was assigned to a
finance dispersing section. Just a small finance office there at this little Army depot. I remember
early on talking to the guys about going to OCS. Basically they said, 'Look we've got it made here.
We were finance guys'. I remember going up the main road there, ours being the finance office.
We were distinctly different and we had our own little barracks up on the hill. Remember, the first
night I was there going by what we called the Animal House, the big major barracks were all those
people were. You could hear the noise and all that went with it. It was Saturday night so to speak.
I was so grateful to be in this more proper gentleman's place in a sense. More than one guy said,
'No Wheeler this is a good assignment. We don't have to pull all the extra duty BS that the other
guys do.' They all had to march to the motor pool and stuff at this point. We didn't even have to do
a formation or should we realistically. We were free to come and go from our barracks to our office
without marching and all that stuff. They said just do your time and go home and live happily ever
after.

RV: How long were you assigned there?

JW: Again, I was on the ship in October. I got there in football season so I immediately
started playing in the league of flag football there for the post. We played other posts. I know we
had more than one team on post we played. Then we played other posts. I got a visit from, back
then the military really had real football teams. There were a lot of professional guys that were
drafted back then that played on these football teams for the Army or for this particular post or this
unit. I got a visit from one of their major coaches after that season that asked me to come up and
consider playing with them the next year. The regular football, tackle ball, pads and all. But what
happened is, at this time we, the United States government is starting to phase out of France. We weren’t the southernmost unit. We were just one little depot. Things were starting to phase out. So, when it got our turn so to speak. In other words I got there in October of ’63, well in July of ’64 I’m in Paris. So during this interim because of my MOS I was able to get to the finance office in downtown Paris. I could have just as easily been assigned say to Germany or just some regular assignment. But because of my MOS I got assigned, as did another friend of mine, buddies there, got assigned to downtown Paris. Big finance office. Because of the problems that had been going on in Europe, not to mention specifically France and the history of time then we were required to wear civilian clothes to work. We just lived on the economy. All of a sudden this little old boy from Tennessee was now an E-4 in downtown Paris, France wearing a suit every day to work. With light hair, lighter than yours then as I got to travel the streets of Paris. I was often times picked as a Scandinavian person. Certainly not a GI from the American Army there in Paris. I milked that a little bit with some of those young women. But that’s another story.

RV: This is in 1964?

JW: Yes, July of ’64 arrived in Paris. Became the only America when you ask about what was I going to do in this particular case I was in the reconciliation branch of this huge finance office that served all of France and Spain and Italy and all that stuff. I worked in an office up on the sixth floor was where our normal Army pay specialists all were. Normal finance guys, financial procedures guys. I was down like on the third floor. My boss was a Frenchman. I was the only American, only GI. There was an old elderly American man in there. I don’t know why he was subordinate to Monsieur John. I can see him now, an elderly, gentleman, that worked there. There was a Romanian, Constantine Zacahenney. Then there was a retired French officer, a Vietnamese woman, where now I get to learn about Vietnam. Then a French lady who married an E-6, myself and Monsieur John. John who was the boss. I was the only GI in there working in reconciliation. Very unique and different. We wore civilian suit. Leading Baptist ties we were staying at that time. That’s what we did.

RV: How did you like the French?

JW: The French are a unique study. Is that political?

RV: Sure.

JW: What I learned was even to this day because my wife and I, as I say, just went a couple years ago and she had not been there before. I, to this day j’adore, I love the city of Paris.
The city of Paris has a magic about it like nowhere I've ever been. To take my wife of 35 and a half years now was a very, very special occasion for me to return to my youth, if you will, of sorts and share with her the sidewalks I used to walk and where I used to live and those sorts of things. So the magic of Paris abounds. But the attitude of Parisians along the Champs Elysees and other tourist type attractions remains bad attitude or negative attitude towards Americans.

RV: Then and now?
JW: Then and now.
RV: Then too?
JW: Yes, absolutely. In general, but what I learned was get off the beaten track which I was able to do by living there. They're just people like you and I. I remember some people sharing their emotions when we were shutting down something else there near Paris. People talking to me about how saddened they were that the Americans were going away. I know part of it was driven monetarily. They still cared for them. I remember having a meal- I don't know how it came about- but in the suburbs, having a meal in a home, a French couple, an older couple who literally the Germans had an anti-tank gun on their big back porch during the war. They were captives, if you will, for much longer than the average person. You now, the average person realizes how long France really was occupied by Germany and all that goes with that. These were just people that so greatly appreciated what we did and we liberated them. Off the beaten track, they're real humans. On the beaten track just like if you go to the west side of Dallas to eat, you're normally a tourist. The attitude of that waiter is going to be a little more caustic in a sense. It's the local neighborhood restaurant that you traveled to. The French have that attitude that's above you and I anyway. Just by nature, by their history. So I didn't have any personal problems. I was always impressed with the language. The French to this day do look askance or look down at us, a generalized statement. They look at us and we don't have a whole lot of history yet. Its just 200 years if you will. 227 I guess versus their history. If you want to get down and start dividing it out let's just look at your success and we didn't need to go there. They still have that attitude it showed when we were there. They won't look you in the eye. Sit right on the metro with them and they know you're American. They see my Nikes. I need them on for walking. I love my boots but I am not comfortable walking around in boots. They're still that way. There was a point that I got away from the French.

RV: How did you work with them in that office?
JW: Good stuff. That's what it was. The language thing I wanted to share, going back to
the intellectual thing. I think we all certainly are a part of where we've been. We are from where
we've been. Because our orders have been protected we haven't had to learn thank the Lord,
German and Japanese and all those things. Given these circumstances, I think without question
the American soldier, the American person is very ingenious. That's shown time and time again. I
dare say if we had the circumstances that I'm fixing to speak to we would have ascended to that
level too. The point I'm getting to is, I mentioned Constantine Zachanney. He was at that time 48
year old man in my office and we became good friends. He used to take me to his gym. He really
worked on that chest. He always had a great attitude. He was a man without a country; he was
from Romania. He was in the theatre. He was a very dramatic guy, a nice looking man. Just had
all the air of a theatrical guy. He was going to be a doctor, but all those things went away because
of the war. He floated, I forget how many countries. Most of them did about the same thing. Here
he is in 1964 and '65 and '66 when I was there. Literally a man without a country because he
could not get French citizenship and I don't remember all the ins and outs. He obviously spoke
Romanian. Spoke German at some point. He went to either Italy or Spain, one of the two and
picked that up. Now he's in France so he's speaking French. Obviously he's working for the
United States government so he's speaking English. These people, and I can remember this very
specifically. The barber that cut my hair was Polish. Obviously his native language was Polish.
He was at Auschwitz. He lived through that by cutting the German officers' hair so he picked up
German. After the war he wound up in Italy, then Spain, the France. He spoke all those
languages. Now he was working in an American building if you will, cutting American GIs hair so
he spoke English. It was just astounding. So, so impressive to me. One time I took a little girl to
the Gard du Nord. I had a little Austin Healy, a little red Austin Healy. It was like a Sunday
morning I'm sending her back. She was a schoolteacher in Switzerland. So got her off on the train
and I come out to my car Sunday morning and here's this guy standing out in the street looking at
my car. So then the typical American, my immediate thing was, 'What's he doing to my car?' kind
of thing, right? Typical. I say typical American. I walk up to him in the heart of Paris, France. He's
literally admiring my little car. Turns to me in perfect English words to that effect, 'Good morning.'
Rather than 'Bonjour, Messieur,' he speaks in English to me and compliments my car. It was just a
bountice. I was so impressed with that part of it.

RV: How much contact did you have with the Vietnamese woman?
JW: The woman in my office?

RV: Yes.

JW: Again she was an office employee. She was very low key, not in a leadership role. I mean it was just one big office. We were there and spoke just like you do with the people in here. Whereas I became not an intimate, I often think of Constantine Zachanney because he was like father figure to me. We became real close. We used to go to the gym together. He set me up one time. To answer your question about her, I didn’t spend an inordinate amount of time with her but I did learn some things about Vietnam obviously through her. Then the French officer that was there. One time French officer I was able to learn quiet a bit too.

RV: What did you learn about Vietnam?

JW: Just some of the basic history. In other words, I knew nothing. Nothing that I can probably even regurgitate to you now other than just a general blending of it really is a country there. It does do this that and the other. Generalization.

RV: I take it then based on that answer that you didn’t have a whole lot of knowledge about what the United States was doing in 1964 in Southeast Asia.

JW: That’s a good question. I’m trying to get back to Zacaheeney, but that’s better yes. That is very true. Even at that point in my life, if I had any idea of what I was ultimately going to do I would have taken so much more advantage of those two people. There was nothing. I was just serving my time and fixing to go back to Memphis, Tennessee. There was no urgency on my part to really dissect her or his brain and really learn where all of Vietnam. It wasn’t on the table.

RV: How aware were you of American policy in Southeast Asia at this point?

JW: Minimal. Little to none. It was totally foreign.

RV: How long were you in Paris?

JW: From July ’64 to February or March of ’66.

RV: Where did you go from there?

JW: I went to OCS.

RV: So you finally did get to OCS?

JW: I did.

RV: What was that experience like?

JW: Can I tell you one story though?

RV: Absolutely, of course.
JW: Constantine Zachaeeney, my Romanian friend, I started going with him way across town to Montmartre is where he went to the gym to work out. One of the early days there, it's just a little hole in the wall gym. We had to wade through all this [?] area. Literally wade through in a sense the prostitutes there. This was after work. So they're just people too. You stop for water or Coke or whatever and sit there and eating there. They're there they're having to eat and drink too you know? So that in itself was really an odd thing because there were really obvious prostitutes. We'd speak to them as we were going on about our business. So we go to this gym. It's just a hole in the wall kind of a place. In short order it was either my first or second visit. This guy’s in my face.

RV: Who? Somebody at the gym?

JW: This guy’s in my face. A muscled up guy in my face. In short order, I’m just this little American guy in the heart of Paris here. He’s Parisian. This discourse starts. All of a sudden, three, four, five or six whatever guys, is only a natural thing. ‘Oh what’s going on here’? All these guys are on his side standing behind him. He’s literally giving me some grief here.

RV: What was his beef?

JW: It was just the French thing. I’m an American on his ground. He’s French.

RV: What are you doing here?

JW: I’m all muscled up. I’m going to whoop your butt. Literally that sort of stuff. I’m saying, ‘Constantine, I need some help here. It looks like I’m fixing to take a whooping.’ Although he was going to know he was in the fight. I can’t remember, but this is absolutely so. We’re literally toe-to-toe. This is probably the key point. I stood my ground. Now, just like in battle at some point you know you just accept that I’m going to die, but that’s ok. This is what I must do this. So I stood my ground in that vein so to speak. Said, ‘Well he may whoop me. They all may jump.’ I don’t know but he’s going to be hurt. I accept that. This is where I had finally ascended to in this discourse. At some point, he backed off. He was testing me. I didn’t know that, even that day. I can’t remember all other than what I say is true. At some point when he saw I wasn’t taking his bull and I was prepared to do battle if that’s what it took, then we’ll do battle. Just because you have muscles doesn’t mean you’re going to whoop me. On and on and on. So even if you do you’re going to bleed. So the next time we went I guess is when I learned this. That he had been testing me. Constantine had to let me do that alone. He’s over there working out or whatever. Out of that I learned that at that time the greatest stunt man in French movies was a guy named
Keskadore. I don’t know how to spell it but his name was Keskadore and it means Superman.

He’s just the renowned French stuntman. Well, because Constantine was 48 years old, which seems ancient for guys in their 20s, he was like the old man in the crowd. Well, they had a pet name for him that was Keskadore. I became Keskadore Jr. with these people. It was kind of unique experience.

RV: So you were accepted in?
JW: Yes.

RV: That’s interesting in that story, you have that in your mind’s eye today.
JW: Very dramatic.

RV: Tell me about OCS school, where was this?

RV: How long did it last?
JW: Six months.

RV: Tell me about it. What was it like?
JW: Most demanding. I can answer that in a way that I’ve used before, Richard. When we finished that school it was going to be roughly 10 years generally speaking before we would be majors. I have said more than once, years I haven’t said it lately. If the commanding officer, the commanding of that company came to me and said, ‘Ok Lieutenant Wheeler if you will go back and do again six more months what you’ve just done we’ll make you a major,’ I would wait for my 10 years.

RV: You would have said no?
JW: I would wait for my 10 years to make major.

RV: Really that tough?
JW: It was a highly demanding course, no question about it.

RV: Tell me about it. What was it?
JW: First of all, now I fully realize and understand what it’s all about. I don’t question it. You see it was that demanding. So there’s a point, just like back at basic. There was a point in the reason why Sergeant Brown did what he did. I realize the structure of what it’s all about now. At that time I better understood. That doesn’t make it any easier. First of all, they max you out to do more things than you can get accomplished in a day. So that adds an awful lot of stress to your life. You’ve got to operate under stress. This is all about war. Everything that we do is geared
towards war, performance. If there’s more to do than you get done, how are you going to react
under that stress? How do you prioritize those things that you’ve got to do? You have to prioritize.
It’s not humanly possible to do it all. So that was a part of every day of your life at OCS. That’s all
internal to your mind and your physical. Of course, the whole thing starts with Blue Monday. You
got in-processed, arrived in a taxi and arrived with a wrap on my knee because I hurt my knee
running. I hurt it in football the last season in Paris. I played again in a league of football over
there. I worked on it all winter long, this was two years later, swam with it on my lunch hour.
Stepped right off a curb and it was right back where it began. I already had a problem going in
physically in that regard. But Blue Monday, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard the term. But Blue
Monday is Blue Monday. I mean the blues; the guys that have gone through almost the full course
have ascended to what’s called the Blue Helmet. Of course, they’ve caught the crap for all these
months. Now it’s their turn to bring you in and get a little satisfaction themselves, within reason. I
mean some are over the top. They’ve been there, they understand. It’s still pretty overwhelming
especially for your first day. They hit it about 4:00 in the morning, banging on everything in the
world. Of course, you didn’t get to bed until probably 1:00 anyway. You hit a brace and this
happened many times. 10-hut and so there’s a blue right in your face, ‘What do you mean 10-hut’?
Here’s a 10-hut and here’s your wall locker. ‘This is a tin hut. Get in there candidate,’ Close you
up in the wall locker and bang on it. Bang, bang, bang, bang bang. This is just happening
anywhere and everywhere. It’s just all engulfed. That’s the start of your morning. Then you fall out
for your five-mile run. I still have a scar right here from that five mile run. Of course we ran in our
boots.

RV: You’re pointing to your left foot by the way, for people who can’t see.
JW: I’m sorry.
RV: No, that’s fine. That’s fine. On top of your left foot.
JW: My boots were too small. They were regular Corcoran jump boots but I either laced
them too tight or whatever. I wasn’t going to fall out of the run. We had a huge, huge fall out. Very
few people made the run. I still have a scar from that very first morning. It gets your attention
early. Everything is at a double time. Everything’s at a double time. Every meal you had to eat
square. You sat at the edge of your chair, literally at the edge of your chair, one bite at a time.
You squared off the meal. Put your fork back down before you could chew I guess and get that
done and do it again. You never got to finish a meal. You’re always rushed back out. The TAC
officers are always sitting up front looking at you. You might be eating. They say, ‘Candidate
Wheeler are you eyeballing me boy’? ‘Sir, Candidate Wheeler, no sir’. ‘Candidate Wheeler I
believe you’re eyeballing me boy. Outside!’ There’s your meal. Now you’ve got to go outside and
either do push-ups or pull-ups. You get back in, ‘Candidate what are you doing back in here? Get
back out there!’ I mean that kind of a thing. You didn’t catch it personally every time but it
happened often enough for all of us. Of course, we always double-timed with our rifles. We were
up on the hill we had I don’t know the distance. I was just at Ft. Benning a month or two ago to an
OCS reunion. I got to revisit Ft. Benning for the first time in probably 20 years. That was all
engulfing. But the 250-foot towers are still there and all that. We were still a pretty good distance
from infantry hall. The 50th battalion was right there near infantry hall, which is where all of our
primary classes took place. We were 6th Battalion because remember this is ’66 the Army is
greatly expanding its programs for the war.

RV: This is 1966?
JW: Yes. I left France in March of ’66. Basically, 30 day leave and right on to Ft.
Benning. So we had to travel a pretty good distance in a sense each morning to infantry hall after
our morning PT and stuff, with our rifles. Get there all soaking wet. Summer time Ft. Benning,
Georgia. Sit in class and then double time back to the mess hall. Double time back down and
back home. Then, if I remember we had spit shine floors. Truly spit shine floors. You can’t walk
on spit shine floors. In and out every time you’ve got to take your boots off. You crawl across
bunks to get to your bunk. All these things that just add to your time. As the aggravation of daily
life there. But it all has a purpose in the end. Of course, they give you an awful lot that you’ve got
to study at night. But meanwhile your boots have got to be totally standing tall the next day.

RV: How did you deal with all this? Did you adapt and make it through the class?
JW: I did. I’m into that stuff. I didn’t enjoy all that. Too much is too much. I went to a
footlocker literally 20 years later in round numbers. I pulled out my jump boots and you could still
shave with them. They’re still that shined. I didn’t just do the toe and heel. My whole boot.
Obviously you get a better shine on the hard toe and heel. I spit shined my whole boot, all the way
up. I started that with Sergeant Brown. They couldn’t believe I was doing that. I heard him talking
to the company commander once about me. He said, ‘I don’t know if he’s scared to death of me or
if he has that much respect for me.’ I heard him say that to the company commander one time. Of
course, it was the respect it wasn’t fear at all as such. A healthy fear you could say. But Ft.
Benning, a lot of demanding tests, classroom alone. Just more to do than you could get done.

Then we graduated to field duty. Ranger kind of stuff, not orienteering, but map work. Escape and evasion stuff, we had to do that. If you were caught they smarted you a little bit you know? So you didn’t want to get caught in your E&E.

RV: Did you get caught?

JW: No I did not. Didn’t get caught. I figured I could out run them if necessary.

RV: I don’t doubt that.

JW: Did not get caught with that, but there were some hurting guys. Our TAC, of course, our platoon leader was called a TAC officer. They were pretty good OCS themselves. Our original TAC officer, Lieutenant Calver Reese was relieved because he was too hard. We’re already hard. Certainly, there were limitations, more than I can note. It was still over the top. He was over the top, so much so that he was relieved of his duties because he was too mean. I served as one of the saber guys at his wedding. He got married while he was still out TAC officer. However, many of us were picked to do the saber work at his wedding. He was relieved, he was that mean. Mean guy. I saw when we turned blue, again it was one of those deals where there were just some of us were doing saber for something. I can’t remember now. This is how demanding it was, Richard. Probably the most gifted leader in this whole company. I’m talking about a company 100 or 125 guys, whatever it was. Probably in my mind, my estimation the most gifted guy there, and we had a unique company. The greater majority of the company that I was assigned to, 65th Company OCS 13, were NCOs. Prior service. I can’t say there was an average of E-6 across the spectrum. I was an E-5. You got automatically an E-5 pay. You became an E-5 for pay purposes at OCS. Now, if you were already an E-6 obviously you would be paid and E-6 or an E-7. I would have made E-5 in Paris. I was specialist fifth class. I wasn’t a sergeant E-5 because I wasn’t combat. I was a specialist. I was an E-5 when I got there. The point is a lot of soldiering had been done by the average guy in my company. In fact, I was probably junior to most of them. That’s a lot of experience. We were out one day, typically all days were long; that goes without saying. We were out doing our saber work. His name was Manning, to repeat myself. Probably the most gifted leader there in the whole company. I want to say he was Special Forces. But a real horse of a guy, real thick and just looked the part of a soldier, if you will. They were on his butt bad one day. Two or three TACs were down there on him while we were up here doing our stuff. I can’t say that I saw it. I was there on the periphery, I’m sure I didn’t see it. They were all in his face, just
dressing him down. We're blue now. We've done all that. We've still got to finish the race. We've shown where we are. They were into his face and he took his saber and threw it down. Never saw him again.

RV: He walked off?

JW: No, he was relieved. When we left for class the next morning he wasn't there when we came back because he flunked. He broke under pressure. What can you say? Would I have done that? Maybe so. They really drove it to him. I don't know why. I don't know. The point is, probably the most gifted leader and, he, in the final weeks flunked under their stressors if you will and was relieved. So that's how demanding it was across the board. We did get in our particular company we received what was called a Tiger Tactics Award. In other words, we scored high enough on whatever we did in different venues there that we were able to receive the Tiger Tactics Award, which wasn't given out to every company. Again, that speaks well for the company. Then it was graduation. Knowing full well that we were all basically in bound for Vietnam. Going back to Ft. Polk and that Special Forces guy, we learned at some point when we're nearing the end we were told in no uncertain terms that. See I wanted to go to jump school and I wanted to go to Ranger School. We were told that no one would be getting orders from our company unless they received and assignment to a jump slot. Then you could go to jump school. Like ways, Ranger School. So, I applied for both Ranger, at that point I had already done it, applied for airborne school and Ranger School. Then I guess when I knew, maybe I had my orders and I can't remember exactly this is essentially absolutely correct. I said, 'Well I'll beat you guys at your own game then'. Since I can't get jump school or Ranger School, I'm going Special Forces. So I did my paperwork for Special Forces. In reality, once again God smiled upon me. What happened is, nine guys applied for Special Forces out of may company. Seven guys got orders. The two that didn't get orders, was Wheeler and Yockopin, Beginning with a Y, Yockopin, Hawaiian. Well it was obvious that some little clerk at the battalion level got seven allocations, took the first seven guys and fu-fu on Wheeler and Yockopin. Well, really, of the nine, we were probably the two best candidates in a sense if I may say that. We were really viable candidates.

RV: You were well qualified?

JW: We were. We didn't make it. Yockopin, in later years went Special Forces but got caught up in the rifts of the early '70s because when there was too much overhead and there was a reduction in force, those who had become specialists, and Special Forces as the example, got
riffed. If I had gotten Special Forces back in ’63 or even then I may very well have gotten caught up in the rift. Whereas it turned out I was a conventional commander twice and that worked for my career.

RV: Had you decided at this point, I assume you probably had to make the military your career?

JW: No sir. No it was really a war thing at this point because remember I didn’t have to do this. I was finishing up my time in France and was really going to head home to Memphis.

RV: Right.

JW: So I was doing this, initially. I won’t say for the adventure of it, because I can’t say that. But to a degree I guess I could say. But not for the pure adventure.

RV: Adventure of what, OCS? Or continuing the military?

JW: War.

RV: You said in Paris you didn’t really know much about the war. Now in OCS you’re learning about it. About our involvement.

JW: Certainly ultimately about Vietnam. Right now it’s all about military tactics and all that goes with that. Weaponry etc, etc. Not so much canting yet pure Vietnam. Although that had to become a part of our curriculum, no question.

RV: If this is ’66.

JW: This is ’66.

RV: We’ve already got a mass amount of troops in country. So it had to be on your mind, you had to know.

JW: Emphatically. That’s the reason I’m there. It’s all about going to the war. It truly is. As silly or as crazy as that might sound.

RV: I’ve heard that many times.

JW: That’s what I was there for. This is kind of a side bar, but the irony is when I think about all the guys in my company alone that were killed is life is life. I mean that was literally pure hell. There’s no denying it. A friend of mine that was in the country was over there. He mentioned crying at one point. He was a guy, I can show you a field manual where he’s in it. He was one of those older soldiers. Not old, but the guy had been around. He had been in I guess it’s in the soldiers guide. This is the right position for right shoulder arms and those kinds of things. He’s in there, he goes back that far but I think his wife shared it with my wife. He literally was a strong
leader because he had been around a while. Better understood all the above, versus most of us. He mentioned it one time. He was so overcome with it all; it was just too much.

RV: During OCS?
JW: Yes. But that’s why I was there.

RV: Upon graduation did you know where you were going to go? Did you have a choice of where you were going to go?
JW: As you know the military works off of preference statements. You pick your three choices. It all begins with, ’The needs of the Army comes first.’ So if the needs of the Army and yours matches then certainly you get that assignment if you will. There’s always the need. I understand that needs of the Army first.

RV: Sure.

JW: In my case what did I know. I mean my gosh, I had been to Ft. Polk and Ft. Benjamin Harrison and I was overseas. I wasn’t like a background in the Army or anything like that. So I can’t even tell you if I know what I put on my preference statement. It really doesn’t kind of matter because regardless I was assigned to Ft. Bliss, Texas, as a training officer. The interesting part I was going to comment thought on Richard, was it’s not the right term. It’s almost a sad commentary in that, you literally spent six months in one sense of the word, pure hell. It’s misery. You may be the most gung ho guy in the world, but it’s so demanding. Certainly you may have great moments. But it’s just hell on Earth. Then you know you’re going to have about four months before you go to the war. The likelihood of you dying is really quite high. So I just think it’s an interesting study of sorts that you literally go through six months of hell in this zone area. Then you get a little break, but it’s not a break because at Ft. Bliss, once again I’m an overdone one guy. I’m working long, long hours as a training officer in that little company trying to effect and impact my soldiers. I go much past- I’m not the only guy that does it. I go well past the norm in trying to support the troops and the training and all that stuff. Still, just maxing out your days and just living in a little Spartan BOQ. Then the next thing you know, you’re on a plane to Vietnam.

RV: What were your assignments at Ft. Bliss? What were you actually in charge of? How many men did you train?

JW: I was assigned to the basic training brigade. And from there under a battalion, more specifically to a company. I was simply a platoon leader, training officer. Actually I don’t know that I was even a platoon leader. I was a training officer at basic training. I got there, let’s see I
graduated September the 22nd. About a 30 day vacation. I got there mid to late October. You know, I can’t remember really when I had my orders to Vietnam other than in four months later I was there. I can’t remember. I don’t know why that is, when I actually got my orders.

RV: You don’t remember if it was before you went to Bliss?

JW: It was after Bliss. I was at Bliss first. I think it was probably around Christmas time. So that’s not very long. Literally, fresh October so I had November and December. Then December half of that month you shut down a part of your operations. Then in January, February, March I was on leave to go to Vietnam, boy I put in the hours. It was pure training officer.

RV: How much did you rely upon what you learned from Sergeant Brown and using it?

JW: A whole lot because I was kind of in a sense in a like role that he was in before. So there’s no question through osmosis, if you will. I certainly took on quite a bit. Not all the Goddamns and stuff. I’m an officer and a gentleman. The dedication and dress right dress and the personification of the uniform and all these things. There’s no doubt I consciously and/or subconsciously mimicked to some degree Sergeant Brown or took some of that to put on me. I remember one time I was putting guys on the bus. They were leaving. It’s dead of cold winter. We’re out there on a Saturday morning. They’re in their coats and their field jackets and stuff, I’m sleeveless. Ok, because I’m trying to impress on these guys, you’ve got to be hard. I could have easily had on a jacket, but I didn’t, so help me. I’m out there, I know I’m probably cold. I had to be. I’m out there in my khakis. I’ve got my pockets sewn down, everything is starched to the hilt. These kids are taking it in, that’s the whole point. It’s all about that. Instead of the quarter master shoes I had, I mean they were black plain toed black shoe. But they were nice black shoes and they were spit shined. I still had them spit shined instead of that old standard sock I had on gold toe. It was a black sock, I’m in uniform. I remember a couple of guys talking about this, getting on and off this bus talking about it. They were talking and so I’m reaching them. I wanted them to see you’ve got to go above and beyond. So very dedicated. I adored that window of time that I was a training officer and impacted, I guess two, maybe, three cycles of basic trainees.

RV: You were a lieutenant at this time?


RV: You received your orders for Vietnam at Bliss right?

JW: Yes.

RV: What did you think when you got these orders? How did you feel?
JW: I think because I can't consciously remember when some of those things you just
automatically remember. I can't but I guess it's because we were so conditioned. We knew it was
coming. You're talking to lieutenants everyday who are leaving, guys that have been there longer
than you. It was so commonplace and so realized that it's coming that it just was a natural flow of
events is the best way to say it, Richard. I knew it was coming, invariably coming. I'm prepared for
it. Now, it's here. Well, I've been waiting on it. So it wasn't any great big push in electricity in my
body. It was just commonplace there.

RV: How did you family feel about you going over to war?

JW: Well, I had a brother over there at this time. He was in the Air Force. So my mother
had lost a brother in World War II. We didn't have any direct affiliation in our family with Korea in
the whole of it all. So my brother was Air Force and he was a jet mechanic over there. That
probably set a little bit more easy with my mother even though anybody's subject to a rocket attack
and those sorts of things. But at least he was in Bien Hoa relative safe of sorts. It was still fairly
early in the war. I can't remember exactly when he came back. He was over there probably during
the '66 time frame more or less. Then she couldn't fully understand, not fully grasp the significance
of what an infantry guy was all about period. So she was probably a little bit naïve and/or ignorant
to that part of it. At the same time, it's still her son, her first born. We had a great bond. Her first
son going to war. She never once gave me any grief in the sense, 'Oh, son.' She didn't play on
those emotions either way. She took it right in stride.

RV: How about your father?

JW: Dad, Dad's again, we had a great relationship. He was still something of the old
school. He didn't play hard ass as such. Some guys tell me my daddy never hugged me, never
kissed me, never said he loved me. No, I didn't have the problem. We weren't nearly as warm.
My son and I are bonding but I have a great rapport with my dad. There again, no dramatics that
come to mind when you asked me the question. I don't remember any dramas from either of my
parents. I know that generation is more prone to suffer in silence than we are today if you will. So
they kept a lot of it internalized, no question.

RV: Did you have some leave before you went over?

JW: Yes, sir. I had the standard Army 30 days leave, give or take although I don't know
that I even had 30 days at that point after doing it at OCS. Yes, I went home, drove my Corvette.
Corvette, now, no more Austin Healy.
RV: Stepping up in the world.

JW: Left my Corvette at my mama’s out in the country while I was gone. Of course my brother partook of it a bit. There’s no doubt when I got on the plane to go back to El Paso because I had met my mate for life at this point. My mama no doubt had a heavy heart. I even cut short obviously some of my time in Memphis to go back and see this sweetheart of mine I hardly even knew yet. Again mom was suffering. Suffering in silence a lot. She made no threat, and obviously there were tears and that sort. But she didn’t give me any kind of grief, any kind of grief about one going to the war and, two no doubt leaving her a little bit pre-maturely to go see this little girl called Claudia.

RV: How did you leave the country? Did you go off the west coast?

JW: Yes. Flew out of El Paso. I’m sure to L.A. and had a day or so there. It’s odd I don’t remember a lot about the travels. I don’t.

RV: Civilian air or military?

JW: Fortunately, I say fortunately for me. My four trips over and back, over and back were all on like Continental civilian planes. I never went over on a troop transport or anything like that.

RV: Do you remember you embarked out of L.A.?

JW: I think so.

RV: Do you remember the flight over?

JW: You know, my children and my wife say, ‘Dad, how do you remember such things?’ I have a pretty good memory of things that my wife had forgotten so long ago or whatever. I don’t have any real elongated memories of the eight hours or the 10 hours or whatever I was on that plane or any discourse with guys.

RV: Do you remember the mood on the plane and how you felt?

JW: It must have been ok, because there’s no drama either way. I think it was probably. I’ve seen movies or whatever, I guess, more than coming back with the partying side. Going over there definitely don’t remember that. Well, you would be partying over there. I don’t remember any out of the ordinary thing. In my mind I’m sure we were graciously dealt with by the stewardess, ladies, stewardi. I do remember when we were in country it was nighttime and we were going to land. I do remember this emphatically. But no drama from the flight. I remember we landed. We landed a number of times. I remember in the Philippines seeing all the tails of the B-52s, just a line of B-52s sitting out there. I remember landing on Wake Island and going right beside the water...
and realizing how small. Those little things. As far as the drama of human is pretty level. When
we, if you will, going to land wherever we were landing.

RV: Do you remember where you were landing in country?

JW: It had to be Bien Hoa. It was Bien Hoa, I know it was Bien Hoa because I challenged
my brother and he had all these war stories. What we call our guys, the Army called in the rear
area. Hemephors, you know their war stories that are embellished and that’s ok. But my brother
talked about and this is just in play. He talked about how hard. It was hard. I don’t want to make
light of any of that. He was on Bien Hoa. So what I did I went over and took a picture of swimming
pool that was on Bien Hoa and I took a picture of the outdoor racquetball courts around Bien Hoa.
I wrote him and ultimately sent him those pictures. I said, ‘Yeah brother you really had it hard.
Look at this I see where you were. You didn’t know I was going to land in Bien Hoa.’ The point is
when we were coming in, I guess at some point we would have been in proximity of Saigon as well,
certainly. It was night and it was so dark. It wasn’t like our lighted cities. I remember flying over
London the first time I ever saw the orange lights back then and how bright it was. There were no
lights and yet I knew there had to be lights because we were landing down there. I always
remember the countryside was so without light. I don’t know why but I remembered that very well.

RV: Why don’t we take a break? Continuing the interview now. You’ve arrived in
Vietnam. You said you came in at night.

JW: Right.

RV: You said it was really dark.

JW: Very dark for what I thought would be a major city down below, yes.

RV: Did you see any firefights? Any tracers? Anything off in the distance that would alert
you to where you actually were going?

JW: Not really, no. It was just a peaceful landing.

RV: When you got on the ground and got out, what were your first impressions of the
country? Of course it’s at night again but what were your first impressions?

JW: I can speak more to the next day. There are certain smells associated with Vietnam.
Just the smells at large in that country. You also are aware of how the military bases dealt with
human waste. They were constantly burning waste. When the outhouse affairs went into a cut in
half 50-gallon drum basically. So the stuff was constantly on bases, being burned. That’s literally
one of those smells that you smell for the first time and it’s a smell you never really forget. I didn’t
know really what it was like that first morning up and out. Of course, you’re just engulfed with the
heat of it all as well. All this going on. That smell of the burning is something that was just always
there. Well, not in the field. I mean, I stayed mostly in the field but it’s just something you were
always aware of. That’s what kind of jumped on me that first morning, if you will. Just that
particular aroma as we basically just went through really an in processing process so that we could
get on into our assignments. I wasn’t there, I don’t know a day or two.

RV: This is at Bien Hoa?

JW: Somewhat not overly memorable. Just in and out. Although, I was able to visit on
Bien Hoa where my brother had been the year previous and identified a swimming pool and
racquetball courts that he didn’t share with me about his time in Vietnam. In short order was off to
Camp Enari, near Pleiku.

RV: How did you get there?

JW: I want to say on a C-123. C-123 had the ability a short runway and get up in the air in
a hurry. I’m almost positive I was on a C-123 for that transport north or as they say up country to
Pleiku or the 4th Division.

RV: Let me ask you an overall larger question. Now that you’re in country what did you
understand at the time of why the United States was in Southeast Asia? Were you aware of the
bigger picture? Did you all discuss it? What kind of internal conversation did you have with
yourself about why the United States was even there?

JW: You know, one of the main things commanders are in the process of commanding
one of the things that I strongly believed in is keeping the troops informed. The welfare of the
troops are counted one and the same. After the mission comes welfare of the troops and keeping
the troops informed. I regret to say, at least in my own life, I was not very well indoctrinated to
Vietnam and certainly not really and truly to the political processes of what was going on in that
country. I don’t enjoy saying that. Here I am an officer in the United States Army and I must say to
you, I wasn’t that tuned to the larger picture, politically speaking. Of course, I had no knowledge of
the Vietnamese language. I mean, there was a language school for those who did that. But it was
pretty much you were put in place in order to perform. I don’t mean that really that negatively but I
really was much lesser schooled than I think it should have been at large with information. I was a
soldier and I was primarily put there to fight the bad guys. What more do you need to know?
Everything’s on a need to know basis and I understand that. I don’t need to know at division level
what they’re doing. I only need to know at my company level. So I’m comfortable with that. I don’t think in my own mind as I reflect back that I had even an inkling of the understanding of what was going on politically, no.

RV: Did that bother you? Did you want to know the bigger picture?

JW: No question it frustrated me at times. But again, I almost consider myself, maybe a silly example almost like a plow horse. I’ve been put in the fields and I’ve got my blinders on and here’s my mission. I’m just a lieutenant. Here’s my mission. All the other things are being taken care of by a higher order. So I’m down here just doing my little part of it. I know without question I would have been better off in my mind if I had a better understanding of the larger picture. I don’t think that’s all my fault of ignorance. We just weren’t presented that. ‘Here’s your rifle boy, go to war’.

RV: Tell me about that. How were you armed? What did you carry in to the field with you when you reported out to Enari?

JW: Well at Enari of course was the division base camp. Of course we checked in with G1, got our specific assignments, in my case to the second brigade. Charlie Company of 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry as a rifle platoon leader. There was a short three to four days, whatever it was, a short indoctrination period where we primarily were given our weapons. We were taken to the rifle range, of course to sight them. Then in my case, I’m sure the rear areas guys didn’t, but as an infantry guy we were taken on a little patrol in proximity of the division base camp wire if you will, yet out and made contact in the community of sorts around this division base camp. I remember seeing my first Montagnard people out there. Topless women. They were Montagnards in their loincloths and all. I can remember that early on because that was my first dealing, or even visual of the indigenous people. Of course, I came to know the Montagnard people because we worked in the highlands and they’re primarily mountain people. I came to have a healthy respect for them. At one village, sometime later I really was given a friendship bracelet from the chief, if you will. That meant a lot to me. I wore it proudly and came to know that they were honorable people. They seemed somewhat not fully understanding politics then. They were kind of caught in the middle. They were a mountain tribal people that just were almost like the old slash and burn lifestyle.

RV: You got that feeling then?
JW: Yes, I’m speaking then. So we had that time at base camp before I was actually assigned or taken out to my unit.

RV: When was that? A couple days after?

JW: Two or three days after. In my case, I was taken by a helicopter out to my platoon.

RV: Let me ask you, right there you are the new leader for the platoon? These men do not know you?

JW: Correct. Do not.

RV: You’re going to step in and lead them in-country, you’re brand new in country in operations. How did you mentally prepare for that?

JW: Through my training at Ft. Benning, Georgia I was trained well to be a leader, a combat leader of the troops. Now but what you just say I may or may not have mentioned it. These guys had already been in country about nine months or so when I arrived. Here I am as you just said, a brand spanking green behind the ears second lieutenant. Who am I to tell them anything? They have been in some major, major battles. They trained together, they came over on the ship together. They’ve been together all that time. Now I’m the new guy.

RV: Did you rely on the captain? Say, ‘Look you’ve got to tell me what to do here as far as indigenous to Vietnam and to this specific area in country. Yeah I know how to set up a perimeter at Ft. Benning but how do you work a perimeter here? How do you do listening posts and outposts here?’ Was that the kind of thing that you were thinking and going through your mind? Or did you just say, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do’?

JW: The circumstance simplified that a little bit. I’ll explain. I never met my company commander yet. What happened is, my platoon, if you will, was securing a rock quarry on a main road out of Pleiku. I mean it’s out in the middle of nowhere. They were actually the security force for an operating rock quarry. The rest of the company was in the bush. I did not meet my company commander until later.

RV: He came out right?

JW: Not even then. A little unusual. Normally, I would have been put right in to the company. The company would be there in a total package but mine was separated at the moment. So, I went in and replaced a lieutenant literally we talk about changing guards out. He’s in place, I come and take him and then he leaves. I don’t even remember who he was or if I met him. I don’t even know. I mean I replaced a lieutenant but I don’t have any memory of that other than whamo,
I'm at the rock quarry. Someone had to give me directions I realized what my responsibility was. Certainly I had a platoon sergeant there on site. My CP and my CP command bunker. But for the next week or 10 days, give or take, it simplified my indoctrination of sorts because we were in a relatively static position. I had to run patrols out every day. I put out listening posts and observation posts and things at night of course. It really did simplify my initial indoctrination on the ground, in the field as platoon leader.

RV: Did you have any action during that time?

JW: Not at this moment, but it's waiting. No, as I say, it worked out nicely in that sense of the word to get attuned and meet my guys etc.

RV: How'd they react to you?

JW: Again, I don't have any recollection of any animosity. Soldiers I can only speak about combat arms guys, but combat arms guys for the most part understand leadership roles, chain of command etc. Not that you can't have a bad experience in all those things. But I received no negativity that I was conscious of in any respect as I went through my little processes either that time or even when I took my rifle company two years later. I don't remember anything like that. He's the lieutenant, he's the boss. We'll follow him until he proves otherwise, he's the leader. It didn't take long to prove.

RV: What happened?

JW: As I say, I cannot remember actually meeting my company commander. If I did, I'm so sorry to my own self that I can't remember that. I just don't. I just believe I didn't. In my mind the first time I met my company commander we had orders to leave the quarry. Lead my platoon through. Helicopters flew into what was a burning village. What was happening is the system said, 'Ok we're going to clear out this area.' This is down in the Ia Drang are, bad, bad place. What they were trying to do is build essentially a free fire zone and protect the villagers that were in those areas. So what the system was doing was moving them literally all the way up to this main highway that was west of Pleiku. It was called tent city. They built little shacks for them of tents. They called it tent city as I remember. There was a term for that process where they moved them out. So when I landed, as we landed of course I went in to report to the company commander Captain John Noble. The village was on fire, it had been set on fire. There was no contact being made. It was just everything was burning and all the bamboo and this, that, and the other. I mean it got my attention because it was very noisy. Really wasn't tuned to what all was going on. I didn't
know that we weren’t having a fight as we landed. I didn’t know what was going on per se. So it
was very dramatic. Reported to my captain. Of course, he had been out in the field all this time
while we’d been sitting on our duff so to speak, humping the bush. So within the first 10 or 15
minutes of being on the ground Captain Noble laid out a 10/25,000 map and showed me this
particular river in a trail and assigned me the task of going down and setting up an ambush that
afternoon for this trail junction. So in short order that’s what we did. This all happened probably
within the course of a couple of hours from leaving there to landing and the burning and everything
and getting the mission ambushed and actually setting up the ambush. So went down to the area
that he had identified on the map, identified the high approach, that’s where I put my M-60, one of
the principals were there. It wasn’t because of the terrain and all. I couldn’t in place your classic L
shaped ambush. It was a little modification there because of the terrain. So we literally had just
gotten into place and it’s probably 14:00 hours or something in the afternoon, I don’t know.
Nobody’s eaten. I know this is contradictory to an ambush but we were going to do some eating
here. So help me, I had just taken off my ruck and gotten all my work done. I just leaned back
against a tree. My RTO, my radio operator was literally to my right shoulder. I had a can of C
rations in my hand and I had just reached for my P-38, when the ambush sprang. My RTO was
immediately shot through the neck. Right here. Well, I am the new guy, but I’m also a trained
warrior. I had no problem reacting to this circumstance. We returned fire and all the fighting was
going on.

RV: Was your RTO killed instantly or did he live?
JW: No, he was alive when I put him on the chopper. I truly don’t know. That was part of
the uniqueness of the Vietnam War. He went to the rear. I had no more discourse or contact. I
truly don’t know.
RV: Let’s take a break for a minute I need to change out the disk. Let’s go ahead and
continue.
JW: Alright, so the ambush was sprung. My RTO is shot. He was our principal injury; it
may have been the only one. I want to say that there was another one or two, maybe slightly but
this was serious injury here. With the design of the ambush site and the lay of the land and all and
trying to protect because I’m still a new guy. Of course, during all of this there’s a lot of firing going
on. So, I immediately start doing what a lieutenant’s supposed to do. I crawl because we’re
essentially in the perimeter of sorts. I did a lot of crawling, directing fire and all these different
things. While I was doing this, there was a lot of bullets fling. I came across an E-6 hiding under a log, beside a log. I didn’t have time to deal with that right now other than I stopped and told him to get his ass in gear. Often times I’ve regretted that I didn’t shoot him. I mean that, ok?

RV: You don’t mean that or you do mean that?

JW: I do mean that. Jim Wheeler’s definitions. There are career soldiers and they’re what I call lifers. A lifer being a negative. Those guys that want to be lifers are careerist but they don’t ever ring a shot in. It’s a good comfortable living and all this kind of stuff, guaranteed paycheck, but don’t shoot at me. Those are the guys I term lifers. This is Jim Wheeler’s definition. I don’t have a lot of use for them taking up space. He was hiding. I can see him as I look at you Richard, lying right there. The point being most of these soldiers carried a U.S. in front of their service number, they were draftees. This guy was an E-6 lifer. So, I literally crawled right across him as I was doing my little thing. Now that contact is broken, needless to say, my greatest concern is to get this soldier out of here. We are close to the river and we just don’t have any place to land the chopper. I found and this is happening so quickly and moving. I did find very near where we are, there was a great big gully that just by design had some freedom from the vegetation. So what I did because I still didn’t know what size element we were dealing with or anything else. So much of it is unseen. They found it very unique. Now these are my soldiers, they’ve done a lot of shooting. What I effectively did was, I moved the perimeter intact and ultimately got it around this big gully affair.

RV: Let me note for the record here, you’re holding your hands up in a circular perimeter.

You actually just moved the entire thing.

JW: I moved it I don’t know like 100 meters or whatever. I don’t know the distance at this point. Trying to protect all concerned and the wounded inside. As I say there may have been a couple more but they were very minor versus the urgency was the RTO. That’s what I really remember the most. Anyway I found in that gully. I moved intact, the entire perimeter, trying to protect all concerned with the injured inside. Moved it over 50 to 100 meters wherever this gully thing was and secured that so that it looked like to me a chopper could at least come in. We had to lift him up. The skids couldn’t come down to the ground, but close enough versus the trees. So we were able to push him up into the chopper and away he went. This is how much I’d been taught because we weren’t taught medals per se. We mostly didn’t write up awards. If we wrote up awards for everybody, for every little firefight, we’d have spent half our time writing. Not going to
ignore anybody that’s earned an award that’s not the point. It’s kind of like getting an award for
doing your job. That’s our job anyway, above and beyond that we can deal with it. Out of that
came my first Bronze Star, V for valor. What I learned after the awards ceremony some time later,
did have a formal presentation is my guys said that should have been a silver star. Then when I
reflect back, it’s ok. Everything’s ok. The reason it probably wasn’t is because it was my first
contact, brand new guy. Hey, let’s don’t get carried away here kind of a realistic thing. That was
my first real day in the field. That was, as I said earlier, either seven straight days or nine which
ever it was of some kind of absolute contact with the enemy.

RV: Starting that day?
JW: Starting that day. My first real day in the field, aside from the quarry. It was always
my platoon was second platoon. Every time there was a fight they’d say, ‘Saddle up second.’ You
may have heard that term. But ‘Saddle up second’ my guys knew what to do and how to do it.
Another little thing I remember is in the next day or two because we’re working as a company now.
We’re together as a company and operating independently as platoons but still basically together.
We sent out a water run, where the platoon collects up all the empty canteens, three or four guys
and they go down to the water line and fill up canteens. So on this particular day that had taken
place. They got pinned down. There were bad guys. It turned out some them were tree snipers.
So saddle up second. What basically happened is this was a great big old, burned out, blown out
field if you will. Then there was a heavy tree line. Down below was the river where our guys
were in this little fight. We had fire coming back at us as well. Automatic weapons fire. So second
platoon we were there first and I moved my guys online. Then I’m using arm and hand signals to
maneuver my people. What I didn’t realize and what I didn’t know either was I didn’t know what the
sound of a bullet sounded like passing your head until it’s just fixing to happen. What else I didn’t
realize at the moment was there was a couple of snipers in the trees shooting back this way. What
they had I can see it now. He’s up in the tree ad this is a fully blown out field if you will. It’s just a
panoramic view of us coming forward. Well it isn’t too hard to pick out the lieutenant because he’s
the guy doing all of this stuff and there’s a radio guy by him. So I had moved forward and jumped
down behind a tree, a burned out stump thing. Had moved my guys to where now, and there’s one
guy his name was Johnson. I remember him doing so well. This is in contrast to that E-6 I just
mentioned. By the way I sent him to the rear and got rid of him, the guy that hid.

RV: The guy that was hiding, right?
JW: Yes, back there. But he was out of my unit. Who knows what the company commander did with him. Conversely speaking here’s, this was a black soldier, E-4. Took command over here because part of my guys were out of my view with the tree line here. It was just an example of a typical American youth drafted into the United States Army giving his all over here. Totally on his own initiative basically. I just remember him doing some stuff over there I couldn’t get to. My next time to move after I got everybody forward I stood up of course from my little stump and zing, zing, zing, zing, zing. I didn’t fully realize. I mean, I knew what I’d heard, but I didn’t understand it. I was the perfect statistic to die that early as a lieutenant. Not through any fault of my own. Not like I was doing some thing stupid. It’s just casualty of war, early on as they say. The first three months and the last three are by far the worst times. Here you don’t know enough to know the difference, you think you know more than you do. Anyway, when I moved that’s when I had my first experience of bullets passing me by. However close. They really do pop like a cap.

RV: When they pass you?

JW: Yes, they do. A couple of guys, it could have been more. I don’t know. He had me zeroed. Thank God he flunked a marksmanship because as I looked back and realized what he did, he had a panoramic view and just a perfect way to shoot out there at me. God has smiled upon me more than once in my life. So that was just like the very next day. In the same window of time, we had some South Vietnamese soldiers with us. I’d heard stories of how poor they were. How poor they were at soldiering.

RV: Where had you heard the stories?

JW: Informally, just the troops talking. Their experience over the past nine months, ten months and what have you. Their experience with them and whatever I might have heard back in the rear as we’re going out. Be aware, be cautious. The irony being here it is their country. They’re soldiers, they’re supposed to be fighting. Yet they lean so heavily on us. Call it the next day it was in the same window of time. This is still in the Ia Drang Valley, which is essentially where We Were Soldiers took place. There was a place down there, not that I did it often but I was able to do it more when we went to APCs. I could get a fight anytime I wanted it in this one little area. They were just always down there. On this third day call it Richard. There’s no contact we’re just moving along searching.

RV: What were your orders? Search?
JW: It's basically S&D. S&D. S&D. You just search. Clover Leaf, whatever the circumstance of the surroundings and all of the above. Whatever it may be even intelligence you have. For all intents and purposes our mission was search and destroy. Here's your AO. Here's your area of operations lieutenant or captain. Check it out. However you want to divide it up with your squads, a platoon, and all that. Yes, sir. We were moving, again, these things are coming back. We were moving through this area. All of a sudden this tree line to our front we were in brush and stuff but there was a little clearing.

RV: How far ahead?

JW: It wasn't 50 meters give or take because we were staggered a different way. We had ARVN. It wasn't like they were on point. We had ARVN up in front of us. At least in my little sector. There were some ARVN soldiers up there.

RV: Did you put them up there? Was that your choice to put them first?

JW: Essentially because they were kind of attached to us. Maybe at the company level, but for this given day there was an ARVN in my little area that I'm working. There's another platoon here and another platoon here. Well weapons fire came out of the tree line to our direct front. I saw it with my own eyes. You should fall down as close to the ground as you can in general terms and return fire. Here they come.

RV: The ARVN?

JW: Running right before my eyes.

RV: They turned and ran back?

JW: Turned and ran just like I'd been told they do. So now they can get shot in the back. At least give them something to think about. I witnessed it with my own eyes, right in front of me. They turned and they ran.

RV: Was this a typical experience with you with the ARVN?

JW: I didn't have a lot of experiences with the ARVN. Fortunately, I just say that as a statement. I didn't outside of this timeframe as a general rule. I was pure, if you will, conventional forces. We had interpreters, not just a pure ARVN rifleman. I didn't have that experience either time around to speak of. In this instance I saw it with my own eyes.

RV: Let me ask you. You came across a few days before, your own man, an American hiding. Here you see these two South Vietnamese soldiers turning and running. What was your
inclination? Were you in position to discipline them immediately? Or because of fire you needed
to take care of the fire, what was your reaction to that?

JW: Well, first of all we needed to return fire and get on with the task at hand. I'm pretty
confident I don't remember any personal discourse with them. I'm sure they were a company asset
and that would have been the captain's responsibility to deal with, the old man. Because I don't
have any memory of dealing with them directly. No question they were dealt with. Certainly at the
company level versus the platoon. These same guys and I don't know how many we had. We had
a couple, three right in my little sector. This just adds insult to injury. So, we kill some of the bad
guys. So then the ARVN's were told to bury them. So they stayed behind in a little force to bury
these guys.

RV: I'm sorry colonel let me interrupt you again.

JW: That's alright.

RV: Did you go inspect the bodies? Is this the first time you had seen the enemy dead?

JW: No, I had seen some already with the other.

RV: With the previous ambush?

JW: Yes.

RV: What was your reaction to that? First time seeing the enemy and seeing them dead?

JW: There was nothing repulsive about it to me. They were the enemy. It could just as
easily be me. I'm a Christian person. Yet at the same time I was not bothered with oh my
goodness, here's a dead person. God rest his soul thing. It was just very matter of fact to me.
Firefight, dead enemy, better he than I. Just press on. You take it in, this is a human regardless.
It's very fleeting. There are too many other things to do. You can't sit and dwell on it. I was not
demonstrably emotionalized, negatively or positively. It was just more of a matter of fact, just the
way it was.

RV: I wasn't implying at all that you should have had any other reaction.

JW: I understand that.

RV: I just wanted to know how you had reacted. Ok, this is business let's move on.

JW: That's well said. As I say, I got on alright with this stuff. I just was able to deal with it
pretty straight up. I wasn't ever really too bothered by it. The irony was after this we got some
dead guys. Ok, you ARVN bury them. We've got to go in and sweep the area. We've got to do
our work because you all guys aren't. So to add insult to injury we of course had passed on
through and went on however far we went. At some point well past that area we set up a night logger, set up for the night, which we did. Then as fate would have it, so to speak, we passed back through that area the next day. Here’s an arm sticking up out of the ground, here’s a leg. The point I’m making, these guys didn’t even bury them good. So help me. I took this in. This was strange. Here’s you are walking and whoa, there’s an arm sticking up. So help me. These guys didn’t even get that right. I didn’t come here to pick on him, but those happened. I saw them. It was the gospel. That’s what happened.

RV: That’s what I wanted to ask you, exactly what your experiences were with the ARVN. That’s interesting your first couple weeks out in the field, in country and this is our experience with them. How did that make you feel? The United States is there in essence defending South Vietnam and helping them fight their fight for better, for worse, whatever the reasons, political. There you are in the field and you’re seeing the South Vietnamese turn tail and run. Did you have thoughts of like, whoa what’s going on here? Why am I in their country if they’re not going to fight? Or did you just say this is business and let’s carry forward?

JW: No, no the former is how I felt and how we talked about it to a degree. Very disappointed. Not at all happy. No doubt demonstrably internally anyway, demonstrably upset at the audacity of these guys to do that. Because just as you just described, Richard, I’m here to help you. Yet, you’re not doing your part, you’re not doing your fair share. It was quite disturbing. No question about it. What can I do about it? Not a whole lot. Of course. Yet it was very disturbing and we talked about it to some degree at large.

RV: After your initial first few days in contact did you feel like your men held you in a little higher esteem? They saw how you would behave under fire? How you would react, have your proven yourself to your men do you think by this point? Or did you need more time?

JW: Well, I think certainly that was happening. I had something so to speak to prove because as I said these were battle proven soldiers. These guys had been through an awful lot. But in short order, the new lieutenant had been through his fair share in a similar fashion.

RV: You won the Bronze Star in your first action.

JW: First one, yes. But again, I’m just getting on with the flow of things. I’m not spending a lot of time thinking too much about it. Yes, no question subconsciously if not consciously. I’m certainly wanting my troops to understand that I care for them. Their welfare is of my utmost concern. I want to show them I’m not making a plan to show them. Just as events unfold that I am
in fact capable of leading them and that they will be well cared for under my care or leadership so
to speak. So yes, that unfolded somewhat naturally. No planned effort. I could have flunked the
course. Some people flunked the course. I stood up under fire, I did. That worked.

RV: Can you describe your uniform, what you carried in the field? Your equipment, your
weapons.

JW: Certainly, fatigue wise it was just the basic old jungle fatigues that you know and have
seen. We got to change clothes every so often. There was no regularity to when we changed
clothes. I probably started out with my own shirts. Then once you threw them in you just wore
whatever came in from the big wash. That’s when we just took of our personalized cross rifles and
lieutenant bars. You needed those on your collar, of course. Although I suppose I could have
done without them. They knew who I was, but that was only proper, understandably. So your
clothing came in just like C rations and everything else and water. When you got a change of
clothes you were just happy to get a change of clothes. They were just fatigues in a bag that you
grabbed and put on. You mentioned at some point in our conversation earlier today, I’ll even go to
the underwear level. We just as a rule didn’t wear underwear because in the dry season you were
wet so much of the time from pure sweat you were wet anyway. In monsoon season you were wet.
I assume we considered the underwear something that would perhaps chaff you. Just an extra
something there that didn’t need to be there under the conditions. Plus there was probably a
shortage as much as anything else. Just no big deal.

RV: How about socks?

JW: Socks were very much more important, of course. Both seasons as well. Even
though you’re not in the wet season, obviously you need dry socks. In the dry season you’re
perspiring so much that you’ve got to enforce and you use your medic, your old doc. Use him to
really enforce that. You use your chain of command as well, but very important to keep the feet
clean and well because that was our traveling. Just our basic undergarment was that. Your basic
jungle boots. You always had your towel. Towel around your neck was imperative because again
you’re just constantly wet either way. So the towel was a major part of your rucksack. Your
rucksack of course being your pack. I’ve never weighed my rucksack. But the average numbers
that I’ve heard and I like to think I knew at onetime formerly as an officer was around 80 pounds,
60 to 80 pounds. I’ve heard 80 more than any number was about the average weight of a given
individual’s rucksack. You add onto that, on top of that the poor RTO, the radiotelephone operator.
He had to carry his radio on top of that. Then you had to carry extra batteries. This is on top of your basic. So we spread around the batteries to help out as we did with other things because believe it or not, as simple as it sounds not everybody carried a razor. You might carry a razor and you carried this. You did everything you could to simplify and lighten your load. Of course, we shouldn’t have with us or forget deodorant. There’s a tactical reason for deodorant and aftershave. Even though we were required and should shave everyday for a lot of reasons. You obviously don’t use aftershave because you literally could smell the enemy in the field. I’m sure they could smell us without aftershave.

RV: You could smell them?

JW: Yes.

RV: How could you smell them?

JW: There was something in the air. Their smell emanated in the air if they were in proximity.

RV: Would you have to be down wind or was it stronger than that?

JW: I’m not talking like it was something that you could just color in and see all the time. There were those instances where in proximity of the enemy either during a fight after fight or whatever it might have been there was a smell. It was there. I guess you would say their body smell. Some people call it the smell of fear. I don’t know if you’ve heard that term.

RV: I have. How can you describe that smell? Do you remember the smell today?

JW: I dare say if I smelled it at this moment I could probably say, ‘That’s it or that isn’t.’ It was just a dull, dank – nothing that I could really relate it to. I don’t know that I could even say bad odor, bad body odor. I don’t even know if you call it that.

RV: It was just a smell. Unique?

JW: It was unique unto itself. Yes, sir.

RV: Did it evoke a physiological reaction that smell?

JW: Yes, it heightened your alertness. It was kind of a warning odor kind of thing.

There’s something here. Absolutely.

RV: Tell me about the other equipment you would carry. Obviously, a canteen and what else?
JW: As I say with your rucksack, you had your personal toiletries as limited as they were and certainly your C rations. In later times we got LRP rations versus C rations were good because mainly they were different but anything gets old. Obviously a lot easier to carry than cans.

RV: What was your favorite C rat?

JW: Beans and franks.

RV: Beans and franks. Not ham and lima beans?

JW: No! Nobody eats ham and lima beans.

RV: I asked that on purpose.

JW: I know it. I hear you. That’s one that you couldn’t give away.

RV: Ham and motherfuckers, right? They were called ham and motherfuckers? I’ve heard them referred to.

JW: You know in Tennessee I ate my share of lima beans. I tried the C ration lima beans but they were not good. So that’s cute. But you never knew because when we’re choosing C-rations obviously if you open the top each individual is stamped with what it is. To make it fair you always turned it over. You open it up and turn it over and pull the box off. So now the bottoms are there and you just pick a box. There were those favorites, beans and franks being one of them. There was an egg thing that was pretty bad too. I’m a picky eater. So, well, we do what we have to do. Garlic salt and hot sauce were staples in the field because anything you can do to alter the taste a little bit. I did a lot of peanut butter and jelly and crackers. So that kind of made up your rucksack. Aside from that you couldn’t carry enough water. Everybody was required to carry however much it had been. Two or three canteens. We even went to two-quart bladders at some point. I’ve got pictures of me with D rings, canteens here there and yon because you couldn’t carry enough water especially during the dry season. More than once I’ve gone to a blue line on my map to get water only to find it’s dried up. Then you wore your bandoliers, your M-16 5.62 magazines. Again, you’re required so many. You wanted to carry more, that was your prerogative. Certainly on your pistol belt you had your standard ammo pouches for that. Generally we carried them in bandoliers. Your ammo pouches were used to carry something else. Maybe some kind of pogey bait we called it. A little snack or something. Of course, you had your first aid pouch there, definitely. In my case of course the helmet liner, steel pot. Although when I had my recon I let them skate and we wore berets in the field. That’s another story.

RV: What kind of weapons?
JW: My weapon in my case I was so grateful for this. Most everyone of course carried the M-16 rifle no question. We had of course the grenade launcher, the M-79 was carried as well as the M-60. The M-60 machine gun and, of course, the assistant gunner had to carry extra ammo as the assistant gunner for the M-60. It seemed invariably I had one big black guy named Kingsbury, name of my high school, carried the M-60. In fact, that story I was telling you about all the leeches he carried the 60 on that particular recon. Seemed like the little guys forever was carrying that M-60. It’s a heavy weapon. No longer in the active system, I was told at Ft. Benning last month. It was a wonderful weapon. In my case, getting back. I carried the AR-15, the Car 15 which had the folding stock. It looked like an M-16 but it was a much smaller version. Of course, the stock would extend out. Carrying it through most all the time. You always had it over your neck, always in the ready position. Of course I had the stock in. For me, it was for anyone that would carry one but mostly for officers at that time it was just a much smaller weapon. So a lot easier to get around and deal with than the M-16.

RV: Right. Did you have a sidearm? 9mm?

JW: We had, of course grenades, I didn’t mention the grenades. But the M-26 fragmentation grenades and smoke. We always carried smoke, various colors purple, yellow, what have you. Red is only for a bad time. What did you just ask me?

RV: Side arm?

JW: Side arm. I’m going to have to tell a story. The .45, which was your basic side arm, we didn’t really have in the field. We needed fire power. I think the only one I mean there’s lots of crazy stories about the .45. The side arm in general terms wasn’t going to be of much use in general terms. As a rule, no side arm. But at one point, we were operating off of LZ Oasis, which was a brigade size LZ, just southwest of Camp Enari. A Brigade size LZ with I don’t know how much maybe a battalion of artillery. Anyway, I was securing that. We had now gone from straight leg. We were converting to mechanized before I took the recon platoon. So in short order at some point we actually got 113s or armored personnel carriers. So my recon platoon job also became a scout platoon job. We still operated mostly on the ground. They could get us to some point but we still had a walk.

RV: When was that transition?

JW: It was probably in June. Probably in June ’67. Not too long after I had joined them because we came out of the field specifically to get our APCs. I forgot where I was going Richard.
RV: The side arm story.

JW: So there we were on LZ Oasis and rumor had it there was an Australian officer in Pleiku who was there as an advisor. He had lots of Belgian made Browning 9 mms still in the COSMAL. He was trying to build a force there with the ARVN or rough puffs or whatever but he needed M-16s. So sitting around my CP my command carrier one day this was mentioned just in passing. I said without even thinking about it, ‘Man I’d sure like to have one of those pistols’. I didn’t do it consciously believe me. That’s all a lieutenant really needed to say because his troops looked after him. So about three days later I come out of my command bunker to go in my APC or whatever. Sitting right at the commander’s hatch was a brand new Browning Belgian-made 9 mm pistol. Almost in the same day the artillery battery commander, the captain at the battalion briefing reported his troops missing M-16s (laughs). So our boys, our guys we never leave our rifles ever for a minute. Artillerymen, it’s just a secondary thing to them. They’re leaving their rifles around.

RV: They lost them.

JW: What can I say?

RV: So did you carry that 9 mm with you the whole time?

JW: I carried that the rest of my time.

RV: How about the second tour? Well, you couldn’t bring it back with you, were you able to take it home with you? Ok. You still have it?

JW: I regret that I don’t. I made an error. I traded it. It was the dumbest thing I ever did. I’m sorry you asked that question. I just made a stupid error and traded it for a western pistol and it was the dumbest thing I ever did. I regret that I don’t have that pistol to give to my son. We have to live with our choices.

RV: Right. Of course. What was your favorite weapon?

JW: My car 15. My 15 without a question.

RV: Was there anything that you did not have that you really wanted to have? You just spoke about the 9mm was there anything else that you said, ‘I want this.’?

JW: No, because we go on rock and roll. Our little weapons served us well. There was always the controversy about the AK-47 was far superior in the field environment to the 7.62 the 5.56. There’s a certain case to be made for that. I’ve seen many Ak-47s after a battle. Not that they were naturally dirty. As a rule, any soldier is going to keep his weapon clean. I’ve seen them in pretty dire straights and they were steadily pumping lead at us. So they held up well in the field.
It didn’t take much to lock up an M-16. It really didn’t. Then there’s the old studies that I’ve seen in film about the tumbling 5.56 once it hits foliage and goes into a tumbling affair therefore it doesn’t have the hitting power it should have because of that. I think all told it does well. It performed its role in Vietnam all told. Those were our basic weapons. Obviously, at night we put out trip flares and we set out our claymores. There’s nothing more damaging and scary than to pop off a claymore mine at the bad guys, it’s powerful. We even carried some Willie Pete, white phosphorous grenades, mainly for tunnel, bunker work and those kinds of things.

RV: What do you mean bunker work?

JW: We go into maybe a tunnel complex that we want to. They’re not going to voluntarily come out. Throw a white phosphorous grenade down there. I mean, you can throw down a concussion grenade and kill them if they’re there. This way this would kind of cause them to make an appearance.

RV: Would you take them prisoner most of the time or would you kill them?

JW: I have more than once not fired. What I mentioned earlier about the movement of the villages out of our area, so that especially my second tour we had essentially a free fire zone. I value life. I more than once just allowed myself and or my troops to fire because we weren’t quite sure. If we were quite sure there was never hesitance. But as I spoke to you I just saw two khakis guys in the tree line. We were in our APCs. I know pretty much they were bad guys. There was a question in my mind. We went out ahead of them they were pretty far away. But the 50 cal will reach out there of course. They probably live today because I made a decision. I wasn’t sure. I can’t remember all of the circumstances. I just didn’t want to arbitrarily kill. On my second tour one of my guys got jumpy and shot to movement and he shot off the thumb of one of his fellow soldiers you know? Dumb, dumb, dumb, dumb, dumb. And he was a guitar player at that. His left thumb.

I mean I had to be aware of what was going on and not just arbitrarily fire. Even in a free fire zone within reason. You’ve got to be reasonable in my mind about it. You never know if someone got out of line, they’re circling back, they got lost. On occasion we had, as I mentioned, our interpreters. Well they are South Vietnamese. I don’t care to kill them if I can help it.

RV: Let’s talk about the enemy. What are your general impressions about who you were fighting?

JW: I have to separate what I know today versus then. I really didn’t know a whole lot about them.
RV: Tell me how you felt.

JW: To me, in my little world they were the bad guys. I was aware that the North Vietnamese Army was quite a bit more disciplined without question than the ARVN Army.

RV: You’d heard this?

JW: I heard this and now I have seen it. I mean if you take into account all they did just to get there that alone was impressive. Not that I didn’t meet some impressive ARVN. My time with them were limited. Anyway, he was mostly an unseen enemy right? Rarely did you see this guy. So he was an unknown face. I just didn’t know a lot about him other than he was an opposing force. It was my job to take him out. I had no compassion for him. He was an unseen face to begin with. It was one of those either he kills me or I kill him first kind of a scenario. That’s kind of where I was with that. We were fortunate in my area of operations with that in mind. The NVA were basically professional soldiers, if you will, to make a point versus the VC. Well the VC had less equipment and that sort of thing. So they had to go to unconventional situations. So, what I like about it, I’ve said many times I’d rather go to a pick up. I live in Valley Ranch and the Cowboys are right there. I’d much rather play a pick up weekend touch football game against a mixed Dallas Cowboys versus the guys that have never played ball. My analogy, if you will, is they know what to do when, but the guy that’s never played is always in your way and screws everything up. I’ll try to make this clear. In the case of fighting, in that scenario, fighting the NVA was pretty straight up conventional kind of deal.

RV: You can employ better what you had learned and had been trained with.

JW: We’re going to fight on like terms. But the VC were kind of off the chart in a sense. What I’m working towards is one of the things that because of where we operated [the VC primarily operated] in the highlands, we weren’t ever around really population areas. So we weren’t faced with VC as a rule. In the same breath weren’t faced generally speaking although I’ve got a pretty good scar here to say otherwise. We weren’t faced for the most part with booby traps like the 1st Division around Saigon as an example. We were taught a lot of that before coming over. Booby traps was really I remember that in particular being preached to us a lot because you don’t just open a door. You don’t just pick up something. I’ve heard many horror stories of battalion S-3, there’s been a firefight and a commander comes in. Oh my God, there’s a rifle over there or whatever it may be. Let me go get that for you. That’s the thing that you’re taught time and again and more than once a guy goes to grab it and it was booby-trapped and it blows him away.
RV: Did you ever see any of that?

JW: No, that kind of an accident, no. Now in my second tour I lost some boys. One boy on his 21st birthday lost his legs to a booby trap. Beautiful young man on his 21st birthday. So I'm just saying as a rule we weren't faced with that especially my first tour with the unconventional stuff in the way of booby traps as a general rule. It was more of a straight up fight with the NVA.

RV: What would you say would be the strengths and weaknesses of the NVA if you had engaged them?

JW: Boy, well, their stats are dedication to the cause. Their ability to hit and run. They definitely performed well, the NVA. I'll just give you another example if I may. Again the majority of my time was against those guys versus the black pajama guys, I think that was the VC. Their weakness would be kind of internal to themselves as far as their lines of communication and logistics. That's an internal problem to them, which in turn aided us in a sense. As far as just the actual performance of battle, these guys are dedicated and good at what they did within the means of what they had. One example of that, we were operating southwest of Ducco, which is Pleiku, southwest of Pleiku. Southwest of Pleiku is Camp Enari. Then there's the LZ Oasis. Then we got on out that road you go to a Special Forces amp called Duko, before you get to Cambodia. Then south of Duko is an old camp called Plei My. Between the two was a pretty good area to deal with and right near the Cambodian border. We were operating out in that area. On one afternoon, I patrolled a particular area until mid to late after noon in this particular area. I'm going to say 300 yards squares or whatever kind of place. I worked it. Then I came down this road and we were night lagered in our APCs, in a company sized night lager. Sometime in the night, I don't remember the time, all of a sudden it was like the 4th of July. From the general area where I had just been until later afternoon the bad guys were firing into Ducco, which was a little Special Forces Camp. It's an ARVN camp with Special Forces advisors. So we're here. This wasn't even 200 meters probably, honestly right here where these guys were firing into Ducco Special Forces Camp with recoilless rifles etc. Being the hard charging lieutenant that I was, I was immediately down to the Captain Nobles command track chomping at the bit because I knew exactly where these guys were. I'm truly, literally, begging captain Noble to allow me to gather up my platoon and head up there, either on foot or in APC, whichever. I just can't stand it. I just know almost exactly where they are based on the flashes and all. He being the wise and old commander didn't say no, but 'Hell no'. Once again he saved my life because the attack wasn't so much about Ducco as it was
about the ambush. This is the smartness of the NVA, and I’m going to describe it. It was all set up
for me, Jimmy Wheeler to come running up the road and kill all these Americans. This was
something of a feign if you will. Because at first light, I got to go up there. I don’t remember the
exact numbers now but I’m talking to you as I said was there until relatively late afternoon on the
day before. This started happening sometime in the night. I got up there and there was an old
road that went up there. You don’t walk on roads and trails. I fully practiced that. Where we would
have come if we’d have done the APCs, we’d have come up this road and they had dozens and
dozens of fighting positions in place.
RV: All along the road?
JW: There wasn’t one hole there when I was there that afternoon. I never saw a bad guy.
I mean I’m looking for them. But that’s just it, you mostly looked. Sometime between the time I left
and say 10:00 at night, whatever it was, I’m talking about multiple holes. They could dig a hole
with their little old entrenching tool, by the numbers. I mean slick. Not just a sloppy hole. I mean a
nice professional hole. They had dug emplacements for automatic weapons. Not just a weapon,
an automatic weapon, the whole bit. All down what we call the high speed of approach, which we
would no doubt big bad Americans come rolling up on their APCs and RPGs would have blown us
all out etc. This went on forever. I mean I’m talking about I don’t want to state a number. We’re
talking probably 100 holes. I’m serious dug in that short amount of time and everything in place.
So everything’s catered toward us but they’re firing over here, just waiting for us to come. The old
wise commander see? They were gone. Right back across the border because we were right up
on the Cambodian border there.
RV: That’s the NVA?
JW: That’s the NVA and that’s how impressive they could be. They obviously, they were
watching me patrol that day. They had me in their sights. Maybe could have attacked us,
generated a contact. But that would have defeated what their real mission was. Their lieutenant
might have wanted to do that but their captain said no, ‘Leave Wheeler alone, let’s wait until tonight
and do what the heck we’re supposed to do’. I was told at one point, this is totally unofficial,
please. There was a price on my head down in that valley. I ran in a lot. I was the recon guy.
Once we got our APCs we spent a lot of time down in there. I was told informally that there was a
price on my head at one point. I hadn’t thought of that lately either.
RV: What about the Viet Cong, their strengths and weaknesses?
JW: I really didn’t have any real dealings with the Viet Cong per se. Not having had any
al I could probably say was what I know today maybe from what I’ve read. I didn’t have any real
direct. There was one time though we were dealing with Viet Cong because of where we were.
This is still in this same time frame. I’m recon platoon leader and we’ve been sent south to secure
a little temporary firebase probably from one of the fires. Well south almost down to the Ban Me
Thuot area. So it was a new area for me. It was well south of where we normally operated. It put
us into something of indigenous circumstances with indigenous people. Fairly near little village
because I even liked to watch the Zen. I got picked on a little horse then and this that and the
other. One day, I’m sitting in my APC, command post. It just turned out we had a reporter from the
Ivy Leaf’s newsletter from the division, just happened to be there. It was mid-morning and it was
time for me to send out a patrol. So my primary radio operator who’s father was the mayor of
Indianapolis if I remember correctly, because he’s my personal radio operator. So he didn’t go out
with the squad, they did their own. He begged me to go out on a patrol that morning. Literally. He
wanted a break. We’d been stationed there a few days. He wanted to go out. He was an
interesting guy, Creech. So I succumbed. I said, ‘Ok grab your radio and take off. Have a ball’.
So I’m sitting here in my APC. My radios are right here, just talking to this reporter whatever.
Creech comes on the radio and his voice is inflected. He is one worried individual. He uses, I
don’t remember the exact call sign. For all intents and purposes I’ll call me Recon 6 and call him
Charlie 6. The point is he was using his proper radio procedures but he called. He said, ‘Recon 6,
Recon 6, Charlie 6 over.’ I heard him; he was excited. I heard him; I said, ‘Roger Recon 6 over.’
He said, ‘There’s a big element out front.’

RV: A big what out front?

JW: Element. Well, with his voice level and the fact that we weren’t on our normal area of
operations to kind of know what’s going on. This is all instantaneous of course. I needed to know
whether we were dealing with the NVA or the VC to react in one sense of the word. But as I’m
going through this in my mind immediately to ask him that question, I see Genghis Khan’s hordes
coming. With his voice and we’re talking about six or seven guys out there.

RV: How long had he been gone?

JW: Thirty or 45 minutes. Just a short, kind of running. Wanted to make sure no guys
were getting in too close to us. Just a short patrol. So I literally saw these hordes, but I didn’t
know what uniform to put on them yet. I saw these hordes of bad guys coming at my half a dozen
guys. So this is all happening instantaneous. So I immediately came back and I said, ‘Well
describe them to me.’ Because I needed to know are they in khakis or are they in black or
whatever? He came back and he says, ‘It’s big and gray and has big floppy ears’. Well I went
from here-to-here in emotion. I was so relieved.

RV: Just for the record your hand is up and it moves down. You went from way up here to
way down there.

JW: I’m sorry. Yes, my emotions were so high because I was so fearful for the lives of my
soldiers. I had heard element, which meant an enemy element coming towards him. They’d run
across an elephant. So there was my range of emotions. This all happened in the course of a
minute if not less. We all got a good laugh out of that. Of course the writer being there made a
little story that he put into the Ivy Leaf news magazine about the big element.

RV: Did you ever run into any of the Pathet Laos troops from Laos or the Khmer?

JW: We killed Chinese. To answer your question, to my knowledge, no. To your
question. Again forgive me for looking away, obviously I’m thinking back when I look away from
your eye contact Richard.

RV: Of course.

JW: I start seeing these little scenes. It’s amazing because it’s not where I go. I
remember, I don’t remember when it was but another one of those contacts.

RV: First tour?

JW: Yes, this is my first tour, yes. We had a pretty good firefight. There were a lot. When
I say a lot I don’t know how many. Quite a few dead I should say it that way. Quite a few dead. I
remember this was around a stream. We got so annoyed just being humans because one guys
was lying in the water and we wanted to refill our canteen there. Just one of those fleeting
emotional things as we were policing up the battlefield. This is when I saw my first Chinese. They
were demonstrably larger.

RV: Is that what identified them?

JW: Yes, exactly. You knew immediately. Hey this is a horse here versus these little
guys. There were two or three. I guess they were advisors, I’m sure they were advisors. They
were obvious to us Chinese. We took whatever we took and turned in to the S-2 and all that. I
don’t know anything past that. That’s the only time in my recollection probably period that I saw
that kind of a thing and it was that one time. That one time was the Chinese big guys. One of
them was in the water and he was messing with our water.

RV: Did you go up stream of him to fill?
JW: We dragged him out, obviously pulled him out of the water, but yes we did. We
needed that water.

RV: Go ahead.
JW: That’s the, relatively speaking one exception to that kind of enemy.

RV: Were you wounded on your first tour?
JW: I was blown up in a landmine, but not seriously wounded. It garnered me a Purple
Heart.

RV: What happened?
JW: We had two in a row. The first time it happened we’re riding along and one of my
lead APCs ran over a mine. So I caused my guy to accelerate and pull up. Of course, I’m riding in
the cupola. I was off and running over there in a hurry because I was the next in line and
everybody’s behind me or forward of them, whichever. What I learned in short order was my guys
would look at me askance I guess they were thinking I could detonate another mine. They weren’t
anti-personnel they were anti-tank mines. So they were a larger thing. But the uniqueness of that
was and I’ll come back to it I had a similar situation happen. I ran to them to lend assistance and
found myself basically alone. I want to share another one of those with you. No one was seriously
injured. Obviously, if you had a 500 pound bomb under there, there’s nothing left. But their
homemade devices whatever that particular device was. It wasn’t our standard anti-tank mine it
was just blowing in 60 to the moon thing. That’s what happened to me in a very like manner
situation. Got cuts and bruises and that sort of thing and blown out of the cupola. But nothing
even like my dear friend who’s son chose to be an infantryman years later and was in Israel on a
field training exercise from Ft. Lewis, the 9th Division and ran over a mine in his jeep out there and
lost his foot, like in the ’80s. A different story. Anyway, twice I got looked at askance. Let me flash
forward from this second tour. In here is an award for Soldier’s Medal. I don’t know how familiar
you are with a soldier’s medal, but it is a very special award. It is for heroic conditions not under
hostile fire. Yet I got it in Vietnam. On my second tour we were up in Dinh Binh Province in the
mountains, heavy, high trees. We hadn’t been resupplied in a while and we needed to be
resupplied.
RV: How long had you been out?

JW: We never went in. As a general rule, that’s what I truly like about the 4th. Now this is my company now. I’m a second tour as a company commander. But the thing about the 4th, we always stayed in the bush. Now there were exceptions like when we went from Dak To back to the Ia Drang we stopped over night in Camp Enari as an example. But the 4th Division stayed in the bush. That’s something I want to give a profiling of at some point of how grand and wonderful a 19 year old infantryman was in Vietnam and what his life was in the field. In my second tour, I’m literally on the side of a mountain, honestly. I mean honestly we had a big gorge here. The trees were still out about here. The chopper was really high. I know they can’t see it but I’m just trying to give you. This was where we were going to have to receive our resupply but they were going to have to drop it a great distance. I’m literally holding onto a tree on the side like this. The gorge bottom is here and then they’re dropping from up here. We had a couple, three choppers come in to drop resupply. We were getting our little cases of soda. My God, by the time they were falling the distance they were falling we weren’t getting three cans out of a case. So this one bird came in. Of course, I’m talking to him. I said ‘Blackjack 6, Alpha 6 over. Could you at least bring your skids down to treetop level?’ Because they were still dropping them well above the treetops even. There was a hole there that a chopper could fit in. I had one of my rear guys was on this particular bird, from my rear, a short timer that you send back, to give them a break. So the sergeants simply asking we’re losing too much of our stuff. If you would at least come down to treetop level with the skids. ‘Roger, I can do that Alpha 6,’ kind of a thing. Then he comes down to the hole and I don’t know, I don’t think I ever knew. I surely must have asked him but I can’t say either which way now. I’ve always wanted to think that he wanted to consciously come down in the hole. There was sufficient it was a little squirrelly in every pilot. There are better ones than others and all. But anyway, he came down past the treetops and then he lost RPM. As I say I must have known it once, because either way he lost RPM. Then when he pulled he swung that tail boon around and the rotor hit the tree and I’m up here. I just watched that chopper fall to this gulch, ravine. Well, once again whether I’m a lieutenant or a captain, I’m on the run, Richard. I’ve got all my CP up here with me. I’ve got my medic, I’ve got my FO, I’ve got his RTO and I’ve got two RTOs of my own all in my CP up here. They’re up on the top and I’m hanging down here talking to the radio. I go bounding down this very, very steep incline and as I’m going down it and I’m already thinking as a commander what we need to do. I don’t know that it’s going to blow up. I don’t know how many
people’s hurt. My medic should be right behind me with his medic bag. All these things are going through my mind as I’m going down. As I get down to the bottom and I mean the chopper is on it’s side and it’s still kind of settling. I literally, so help me Lord, I turn around to start giving orders and there ain’t a soul there. I look up the hill and this is what they’re saying to themselves ‘Dummy. Captain, I don’t think so.’ In other words they were saying, I can’t speak for them. But they were saying ‘Hey,’ because I had done one of these numbers as I started down the hill, ‘Come on, let’s go get these guys.’ They were saying, ‘We’re smarter than that. If that thing blows up, we’re safe.’ I’m sure that’s what they were thinking. Well it didn’t take long for me to get their attention because now it’s settled and it isn’t blowing up. There’s no fire. Of course, they came on down and we go them out. Nobody was seriously hurt. We had to take the radios and everything off the chopper. Then I got to blow it up. Back then, it doesn’t sound like much today. But they cost ¼ of a million dollars is what they cost then. So what I did, I had a lieutenant that was very good with demolitions. We rigged it. Of course it still had all of its fuel in it essentially but was gutted, the basics. Of course, I imagine some safety guy came out. I don’t know but a day or two later we were ready to blow it up. So I chose me to be the guy to blow it up. We just had so much cord. So I was able to get what I thought was a fair distance of comfortable distance from it. Of course, I’m also behind a big old log that’s lying horizontal to the ground. So that’s what I got behind. I got everybody away because this was down here. Everybody was up here anyway. Anyway I pushed the plunger to fire that thing off and Richard I’m talking about a ball of fire come blowing towards me with all that fuel and stuff. I got down like this and I mean ball of fire blew over me like you’ve never seen before. Almost blew myself up. I didn’t get hurt. I think I got singed it seems like my eyebrows.

RV: Lost your eyebrows.

JW: But out of that, of course, my guys put me in and I received a soldier’s medal for my response to that particular circumstance. Question?

RV: No, why don’t we take a break for a second? Let me ask you about enemy tactics. Can you describe what you saw? What was the most common way that they attacked in general? If there needs to be discrepancies between the VC and the NVA tactics, could you explain that? What, in general, did you see as how they would come at you or did they lay more in ambush for you to come at them?
JW: I said earlier, Richard, I can't speak to any degree regarding the Viet Cong. My
experience was with the NVA. As I've also said earlier, right or wrong I didn't have, I was never
involved in a major brigade sized fight that lasted for days. I think very few of us did. I didn't have
that experience. For the most part as we've said so often about the enemy in Vietnam, they were,
for the most part an unseen enemy. Yet, they were there. They did understand how to fight their
war. Almost like the Indians in our cowboy movies, they chose the time they wanted to fight for the
most part. I think they obviously were more in a defensive role in that they did pick and choose.
They often did their ambushes. This is the very subject and I have spent a lot of time literally in the
last year or so reflecting on, as we get older and reflect. And interestingly in my time in my second
tour from December of '69 to July of '70 as a rifle company commander, I had less contact. Of
course the war wasn't quite as violent at that point. I had less contact during that year than I did
my first year. I didn't question it at the time why this was. This isn't absolute, but I think maybe it is,
in my own mind it is, because I very much was a disciplined commander. I cared for my soldiers.
Not that others didn't, of course. But they were first and foremost in my mind. So I did not suffer
principle ever that I consciously ever would do that to endanger their lives, reflect back for a
moment. This was my second tour also. We stayed in the mountains a lot my second tour. This
was a rainy season. We had literally spent the better part of a day circumventing a mountain. I
don't know why we decided to go up on the mountain, but I mean on a high mountain in the
monsoon. We had spent a good part of the day doing that.

RV: Company size?

JW: Yes.

JW: Yes, my company. We're on top of a mountain the wind is blowing. The rain is
pouring. We set up in our little ponchos. I mean we hooked ponchos to ponchos and best you can
try to get by. I'm in my little hooch with one of my radio operators. I keep hearing this noise, guys
talking. I basically said, 'Who in the hell is that?' My guys, it was my Alabama squad. I had some
boys from Alabama. One of them got shot awhile after that and as I was helping put him on the
aircraft, on the huey he said, 'Kill some of the bastards for me, Captain.' He was shot at that time.
That was he was still saying. His rucksack was smoking. He had gotten shot, when I was putting
him on the plane. This group of guys, and oftentimes you'd find your best field soldiers are your
sorriest rear soldiers. They're great in the field, but they're not too controlled in the rear. That's
what this group of Alabama boys were. That's who was talking. They were 30 meters forward,
around the perimeter because I’m in the center. So I had my radio guy call and tell them to knock it off. Ten minutes later same old smoking and joking. So one more time and maybe I went through the platoon or whatever. I said knock it off, now. Here’s my responsibility as a commander, Richard. These young boys sitting on top of a mountain in the middle of the night there ain’t even any billy goats up there, mountain goats up there you know? Just us dumb Americans. They felt they’re safe and sound. You and I know better. I have a responsibility. So after the second time, and they really think they’re safe. I don’t know that they’re safe. I know that my responsibility. So after the second time of calling over there, some time later same old stuff. I really didn’t want to get out in the rain, it’s pouring. It’s nasty and it’s blowing. I got up, I mean, I got out of my little hooch. I walked over to where they were in the little poncho thing. I reached down and I just ripped it off and dropped it. There they were all sitting in there. Just young boys enjoying each other’s company, etc.

RV: Are you lucky that they didn’t shoot?

JW: I never thought about that. I never thought about that. I think it happened quickly enough they knew. I may have said something said I did, whatever. The point is I tore that thing off and there they sit. I didn’t say a word. I just returned to my little hooch. Well, I guess the point of my story is I sleep very well at night knowing that those men, although one got shot later, that those guys are going to go to bed tonight with their wives and see their grandkids tomorrow because of my dedication or my efforts for their well being. Could I have let that slide? Sure I could have let it slide. But that’s not the way I operate and that’s not what I’m charged to do. So that’s one of my little stories about that. That’s not a direct answer back to your question. Going back to the unseen enemy, again on my second tour, we were leaving a night position one time. Very, very thick vegetation. The drag platoon, the last guy that was moving out there and I was back in that area because I always made sure that we didn’t leave anything for the enemy. You can leave your old wet socks, you don’t want to hump them. That’s socks for Charlie. We don’t leave a C ration can, that’s the makings of a booby trap. As a commander I have that responsibility. I mean, I’m using my chain of command but I want it right. So I happened to be back there when this guy turned around. It was literally the last guy and all of this company movement. This is thick, thick vegetation. He takes a picture of his buddy. Then weeks and weeks later because at some point he takes it up, he’s got to get it back to the rear, get it
developed and back out. He’s looking at his pictures. He gets to that picture that I just described
and in the vegetation back in there is a bad guy face.

RV: Oh, my gosh. Really?

JW: Looking at him, so help me I saw it. Now going back to the tactics. I said the unseen
enemy. So help me that was captured just that simple. Just like that.

RV: That’s a bit spooky.

JW: Yes, sir. My reflection when I said my second tour. We had our little moments but
nothing like the first time. I reflected on that. This is going to be and I don’t mean it as an ‘at a boy’
personally to Jim Wheeler, because it’s unproven, but I think the point is well made. The bad guys
did for the most part, because they generally speaking couldn’t mass a force necessary to attack a
company. So they mostly worked in a defensive hit and run kind of mode. Well I’ve come to the
conclusion and I’ve really spent a lot of time with this very serious point I want to make. Maybe this
will end this for now. Is as I reflected, why we didn’t have more contact. Yet I was never
ambushed either time personally, so help me. The next day after I turned over my recon platoon I
got to be the S-3 air for a short while before I left Vietnam for the first tour with the battalion. The
first day that the new lieutenant or the lieutenant that took over my platoon got ambushed and took
an RPG through the right front of the APC and killed my driver. I was on the LZ when they brought
him in. Yet I’d been out there almost nine months. So God is on my side, a little bit of luck in life.
I’m not doing dumb things. So what I’ve arrived at Richard, is by employing the proper tactics,
using my point, using my flank security, using my rear security, not hip hopping down trails. Not
trying to avoid Charlie. I look for Charlie everyday, Oh God I did. By not putting myself in an
ambush situation. Not that it couldn’t happen, luck too. I’ve come to believe that I did a very god
job in employing my troops the way I did. Everyday I searched for Charlie. I never once ever,
ever, it’s not even in my vocabulary tried to not find him or not go somewhere. There’s some stuff
that went on over there. It’s an imperfect world we live in. I did my job and I think I did it well. It’s
really not about me, but that’s what I’ve arrived at as I’ve really reflected on it. I must have done
some things right there because I never got ambushed. That was by working primarily by a little
instinct but also by the book. I’ve come to a very pleasant feeling about that.

RV: So my question of the nature of the enemy and their tactics, you reflect upon just how
you and your men reacted to what was there everyday or what you came across? Or what you
went out to find. They weren’t necessarily taking the war to you, is that what I’m hearing?
JW: They rarely take the war to you unless you are at a weaker position. Like in any line of resistance where are you going to attack? At the weakest point. You've got to find the weakest point. I'm saying in a sense that I employed it well. I'm not trying to do me. That's not the point whatsoever.

RV: There were few weak points in your line when you were in command where they couldn't attack perhaps?

JW: True. That's not to say, again I'm blessed. That's not to say that I was ignorant to a spider hole here where we walked right over him. I walked right past a tunnel, a tunnel complex. I don't know. The point is he generally picked and chose where the fight was to be enjoined. I guess as I'm saying in my estimation I made that decision for him because he was going to have to play with me just like we do that pick up game on the weekend with the cowboys. Straight up. He couldn't muster that.

RV: Maybe perhaps that's why there was a bounty on your head.

JW: Maybe so, but here's my head.

RV: Right. Why don't we go ahead and stop for the day?

JW: Yes, sir.

RV: Ok, thank you very much sir.

JW: You're very welcome.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone, I’m continuing my oral history interview with Lieutenant Colonel James Wheeler, Jr. Today is August 12, 2003. I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech University. Colonel Wheeler, where are you? You are in?

JW: I’m sitting at my desk at the Denton County Veterans Service Office where I sit everyday as a part of my duties as the assistant county veterans service officer.

RV: So you are in Denton, Texas?

JW: Denton, Texas, right.

RV: Ok great. It’s about 8:34 AM Central Standard Time. Sir, let’s pick up with where we left off. We had discussed really basically your first three months in country March to June ’67. You had recently taken over a recon unit. Why don’t we pick up from there? When you took over this unit, what changed as far as your command in the field?

JW: All right, well the comparison from rifle platoon leader to recon platoon leader is very dramatic because at the rifle company level as one of four rifle platoon leaders I certainly commanded a platoon. But at the same time I had a captain company commander that, basically, if you will was my boss in the chain of command and directed me on a daily basis as to what I was to do.

RV: Yes, sir.

JW: By acquiring the position of reconnaissance platoon leader I became an asset to the battalion at large and essentially answered directly to the battalion commander under that circumstance. So my role became much, much broader. At the same time I became an entity unto myself. Because I was the commander of that particular unit versus the captain down at the company level. So that changed. Again, as an asset to the battalion, I was expected to be and was certainly quite flexible in my duties because on any given day I could be in support of Alpha Company, Bravo Company, Charlie Company depending upon the circumstances of any given day. In other words we were something of a reinforcement unit as well. But primarily even though I was in support of them, the greater part of what I did was on my on. I had my own area of
operations to work. I had my own mini-firebase at time to provide security for like at the LZ Oasis etc. So I was something of an entity unto myself in that regard.

RV: What were your daily activities like?

JW: Our day was primarily and understandably driven by intelligence. We spent a lot of time down in the la Drang Valley where the bad guys were plentiful. Even though I was fortunate not to acquire a vital on the levels of what we’ve seen recently in the wonderful movie We Were Soldiers, we could just about, I don’t want to overstate this. There was area in the la Drang when I got new troops that needed a little taste of combat, if you will, I seemed to always could go there in a general area and manage to find the bad guys and have a little modest firefight if you can say that just for my new guys to get a little taste in a general sense. But again, as a battalion asset, I reacted a lot to I think they called it triangularization. If the bad guys, or the enemy if you will, if someone higher level than I intercepted a radio transmission as an example, the communications level guys were able to do a triangulation, I guess, it was called and kind of pin point where that particular push of that radio came from. Often times, or a lot of the time then that was passed on down through the system from division to brigade to battalion. If it was in our general battalion area of operations then it ultimately got passed to me, essentially an eight-digit coordinate. Off we raced to try to see if we could find the enemy in that approximate location.

RV: Were you in platoon size or company size?

JW: This is at recon platoon level. Recon platoon was really made up of two different sections. We were a platoon but now just the terminology of and structure of the recon platoon were such. I guess I had two sections. I often times based upon the mission would allow my platoon sergeant to take if you will a section of my men and go and do something. Run a mission elsewhere from myself. So we did a lot of racing to these coordinates with very little success quite frankly.

RV: Why not? Why did you not have the success that you thought you might?

JW: Down at the platoon level, I don’t know what the time lapse was from when that signal was first noted. I have no idea of knowing if it was within an hour or half a day. I just know that I always responded. I can’t think of a time when I went to the general area of the coordinates for that particular radio transmission. I can’t ever remember finding an enemy or having any contact in that particular context, no. So we did a lot of that. And it needed to be done. Just that we didn’t have the contact that I think one would have expected.
RV: How much did you run across booby traps and other things set for you in the jungle there?

JW: I’ve said many times throughout my life, Doctor, that I was very grateful and this sounds a bit selfish, but it’s just a true honest statement. We the 4th division, first of all we had the largest area of operations in Vietnam. We were fortunate in the sense that we were able to operate in what we call, for all intents and purposes, free fire zones. We operated not around populated areas. We operated on occasion I can stop and think. I may have driven through the city of Pleiku perhaps twice or three times in a year so to speak as we went from the south say north to Kontum, or Dak To, etc. Outside of that, our troops rarely, if ever where we weren’t around any populated areas. That’s a populated area was more conducive to how the Viet Cong operated. Of course, they were the known classics for employment of booby traps etc. So having said that we were fortunate that we didn’t work in that kind of environment. Therefore, we did not experience an overly large amount of the booby trap scenario in my daily activities. That was truly a blessing.

RV: What other kind of activities did you run with this unit?

JW: Again everything obviously is based on intelligence. Again, being a recon platoon we were airlifted at times into special operations. I can remember operating out of north of Pleiku and north of that area of Kontum. Just my platoon itself, the recon platoon, or a force of us, not necessarily the full amount of us were lifted west into the Cheu Prong Mountains I believe they were called. Again based upon enemy activity. We had modest contact. This was way in the mountains and very difficult to traverse.

RV: How long would you be out when you were air lifted and dropped?

JW: Let me see. First of all we were always out on these special operations. They might be a week. I can remember one of the operations because I have some photos of it. In the mountains on a Sunday morning we were above the clouds and the battalion chaplain, Chaplain Tom Deal was flown in for a church service. I remember we were literally on the side of a mountain. I took some pictures during the service. The clouds were down below us we were so high in these mountains. It was a sanctuary for the enemy, but they knew that ground well. We didn’t have any major contacts up in there because they kind of controlled it. And knew the ins and outs of it all. It was tough, tough movement for us.

RV: So this was classic search and destroy?
JW: Purely. Purely search and destroy, absolutely.

RV: What do you think about that policy or that strategy of going out and searching and trying to find the enemy to try to destroy the enemy coming back to a base camp per se versus appoint other tactics?

JW: At the time, it seemed and I think it was appropriate to a certain degree. Certainly, at that time I didn’t see past that. I mean, I understand tactics and I’d studied tactics in later years studied even more of course. At the time, it seemed and I believe it was for all intents and purposes based upon the fact that we were dealing in an unconventional war scenario. For all intents and purposes it was the practical tactic to employ. I don’t have any real problems with that. Due to our versatility we were able to bounce about the battlefield so to speak pretty efficiently.

RV: How long did you run the recon unit?

JW: I ran the recon unit until essentially the end of calendar year ’67.

RV: Let me ask you about the intelligence. You said a lot of it was driven by the intelligence. How would you rate the intelligence that you did receive?

JW: Well I tell you if I had to rate it, well that’s not quite right. Certainly however they triangulated these communication signals had to be real. They had the technology to do that. There’s no doubt that a radio signal was transmitted. However, if I had to grade it out it would seem to me the efficiency of passing that information down through channels was slow. This is just Jim Wheeler because I don’t know exactly or precisely. I just know as I’ve said earlier, literally, every time and I responded to many, many, many of those I never ever made contact with the enemy in that particular scenario.

RV: Are there any incidents that come to mind when you think about this time period when you’re running the recon unit?

JW: I can put a number of things. For whatever the reasons, my recon platoon became a very popular unit within the confines of the battalion. Certainly, there’s a little bit of romanticism with it because again we were kind of an extension. We were not a pure part in the configuration in a sense that a company is very much by the book and a commander has so many people to work with. It’s very structured is the word I was seeking there. Very structured and pretty much conventional in it’s way of operation. However, the recon platoon just by the name and then we got to do a slash and add scout to that when we went mechanized. So there was a certain amount of romance, in a sense associated with the recon platoon. We had a very good success in our
endeavors at large in the field and for some reason my platoon became a very, very popular place
to seek. I truly had so to speak cooks, typists and bottle washers trying to gain entry into the recon
platoon. It was all driven again by just the basic reputation of the recon platoon and what we did
and the way we operated. I did operate a little bit unorthodoxly in a sense. In other words, the
steel pot, I'll give a secret here. The steel pot as you know is not the most favorite item a soldier
has to carry or wear.

RV: Yes, sir.

JW: That becomes wonderfully nice and immediately on the head as soon as the first
round starts coming in, no matter where the pots have been stowed or put. They make the heads,
very, very quickly. Just out and about humping the bush as we did, day in and day out and many
days as is well known. We could go many days of course, many days without having any contact.
That's where the importance of leadership starts taking place because you have a responsibility to
those men and even though it's human nature to get lax and slough off etc, you can't allow that to
happen. I worked very diligently at not doing, not allowing that to happen. Heart and Soul.
Anyway, so days of humping with this heavy helmet on your head. I suffer to this very day with
neck problems from that thing.

RV: Really?

JW: Yes, that poundage on your head takes its toll on the neck. So I visit my chiropractor
regularly for that. I'm sure jumping out of airplanes didn't help. But nonetheless the point I'm
getting to is what I allowed my soldiers to do, unknown to the chain of command is allow them to
get berets. We were able to get them, the guys in the rear; our supply guys could get into Pleiku,
which is the city near the 4th Division base camp of Camp Enari. They were able to get berets,
purchased on their own. Well, they went one step farther. Not only did they get the berets, and
this is all happening in the rear. As you know, American soldiers have great ingenuity. They got
produced just like the Ranger tab. I know you're familiar with the Ranger tab. They had recon tabs
made unbeknownst to me and got those put on the berets. What I did on occasion is, once we
were away from any main forces, let's just say introduced by helicopter in to the bush for special
operations or something even though I could have suffered grave consequences had there been a
head injury in a battle wearing berets. It really lifted the spirits of my boys. That's the key thing to
me. So even though I really am a by the book guy, I'm a dress right dress guy I did allow that to
happen. Something that simple really causes an esprit de corps to take place or that was part of
RV: Ok, as a platoon leader how did you deal with losing a man?

JW: I certainly was greatly, greatly bothered. But here was something about our war. I've read this I've probably seen it in the Vietnam movies where guys say they purposely didn't try to get too close to your buddy. That kind of a theme. That isn't exactly my case. I didn't distance myself from anyone person. I always was there doing whatever they did. I walked point, I carried a machete even though that wasn't my job. I was down there with them so I was right with my guys. Got to know them pretty well. Of course you were more close to what you call your command post or you CP. You know the guys that carried your radio, the guys that were if you had an FO or field artillery lieutenant with you for forward observer and his radio guy. You spent a much greater amount of time around those guys. So you came to know them a lot more than a PFC rifleman in the farthest platoon or section. That aside, death is death. It isn't a pretty thing but at the same time, I myself, through some unknown source internal to me, dealt with it pretty well. It bothered me, it bothered me deeply but I was able to shake it off and move on. We can't do any thing for the dead, other than honor them I understand that. We've got to get on with the mission. It's like some people would get upset if you called a dustoff a helicopter chopper in to bring out the wounded. If it was a pretty good battle, in general terms I'm speaking and the helicopters is full and you're trying to put a KIA onboard, a Killed in Action often sometimes depending upon the circumstance the pilot would say no to that. Of course, it would greatly upset the guys on the ground. That wasn't his job. His job at that moment and that time based up on the situation was to get the wounded out. The dead we can take care of but it's more important to deal with the wounded right now. In like manner, let's say they weren't even on station yet and you called and you didn't have any wounded but you had two KIA and it's about dark. Again, they would refuse to come out. On the ground your emotions are so high you can't understand the reality of what's taking place here, but why would we bring a helicopter out near dark in a hostile environment to pick up two dead bodies and possibly suffer the consequence of somebody else dying? So we wait until the early morning dawn and do those kinds of things.

RV: Can you make some comments on the job the dustoff pilots did?

JW: Not only dustoff helicopter pilots at large I love them to this day immensely. So many times they would come in when they shouldn't. This is not a contradiction to what I've already said
by any means. I’ve had them come in when they probably shouldn’t come in. I’ve had them put
men on the aircraft, let me think if I can think of the word. The air density there in Vietnam,
especially, in the dry season was very, very light anyway. So the chopper because of the lack of
humidity on the air in general terms wasn’t able to lift as great a weight as otherwise. I’ve watched
them strain because we needed to get guys out. I’ve watched helicopter pilots do phenomenal
things with these aircraft. Always for the troops on the ground. That was what it was all about. I
know you’ve asked just about dustoff. They did it but I’ve had them bring in ammunition at o’dark
thirty kinds of things. They were just so willing to support the troop on the ground.

RV: Did you ever operate with any K-9 units?
JW: I had a K-9 unit my second tour that we can either talk about then or talk about it now.

Whichever.

RV: Let’s wait until we get to that chronologically. So tell me what happened after the first
of 1968? You said you had switched from the recon unit or did you continue?
JW: When I finished with the recon I had done a lot of what was all field time and we’d had
a great run with it. Like anything in life, all good things must come to an end. Even though I didn’t
really want to leave I had no choice in the matter. I think we spoke about this doctor informally
before. But I’m obliged to speak to this. Certainly as we live our lives we reflect back over and
look at it, I guess evaluate it and chew on it and think about it, and certainly I’ve done the same,
especially for my war time. I reflect back that I think that certainly a little luck goes a long way. I
also think we make a lot of our own luck. I think the Lord looks over us pretty strongly. Then
there’s just also going about your business properly. I never personally got ambushed. Never got
into a pure ambush. That’s not to say that the greatest tactician in the world couldn’t because
there’s little luck involved and all that stuff. But anyway one of the things that really bothers me to
this day after I left my recon platoon whereas I just stated I was never in a pure ambush. Because
I think that I’m no great tactician but I understand tactics and I understand how to employ them. I
don’t go about it anything short of trying to do the best I can. So the fellow that took the recon
platoon from me, who I did not know previously had to be very capable or he would not have been
allowed to acquire that position, be chosen for the position because it’s a very competitive position.
It’s the ultimate lieutenant position in the battalion. But by golly if it wasn’t the first day, it was the
second. I want to say the first. But the first full day official day that he had command of my old
platoon, and APCs, Army Personnel Carriers, M-113s they were ambushed. He went right into an
ambush and his track took an RPG that killed the driver. I was on the LZ when they brought the
driver in from that, when the helicopter brought him in to the medical unit there. I still see him to
this day as they brought him off the bird. So obviously that gave me great anxiety because it’s one
of those human things. Golly gee if I was still in command perhaps that wouldn’t have happened,
but life goes on. I moved into a wonderful position because the great infantry guy at Benning, the
great Ranger in the sky always said the perfect infantry officer is either a commander or an
operations guy. We still have to have S-1s for personnel, S-2 for intelligence and S-4 for logistics.
But the S-3 that’s operations. That’s the heart and soul of it all. So fortunately I was selected to
leave my platoon to go and become the assistant S-3 for air. So first of all that moved me to the
battalion operations level, working for a wonderful major, a great major. I became the battalion
briefing officer was one of my principle duties so that every morning and every evening I gave the
operations briefing for the battalion to the battalion commander and his staff. Of course any VIPs
as the commanding general comes in, what have you. I did all those briefings.

RV: Can you describe kind of maybe a typical briefing? What it entailed?

JW: Yes, I did this coincidentally right back at the LZ Oasis a year after I left Vietnam and
came back I was now the assistant-3 as a captain at the brigade level. Became again the briefing
officer. In both instances what I really and truly very much so pride myself on is no one said I had
to do it this way, I always went the extra mile and I got up extra early to commit all my briefing to
memory. So that when I stood in a typical briefing was early in the morning. The battalion
commander would arrive and the principle staff is already there and the commanders and what
have you. We just simply went over what had transpired literally since. The morning briefings
weren’t generally nearly as involved as the evening briefings because we’d just briefed the night
before. But for a given morning briefing I would brief following the S-1 and the S-2. Of course the
S-2 briefed off the map pretty much too because he’s the intelligence guy and always had his
notes. Like I say I was up an hour or two before anybody else and went into the TOC, the Tactical
Operations Center and really worked diligently at when I took my pointer and pointed to a sight on
the map I had at ‘16:30 hours yesterday sir Charlie platoon of da-da-da-da made contact with x
number of bad guys, enemy and the results were bop-bop-bop.’ I just did it by the numbers. I’m
very, very proud of how I went about that. So I very much enjoyed doing that. Of course during
the course of the day I’m working with the major and moving forces and evaluating intelligence and
making plans for operations etc, insertions of troops. A great sidebar to that was because I was
also the air, meaning that I controlled if you will the utilization of aircraft I was allowed to go into Pleiku and attend an aerial observer, an AO course with the fixed wing the old L-19 aircraft and fly in the back seat as an aerial observer for multiple reasons. From flying a horseshoe and calling in artillery to just flying out and doing reconnaissance from the air as I did before on the ground. A nice aside to that was when I attended the school, which was probably a week, maybe two weeks but probably a week I was awarded crewman wings coming out of the school. What was able to do I was able to fly enough combat hours and missions that awarded me those wings permanently. So I've always worn on my uniform, they're not pilot wings. They look like, I don't have the shield where the shield is on the pilot wings. There's like an eagle on mine. I was able to acquire those, which was a nice aside to it all and gave a little versatility to what I did on a daily basis there my last three months with the 2nd Battalion 8th Infantry.

RV: Which did you enjoy better, running kind of doing the operation back behind the lines or actually being out in the bush?

JW: I was a field troop, undeniably. I adored what I did in the field. Now interspersed in there, if you allow me, this is really a nice story if I may. I've already mentioned Chaplain Tom Deal who was our battalion chaplain.

RV: Yes, sir.

JW: Also a fellow that I had gone to officer candidate school with was also assigned to out battalion. We weren't assigned to the same unit so I didn't see him on a regular basis, but nonetheless he was there and I knew him. Well, I had met my mate for life before I went to Vietnam. My wife now of 36 years next month. Our plan, we developed this plan over the time to actually meet for R&R in Honolulu in September of '67 and marry. So very unusual circumstances I brought with me it worked out. We worked at working it out. I was able to travel to Honolulu for my R&R with my battalion chaplain Tom Deal and Lieutenant Morris Rowsey, who was my best man. So we traveled to Honolulu together. I actually had Chaplain Deal perform our marriage ceremonies there, September 30th 1967. It sure took. She's my sweetheart. That's just kind of a unique deal.

RV: Absolutely.

JW: Gosh there's probably many more stories but that counter runs us through certainly with the turn of the year into '67 into '68 we experienced that wonderful thing called TET of '68. Certainly I was there. But at that time now I was at the battalion operations level. We were at the
LZ Oasis and we were able to get up on the TOC. We didn’t have any direct attacks on our artillery firebase there at all. But Pleiku was not too far away. A major city in the Central Highlands and we were able to observe and be aware of all kinds of activity with fast moving, high performance aircraft etc. taking place in the distance. So I was there for TET ’68 but I wasn’t mighty involved other than directing units about.

RV: Right. Can you tell me what happened that morning and subsequent days of what you actually did?

JW: It just was our normal day maybe to the fourth power. In other words a lot was going on and we had to direct and or redirect forces to areas for example into the city. We were never in the city as such. The engineers their secondary MOS is infantry anyway, but they are engineers first. They were in town performing as infantry but they needed reinforcement kinds of help. So we were involved to some degree in providing reinforcement in that kind of a situation particularly in Pleiku.

RV: During your first tour you left in March ’68 is that correct?

JW: That’s’ correct.

RV: Where did you go when you left country?

JW: I went to the 1st Armored Division, Ft. Hood, Texas and became a company commander. Commanded Charlie Company 2nd Battalion 46th Infantry. The 2nd Brigade of the 1st Armored Division.

RV: How did it feel leaving Vietnam that first time? Did you think you would be going back or did you think that was it? That was my tour I’m done.

JW: I knew there was no doubt leaving in ’67 I had already met particularly pilots that were on their second tour. So I knew I think unequivocally that I would be returning. Bu that’s what I had chosen to do. If I may, I know and I don’t dare say if I had not met my friend for life and married, Doctor, I would not have left Vietnam after a year. I don’t know what the extension circumstances were for officers because I knew I’d be back soon enough anyway. We could allow our soldiers to extend, I don’t’ know if it was three months or six months at a time. I can’t remember the time. But if I had not been under the circumstance of being married and all I would not have left Vietnam at my normal DEROS date.

RV: Why?
JW: Because I was committed to what we were doing. I don’t want to sound trite but it was our big game. I don’t mean it as a game whatsoever. This is all the training and all the study that you do to employ those kinds of things in the real world of battle and why leave? How long is it going to last, we don’t know? Without question I would have extended, without question until they kicked me out. Now that wasn’t the circumstance because as I said we came back and I was back eight months and had orders to return. I tell you what the war did to people though. What I just said causes me to think about a Sergeant Nipper who I acquired. He was in my recon platoon and had been there for a good long while before I arrived. Sergeant Nipper was a pure field soldier. He loved to fight and he loved the field. Let’s just say it was three months at a time. I really apologize I’m not sure. I know that he’s already been in country a year and extended a time or two if you will when I came along. Well I know that I allowed him to extend at least once. Let’s just say it’s six months, it doesn’t matter because the points to be made. Well Sergeant Nipper started acting awfully weird on me.

RV: What do you mean by weird?

JW: He was a little off the beaten track. He’s the guy in general terms I’m not saying he did this. But he’s the guy that would like to go off and get himself lost and hunt down Charlie by himself so to speak and do off the wall or unorthodox kinds of operations in the field. So he had just kind of turned about 45 degrees from the norm. He wasn’t a problem to me, he was becoming a problem to himself. Well he may have been a problem to me at some point perhaps but what I saw was he had been there too long. He was too engrossed in it, in all of the above. So I remember not exactly the moment but I remember when he came to me, if you will, and was asking for another extension. Yet another extension, I declined. He was not a happy camper as we say. He wasn’t happy at all. We had a little discourse there, probably more than just the one time. But it was for his own gain and his own benefit and his own good. I as a commander with that responsibility chose to do that. It wasn’t popular for him at that time. I like to think today he better understands it.

RV: Have you heard from him or talked to him since then?

JW: No sir, not at all. I mean there are many examples. But this one that comes to mind like that. He just stayed there too long and it just got too morbid. Morbid’s a good word I guess.

RV: You weren’t afraid that would happen to you? I know that’s speculating because you were married and you went home and you had that going.
JW: I like to think I’m above it but I’m only human also. War does, I did some things there that I wouldn’t even care to talk about that are really off the chart from who I am as a good honest Christian man. But it does things to you. You come up within one sense a totally separate set of values for human life.

RV: Can you expand on that? Expand on that. What do you mean a different set of human values?

JW: Realizing that one of the commandments thou shalt not kill and perhaps your first kill, even though the greater preponderance of us never saw who we shot in general terms. Nonetheless you’re involved with killing. Either personally from afar or in between but after a while in my mind especially dealing with the enemy I mean certainly the death of your own American troops bothers you greatly. If it doesn’t something’s wrong. I don’t know that you don’t; reach that point too to a certain degree that you’ve seen so much death, been around it and smell it and taste it and live it on a daily basis. It starts to take on its own aroma about you so to speak. I’d like to think I don’t know if it’s descended the level that I was seeing Sergeant Nipper at, but there again I’m just human. I really had no problems whatsoever. I think most don’t, but I didn’t have any problems with killing the enemy. That’s what we were there for. That’s’ where it stops I would never allow my people or myself to go past basic killing but there are reports of really atrocities. I could never descend to that level. But the mind is a mighty thing as you well know.

RV: You brought up something in answering that question that I wanted to talk about. Were you religious beliefs, your spiritual beliefs changed at all because of your experience in Vietnam? I know we haven’t talked about your second tour yet but just in general can you reflect upon that?

JW: Fortunately for me I was raised in church. I thank God to this day and he’s carried me through so many things and protected me in so many ways in Vietnam in both tours. I’m keenly aware of that. So I went there as a Christian to begin with. Interestingly enough even though I had been baptized as a younger person I just used this chaplain a lot. I have pictures of it I meant to bring when I was out there. I will ultimately provide some pictures. I was baptized in the Dak To River in Vietnam by Chaplain Deal. It’s very special. One of the guys that carried my radio that first tour is still a dear friend of mine a gospel singer up in Kentucky. He was there in fact I got him a job. I got him out of the field when I left Vietnam. I got him a job as the chaplain’s assistant. After this he was still in my recon platoon at this particular point. But I’ve got pictures of us at the
RV: Why did you choose to get baptized in Vietnam?

JW: I guess because it had been as a youngster when it happened to me before. Let me go back even farther. I was raised in the church I even sought out churches on my own. Before I went to Vietnam I was home of course on leave in Memphis, Tennessee. I was at my best friend’s mothers and father’s house. She was like a second mom to me. Countrywoman and fixed a big old typical full-scale country dinner. We were visiting in the evening. It had to be a Wednesday, a Wednesday night service in a Baptist church. So I was there and just visiting and having a good time. No doubt in the way back recesses of my mind, obviously I’m heading to Vietnam in the next few days or whatever the time element is. But you know the Lord speaks to us mightily. I was kind of uneasy, kind of antsy there after the meal and visiting and sitting around. It wasn’t like I needed to just get up and go and just leave these wonderful elderly people. Anyway I was aware that church service was going on at this little country church out near my mother’s house out in the country. To make along story short I just couldn’t, I was uneasy. The next thing I knew I just excused myself from them and said I need to go to church. I drove out to this little old country church, Lucy Baptist Church in Millington, Tennessee, just north of Memphis. Went to that service and when they had the preacher had the call down front I was there. So I guess what I’ve worked myself to, Doctor, is I suppose I never got so I went down front that night already a Christian. I guess you could call it a re-born modern vernacular I guess as a re-born Christian. I don’t know that I like that term. I’m there already. But anyway call it that and I suppose that to complete that cycle there was no time for baptism to go along with that because of the fact I was leaving. So I suppose then, well I know now that the baptism in Vietnam was a follow-up to that commitment and probably was about the first time it could happen. It happened way into the tour. We were up at Dak To, obviously I’ve said Dak To already so that was well into my first tour. I can’t think now if it was before or after my marriage. Nonetheless that transpired it was very, very special.
raised also in my generation if you will I was a pretty dutiful person. Daddy told me to do
something I did it. Likewise with any adult for that matter. That was within the confines of the law
of course. So I had no problem in my own mind intellectually or spiritually doing what we had to do
in war. I had absolutely no problem with it.

RV: Have you had any problem since?

JW: No, no. Are there some things that happened or things that I did there in the heat of
battle that are associated with battle that I’d probably like to take back? Probably so. But do I lose
sleep over it? No because I did what was basically asked of me.

RV: Do you want to talk about any of those incidents or would you rather not? Obviously
you don’t have to.

JW: I understand. I’m not proud. It was kind of cutesy at the time. I’ll go on record here.
This isn’t mutilation or something like that. There were stories of guys that cut off ears of the
enemy. I would never allow that. Would never allow it, can’t imagine it. But one thing I must say
we kind of prided ourselves on is morbid in a sense as it sounds is some units, some guys.
Everybody operated a little differently. My second tour West Pointer captain, he kept a deck of
cards, like spades, I hadn’t thought about this in years. Bu they always laid a card on the dead
enemy, our calling card. What I did was I left an indelible unit crest on the forehead.

RV: Ok, how did you do that?

JW: You know the two prongs that push into the cloth, well we just smacked it into their
forehead. That wasn’t so much as being rude, if you will rude to the dead. It was more a calling
card of sorts for his fellow soldiers to know hey 2nd of the 8th has been here, beware. It was that
sort of thing more so than a morbidity kind of an issue.

RV: Anything else?

JW: Probably not that I should speak to.

RV: Back at Ft. Hood tell me what the climate was like in the United States when you
came back? What had changed and what had changed in you?

JW: The climate was terrible. I was much more comfortable in Vietnam than back at Ft.
Hood for lots of reasons. Of course one day you’re in Vietnam and literally the next you’re out. Of
course I had the experiences of walking into the woods with my wife back in Tennessee at my
mothers and the weirdness of all that, not having a rifle in my hand. Just little weird things. That
comes in time. The troubles facing a commander in 1968 were tremendous. We’d already had
riots in Detroit, Los Angeles. Here I come out of war fighting an enemy and I literally spent an
inordinate amount of time as a mechanized infantry commander doing riot control training. Very,
very strange. But the pace of everything, especially as a young infantry guy the pace is so fast you
don’t get to spend a lot of time giving it a whole lot of thought. It’s more of a reaction. But because
the hours that you put in as a commander are just horrendous, it comes with their territory and the
put on the pressure we had a commanding general that was just a horses’ ass. There’s no other
way to say it. Most of our commanders had already been to war and going to go again in short
order. We had a commanding general there, the better part of my tour the 1st Armored Division
that just didn’t allow life to be very pleasant. It just put so many pressures on the whole system. It
just made for an unpleasant year quite frankly. Going back down to the company level at the
training we spent a lot of time, riot control training. We got so far and my company had already
been I think to Detroit before I got there in riot control training. Again the irony so to speak of
Americans fighting Americans in a sense was just really off the wall. I remember one of the times
while I was a battalion three then. Hang on. We spent a lot of time doing that. This commanding
general you could have your entire battalion or your entire battalion every armored carrier, every
jeep, everything out there on line I understand the importance of dress right dress and all that.
This general first of all had an uncanny ability to do this. You could have 99.99% of everything to
perfection and that SOB would walk along and find a chain dangling off the back of trailer hitch or
something and go ballistic, literally. I mean just destroy everything. He just took the breath out of
you. Couldn’t talk about what good had just transpired. This really ought to be fixed. He was that
kind of a guy. Of course his ADC, his assistant division commander especially a maneuver had to
be in like manner the same way. So we lived and died with our 3x5 cards in our breast pockets
that I normally liked to keep sewn or starched because what happened CG would send somebody
down to the brigade or battalion headquarters on a given night and ask for FM-22-5 drilling
ceremonies. What he did he would take the manual home a review it. And find some little arcane
or some far footnote of some Bravo Sierra and appear at somebody’s training the next day and
throw out that question. If you didn’t have the answer woe be you. Aside from all the things, all the
commitment that you’ve made. Do I sound a little bit jaundice towards that guy? Yes, I do
because it was just not a pretty year especially for the majority of us who were going right back to
war anyway.

RV: Did you know you were going back?
JW: I knew I was going back. I didn’t know when, but I knew eight months when I got back I had orders to return. Now I didn’t return for a few more months. I came out in March of ’68 and I was back in July of ’69 long enough to get my daughter born. But anyway another tough part of command at that time along with all the strife that was happening nationally was there again I have to apologize for not remembering exactly but when a soldier came out of Vietnam and got to the west coast if you will, it was either 90 days, either three months or five months. You may know that. In other words, let’s just say it was five months, I just can’t remember which. If you had four months and 29 days, you could be released early, but if you had five months then you had to stay. Well, it think overall with all due respect to RA soldiers and then they were great too, I remember I was awfully impressed. A lot of my impressions from firefights those soldiers that showed up well were U.S. soldiers, draftees, drafted for two years. They didn’t sign up, they didn’t sign up for three years. They were drafted and they performed immaculately in battle for the most part. I found E-6s hiding on me in a firefight and wish I’d shot them, there’s so many stories. So what happened is we had these soldiers especially those who missed the cut by a few days so to speak who had to come and play soldier. Especially with this 1st Armored Division and they couldn’t at large. They didn’t make any concessions. We were still operating just like whatever the norm might be. The point is you had a training schedule every week and you were required to satisfy these requirements, whatever they may be, going to the field, map reading and all these things. Well when we had a parade, 95% of the guys on the right side you’d see right shoulder patches meaning these guys had been to war. So when we take them to the field to play war, they’re not happy and you can’t blame them. That was compounded by those who say missed the cut, right? So we’ve got all the turmoil going on nationally then we’ve got our soldiers who’ve been to war, come back and missed, using that as the example again. Missed the cut so they’re having to pull another four months or whatever it is when their buddies go tot go home. They’re just not happy guys. So I remember spending not only an inordinate amount of time with the right control training, but an awful lot of time on court martial.

RV: Really?

JW: Yes. We commanders. Because there was just so, so much strife going on. Then I think it was the night before we were to deploy we actually were going to the field. No, I wasn’t a commander then. We had of course the black problem.

RV: What do you mean?
JW: We had blacks who were demonstrating. Of course they were bringing people on to post and demonstrating. We had been alerted to go. This wasn’t a full deployment, but we the unit were alerted let’s just say to go to Chicago, Detroit, L.A. wherever. So everybody was supposed to be information with their uniforms and this that and the other. Like on a Friday night after a full week of training. We were on alert. I remember six black soldiers sat down in the middle of a road somewhere and refused to move. I remember even the division commander going down there and ordering them to move. See, there were outside sources coming in and being a part of this. So they ultimately arrested of course these guys and took them to I think it was a makeshift stockade because I remember going there the next day. Then so the alert was called off say at 2:00 AM. 0700 hours I and the other commanders had to go down to the stockade because of not only the six, there were more involved as well. Anyways we had to go down there and walk through this stockade to identify, try to identify these characters. I remember walking through there and them turning their backs on you. Playing this game, this is insane Doctor. I mean God dang I thought I left the enemy in Vietnam. So those kinds of circumstances were going on. I had a guy I think it was a full court martial when I had a black guy sign out for his weapon at the armory. My armorer brings me the sign out sheet and it shows this guy H. Rapp Brown. Instead of signing his name he put H. Rapp Brown. Well, I had to deal with it. What is this all about? Then I had one of those guys I refused to present him Silver Star. I told him I’m a soldier you tell me to jump and I’ll ask you how high. But I had one of those H. Rapp Brown guys who got a Silver Star, followed him to the States. There’s no doubt that he earned it and my God a Silver Star. I told the battalion commander I will not present his to him. I refuse. He understood.

RV: Is that the guy who signed H. Rapp Brown?

JW: No, he’s another one. In that same vernacular if you will, but we were having those kinds of problems as commanders. About every other week they’d come and take one of your APCs or your tracked vehicles from your motor pool because they were needing to get them to Vietnam because of all that. Boy, command was tough, in the best of times command is tough. Add all that to it and then you’ve got a bride at home, and you’d like to spend some time with her. So I was home long enough to get my second grade school teacher daughter born. She was six weeks old when I had to return to Vietnam.

RV: How was that leaving your family?
JW: Well, not good. We took it in stride. My wife is the ultimate military wife. Her father was quarter master officer. I never let him forget that he was quarter master, support troop in his life, but that was all in fun. My wife, of course having a basic understanding of the challenges and the sacrifices that are just part of everyday life with a military family. Just with the world at large would better understand what we call factors x, the sacrifices that military families do take or have to give up. Anyway I have the grandest wife in the world, took it in stride. What else can we do?

RV: Right.

JW: My wife wrote me letters every day I was gone both tours, with the exception of one day. One time. As I add a little footnote I spoke at Flower Mound I was asked last year to speak at the anniversary of 9-11 in Flower Mound, Texas. So I shaved my little goatee thing and put on my uniform. When I was bragging on her, I told her I think she wrote me twice on Sundays. Once before and once after church, kind of a little footnote. No, I didn’t really relish leaving them, but at the same time it was just part of what we did. We knew it was coming. You just sucked it up and did it.

RV: In that interim period at Ft. Hood how much did people ask about your previous Vietnam experience? How much did you talk about it with military personnel and then with civilians?

JW: Had little to no contact literally with civilians Doctor. Because again as a commander and then I was and I’ll tell about the three job. But we were just so much time spent at the unit level, number one. What free time you had was spent with your wife at home. For the most part, then of course your fellow commanders had the basic experience as yourself. There was a commonality there. It was such a normal part of our lives that I don’t know that we sat around and welled on it too much because we’d all been there. What’s there to talk about? I’m sure we had our discussions you know and the application of tactics and this that and the other. As I’ve said over the years, I wasn’t a guy that just went back to the block and then faced all the things that the average young soldier faced when he went home. Because of my environment the arena in which I operated with fellow officers who were having the same basic experiences myself they weren’t out of the norm versus the young. Especially the younger man that did his two years or even three and returned home, a much different scenario. I think I lost point there.

RV: Why don’t we take a break?

JW: We can do that.
RV: Ok, continuing now. You wanted to mention one other thing about Ft. Hood before we go back to Vietnam.

JW: One if not two, but certainly Ft. hood. I was a first lieutenant at this time. I'm going to make captain in September of 1969. Excuse me of '68. Right now I'm a first lieutenant company commander, Charlie Company 2nd of 46. All of your fellow company commanders are captains. Now as we already kind of talked about the times were very difficult at this particular point in our history of the Army in particular. We were short officers and this that and the other. So not unlike my reconnaissance platoon scenario, I was the only first lieutenant company commander. The others were captains. Obviously senior to me. But once again I was blessed. While still a first lieutenant over the captains I was selected by the battalion commander to be the battalion S-3, which is a majors position, a major's billet. So I literally became a battalion, mechanized infantry battalion operations officer or S-3 as a first lieutenant. Then ultimately was promoted again in September to captain. So I only had roughly three months as company commander before I moved up to be the battalion three. That was nice thing. Before that happened maybe this is why. I just think about one other nice little coup. We were invited I think it had to be, Memorial Day I'm sure. One of those kinds of holidays. I know I just have to think. Anyway out battalion was selected by the division to march in that parade in Austin, Texas, at the state capital. So what happened is I was selected. I was still I guess the company commander and myself and the battalion sergeant major were charged with putting together a composite marching unit. Meaning I took bits and pieces from each of the companies and put together a composite marching unit which we drilled probably for an inordinate amount of time and we went down to Austin, Texas and got the first place for marching in that particular parade for Memorial day. I was kind of proud of that because it wasn’t like it was my pure unit. As I said it was a composite. We needed some high points during that year at Ft. Hood. That was one of them that just came to mind as we were going through the Ft. Hood process. As I say in July of ‘69 daughter six weeks old, I did return to Vietnam. That’s where we want to go at this point?

RV: Yes, sir. What was your position when you returned or your assignment?

JW: Ironically when I got to, I guess it was Bien Hoa remember I’d just been out of country just over a year. I had been a very mobile individual in the 4th Division area of operations. But for some reason the system wanted to send me to he 9th Infantry Division. There I was a young captain and I said you know it just doesn’t make a lot of sense to me to go to the 9th Division. Now
I also was aware that I didn’t have webbed feet. The 9th spent a lot of time wading in rice paddies and that was probably as much as anything driving me to do what I did. Really and more so though was the fact that I really knew the basic area of operations for the 4th Division pretty well, and hadn’t been gone too long. I literally had to go through a little chain of command there. I really did, two or three levels. Kind of arguing my case, tactfully. It just really made a lot of sense to me to return to an area of operations that I was relatively familiar with. Finally got to a colonel who kind of agreed that that made sense. So in short order then I don’t know that I was ever on orders to the 9th. I can’t say that emphatically but that’s where they were pointing me. But anyway wound up back at Camp Enari, 4th Division headquarters. Went into G1 and the brigade commander colonel Volney E. Warner who later retired, as a four star was the brigade commander out at the LZ Oasis ironically enough. He had gone on record with the G1 that the next captain that walks in that door that has prior experience with the 4th Division, he wanted him. I happened to be the guy that walked in the door and fit what he was looking for. He had a staff of people but he needed or wanted some one that was more familiar with the AO. So in short order I was right back at the LZ Oasis where I was in ’67 and became the brigade, now in the brigade level assistant S-3. Working for Colonel Warner and his S-3. Again became the principal-briefing officer for the brigade. Now I’m obviously a higher level than before in briefing daily operations and in short order had the battalion commanders of that brigade trying to get me. Good Colonel Warner kept me there for close to six months, five months actually I guess it was. As the brigade assistant three at that point I took command of Alpha Company, 1st Battalion 14th Infantry in December of ’69 down at Ban Me Thuot.

RV: Tell me about your daily activities as the assistant S-3. What was different between now your briefing the brigade? What had changed?

JW: Well certainly the scope of it is on a larger scale. Basic operations are still the same. I found it very odd in a sense as a sidebar of sorts that here we were if you will, fighting for the same ground that we were just doing last year or the year before. Then when I saw that more importantly, more clearly perhaps when I was on the ground with my company and having guys if you will wounded literally on the same ground for all intents and purposes that we passed through this before. That’s when a certain amount of consternation started probably entering my mind and starting to do a little questioning as to what in the world are we doing here? Can’t we do a better job? That sort of thing. That’s kind of jump forward. The brigade level of course the entire LZ had
been expanded over this particular year. They even had hooch maids. It just took me by surprise
that they had the locals working on, I don’t’ even want to call it a base, but on the LZ. It was a
pretty good-sized place now. Literally within a day or two, and I’m going through this process of
saying I can’t believe his is happening. There’s little barbershop down there, this that and the
other. Literally within a day or two of me getting there and over night becoming the briefer we had
an attack on the wire. So I have his picture right here in my wallet. He was at that time retired. At
that time retired now Lieutenant Don Pepke. Bu then he was the division commander. Of course
he was immediately there that next morning after this attack on our wire. There I was caught up
front briefing. Then he bit me in the butt you know. I responded to a couple of things in a way. I
was brand new. The major should have been up there, the colonel should have been up there. So
I answered in a way hat was right, but he didn’t’ like it. I remember getting burned and thinking that
I shouldn’t even be here. My boss should be here. That aside ironically the brigade commander
had been in the barber’s chair the afternoon before and one of the bodies pulled out of the wire
was the barber. Again those were the kinds of things that had me thinking. Come on this is not
what we’re supposed to be doing. So I guess early on I started questioning to a certain degree
how we had arrived at where we had arrived. I was very much a field soldier. I didn’t particularly
agree with what I was seeing.

RV: Can you expand on that? What were you seeing that was making you feel this way?

JW: Well, the one example, just from me personally and I only have my little micro-chasm
here of my views. But why do we have the locals on base? I saw that instantaneously. Why do
we have that? I know we need barbers and all that but we can do that internal unto ourselves.
You know there are those that are also those empire builders. Expansion in great. So that
bothered me early on. Within the first day or two as I said it came to fruition in my mind that that
wasn’t necessarily such a good idea because it was the same old thing that we’d read over time
and again who really is he enemy? You don’t know. So everybody had to be suspect. So why
bring them on base in my opinion. It may be a little different at division, you’re running activity. But
one little old brigade headquarters I didn’t agree with it and it proved itself out.

RV: Did you make your opinion known or did you keep that to yourself?

JW: I certainly wasn’t overly verbose about it, I’m sure. I’m sure that I had that kind of a
conversation with my immediate boss, the major. But no I wasn’t about to overly espouse it.

That’s not what I was there for.
RV: What were your daily activities like there?

JW: Just a very full day. Again I'm kind of overdone. Just like I did at battalion level at briefings I really did go above and beyond what was expected. But that was my own internalization of that. So again very prideful about how I presented the briefings. Now at brigade level we had an awful lot, not an over abundance but we had not just a morning and evening briefing but we had VIPs come in at different times. Not every day necessarily but there were a lot of VIP kind of briefings where there's the CG coming in, whatever it might be.

RV: Let me interrupt you just for a moment. Let me change the disk out. Hold on just a second.

JW: Sure.

RV: Ok, why don't you continue?

JW: Ok.

RV: Daily activities and what did you do?

JW: Again at least a good part of my day was made up of preparation for and conducting briefings both morning and evening. But at the same time I was the assistant S-3. But at brigade level we did have some planning officers who literally almost stayed in their little cubbyholes over there doing planning. So I was more of real time guys versus the planning captains that were planning future operations. I guess we had some input. For the most part I was right there in the OC throughout the day and certainly throughout the early evening. Again a little bit of overkill where we had constant radio communications with the battalions to just be constantly up on the fact that I was called on to brief at any and all times. I just needed to be keenly aware of what was going on literally from minute to minute if you will. So my days and nights were just spent right there in the TOC. Maintaining the pulse of what was happening in our brigade area of operations.

RV: How difficult was that for you?

JW: I loved it. It just was very natural for me. I have a strong work ethic and a high energy level. Of course I was young too. It just fit. The whole scenario Doctor what it was in the field recon or rifle platoon it just all fit nicely for me. It just fit, it really did. General Warner or Colonel Warner at the time was a sharp and bright officer obviously. He retired as a four star. He was into teaching us. I remember aside from the tactics operation side of the war we didn't have a really nice mess hall there of sorts. In other words he used the mess to cause us to better understand what officers are all about and how we should conduct ourselves.
RV: How so can you give me an example?

JW: I'm just trying to think as I say that. I just remember him causing us to understand that we have a certain level of importance in the hierarchy of it all. These aren't the right words, but I just remember him having special little functions at dinner now and then. They were teaching, I'm stumbling. What he was doing was above and beyond what he needed to be doing there in that kind of environment. He brought a flavor of almost British to us. Something above and beyond.

RV: A lot of protocol.

JW: That's a good word. A lot of protocol.

RV: You were able to learn from him?

JW: Yes, I had the good fortune of over the years, never working directly. Well I didn’t have the good fortune of not working for him. I wish I had, never working directly for him, but escorting him when he was a one Star, when he came to Ft. Bliss. When he commanded the 9th division he spoke at Command and General Staff College when I was a student there. I got to have lunch with him, an exercise in Alaska. We kept popping into one another. What was ironic is I got to the infantry branch. I think it was '82. I was there on TDY and went into the infantry branch to do something. When I signed in there was a Volnoy Warner there. So a lady had escorted me over there. I said, ‘My goodness, General Warner’s here.’ This young man said, ‘No sir, his son Captain Warner.’ I got to meet this man’s son who is now Captain. I have his picture here on my wall. He’s a very, very special person to me. Anyway I worked for him essentially those five months, learned a lot.

RV: What were your living quarters like?

JW: Well we live in tents. But they were tents. I don’t even know how many. There were at least four I’m sure captains to a tent. We had a cot, we slept on a cot. Of course the tents were sand bagged around. Believe it or not, I told you already they were hooch maids, which is the strangest thing in the world. They did wash, primarily did wash I guess. We had wooden floors or something, boxes or something. I don’t remember even though I was probably there five months I don’t remember an inordinate amount a lot about that. I don’t remember much about it. I spent so much time in the operations area. I know I went there and slept and shaved and whatever I did. It was not anything overly dramatic for me. I was still a field soldier. Yes, it was comfortable versus sleeping on the ground. We also had rats I can remember. Anytime you have that kind of
environment you’ve got lots of rodents about. We had terrible, terrible rats just come to mind as I
was speaking.

RV: Did they come into your hooch?
JW: Oh, yes.

RV: So you eventually are going to go back out to the field is that correct?
JW: Absolutely.

RV: What happened? How did that happen?
JW: Well, in general terms I probably got longer in the field my first tour than the norm in a
sense. I would have stayed until I DEROSed if they would allow me. You know a commander has
a responsibility and he’s got to share that wealth. Now what’s interesting, Doctor, is Colonel
Warner called us into his quarters. When I say us, myself and two or three other captains were
called into his quarters one evening. He was basically saying words to the effect, ‘Well children it’s
time now to leave mother hen so to speak. In other words ‘Men you’ve been here for four, five or
six months and it works to the effect I’m sure we’ve got guys in the field that need to come out.
You all need to go and get that experience.’ Again I would have gone straight to the field upon
arrival for that mater, but nonetheless one of the planning guys, I can almost see him now, he
balked. He wasn’t interested in the company. He was an infantry officer right? I remember
Colonel Warner was always so smooth and so intelligent and all that. He dealt with the guy and I
remember him explaining the reality of life and career and all that. But I was probably as stunned
as I guess maybe the colonel that this guy really kind of started waffling. Of course he had been
there long enough to know that you do get shot out there you know and these kinds of things
happen. He just wasn’t too interested. Neither was the colonel too interested in him staying any
longer. So we ultimately all went our various ways to our respective commands to company
command.

RV: You took over Alpha Company?
JW: Alpha Company 14th Infantry. I think on the 23rd of December ’69. Down in Ban Me
Thuot.

RV: Tell me about becoming a company commander. What was that like versus a platoon
commander?
JW: Well certainly the base is much broader. You start dealing obviously more directly
with, well you didn’t have any before but you’re not as accessible both ways to your troops. I really
like my troops. I like that contact but certainly at the company command level, you’ve got to use,
as you should use the chain of command. You’ve to what between you and that rifleman you’ve
got a platoon leader, normally a second lieutenant. You’ve got a platoon sergeant, normally an E-
7. But rarely over there. You even have a squad leader if you want to get down to that level
through the chain of command. So I can remember going however I was transported to take the
company. Having my lieutenants come in that very first night and laying out who I am and what I
am and my experience and been here, done that. We’re going to do it again kind of a thing as we
got ready. We weren’t there very long, just a few days and then we moved back up north to the
division base camp and literally moved the division base camp from Camp Enari to Camp Ratcliff
over near An Khe. Camp Ratcliff is the old division base for the 1st Cavalry Division who was in the
Ia Drang Valley there first. We moved over to Camp Ratcliff I think in early January of ‘70 and
literally became mountain goats because it’s the Central Highlands anyway. But really
mountainous terrain. We spent a lot of time, we used to say playing billy goat in the Binh Dinh
Province Area.

RV: What was your specific mission? What did you do everyday?

JW: There again Doctor, it’s search and destroy. You know get an order from higher
headquarters whether it’s verbal or written, more times than not it was verbal. You know we’re
sending out choppers. We’re going to pick you up and move you from this location to that location
and search out the enemy. Now I had any number of occasions to do aerial reconnaissance work
going into areas of operation. One time, the battalion commander came out in his loch and I had a
unit across the saddle is where he was able to come in, in this little loch. We were fixing to move
into a whole different area. So we came in and got off the aircraft, stayed with my troops on the
ground, while I did a VR, visual reconnaissance of the area that I’d been assigned. Mainly to pick
out my LZs, my dummy, all the above. So we’re flying around and I’ve done my map work and I’ve
identified where I’m going to insert and where I’m going to false insert and do all these different
things. Told the pilot I was done. He came back and said, ‘Roger Captain, but you’ve got 15 more
minutes of allocated blade time.’ I said, ‘Don’t need them.’ He didn’t argue with me, he was a
warrant officer but just trying to be nice. He said, ‘But sir you’ve been allocated another 15 minutes
of time here.’ ‘I’ve completed my work, let’s go back.’ So we flew back, landed there on that little
saddle. Colonel got into the seat that I just had vacated. Two minutes later that aircraft crashed
and he died.
RV: Oh, boy.

JW: I mean it wasn’t hostile fire. It was certainly in a hostile environment. The pilot survived and we never saw him, but I mean helicopter fell out of the sky, battalion commander died. So was that the good Lord working on my behalf? I think so. Had a cute little thing. We formally went into Cambodia in the Spring of ’70. We were called in and so we had been moved into the division base camp. And had gone. I remember it raining. We went to a briefing, a briefing the company commanders, to battalion, maybe it was a brigade. Let’s just say it was at battalion level, all the company commanders went down in this monsoon mess. So we were basically told within the next few days we’re going into Cambodia. The official incursion into Cambodia. So I’m going back to my little CP. We’re just stuck in some trashy stuff there at the outskirts of the base. Anyway I had a consternation. I said, ‘I’m sure we were told that this is close hold, understandably.’ So my consternation was my guys we’re not like leaving base. It’s not like we’re going to town or anything. That doesn’t happen. The only people they’re going to see are those they see. Their own friends. I’m really going through this as I go back to my headquarters as to how I’m going to brief this. But I know that I’ve been essentially told close hold. So I dealt with it in my mind and decided well, we’re not going to talk to anybody but ourselves. By the time, any letter if they write a letter tonight and it get mailed in the next few days, by the time it gets back to the States, it won’t be a secret that we went into Cambodia. So I made the decision, right or wrong. For me it was right that I was going to share that information with my troops. Because I wasn’t compromising the mission, I mean we were like totally like quarantined in a sense. But I made that decision in my own heart and mind that I would share that with my troops that we are in fact going to Cambodia. I just felt obliged that they should know that. I did share that. Then the next day, within the next day or two, we commanders were flown out to right out near the border at our Special Forces Camp called Plei Djereng. It was a Special Forces camp that I spent a part of Christmas ’67 at coincidentally. I think it was the first time I saw them cook dog out there. It was a Montagnard kind of a place with Special Forces. This is where we operated out of and were going to ultimately fly out of there to Cambodia. Anyway this is a cute little story if you’ll allow me. Like after we got there the next day, there’s what I used to call a push-pull aircraft that the FACs used to use, the forward air controllers flew this airplane. Anyway, two of us could go at a time going back to his map recon thing. Two of us would go at a time with this pilot to fly over into Cambodia. Again to VR our respective areas. So myself and Captain Threadgill, West Pointer guy, we kind of
flipped a coin so to speak who would get in the front. One guy had to get in the back and the other
would get up in the right front seat. I won; got in the front seat and I mean it’s just an old dirt strip
there. So the pilot doesn’t say a word to us. He has his helmet on. He’s got his dark shield down,
and so we’re pointed west. We’re pointed west as we go down this little old dirt strip. Just as we’re
lifting off, because I’ve got earmuffs on to be able to talk to the pilot, I hear the pilot say to me. So
help me Lord, he says, ‘It’s yours.’ Well I knew what he meant because he let go of his steering
wheel. Kind of modest not exactly like the stick we had in the back of the L-19, kind of a modified
looking little steering wheel. But anyway so I grab the steering wheel. I’m controlling, he still had
his feet on the pedals. Richard, we’re going straight due west fixing to cross the Se Sahn River
and be in Cambodia. Well, I’m a guy that is very, very happy and comfortable in the ground, but
not necessarily up here. Now we’re going into Cambodia and we’re fixing to be there in just a
minute. I start envisioning all this flak popping all around this little plane so help me Lord. Now this
is happening all very quickly. I still don’t get it why this pilot laid this flying thing on me right. But
I’m holding on for dear life. At the same time all these emotions, so help me Lord. We fixing to
start getting ak, ak everywhere. Well, we didn’t. There we are crossing the river. So that now tells
me we’re in Cambodia over Cambodian ground. So finally when this thing finally leveled out in just
a short order the pilot pulled up his face shield and he just started laughing like nobody’s business.
What it was he was a GLOW, a ground liaison officer that had been assigned months ago back at
the brigade. So I knew him, he knew me. Of course I didn’t recognize him when I got on the
plane. I’d been in the field now for a number of months and wasn’t even thinking about that guy. It
was this guy and he was just jacking with me. I thought it was a cute little story. I really thought we
were going to be getting shot at. I really did. I didn’t know.

RV: What did you say to him?
JW: It was just a classic guy-to-guy thing. Just a classic deal like that. You got me this
time, da-da-da. That was just one of those little cutesy. But while we were doing that of course the
troops were being moved overland from Camp Ratcliff out to Plei Djereng where we ultimately to
on our aircraft and flew into Cambodia. We had no real dramatic firefights over there. I’ll tell you
one cutesy is we received a number of replacements back at Camp Ratcliff. Even though I’m far
removed from the average young rifleman I really did try to meet them all. Sometimes it was
difficult and you never got pass that sometimes. Especially if we were in the field and a guy comes
in on a resupply bird obviously you had a better opportunity to speak with him one on one just a
little bit. Anyway we had more than one. We had these brand new young guys. So when we went
to our LZs, we had some hot LZ going on. So we had incoming rounds, we had the M-60s on the
carrying helicopters and then we had gunships working the treelines. So very, very noisy. But
nothing really dramatic came of it. We didn't lose any aircraft, we didn't lose any people that I can
remember. It's just one of those deals. So now we're on the ground, we're in Cambodia. We're
re-grouping. I've got my lead platoon, I've got my CP together. I've got my drag platoon, I've got
my flanks. All this stuff in place and we're fixing to move out on a given azimuth. I could hear it in
his voice. Lieutenant Bruce LeValley. He lost a platoon sergeant later. This lieutenant now he's
using proper radiotelephone procedures but he basically sent out, 'Alpha 6, Alpha 6 this is Charlie
6 over.' 'Roger.' He said, 'I've go this soldier back here, a new soldier who is refusing to go with
us.' Well there's a difference in a lieutenant and captain that's why we're called the old man right?
We're wise beyond our years. I never missed a best because the lieutenant really, truly thought he
had a problem. So I gave any instantaneous response to his circumstance, Doctor. So he said,
and this soldier is refusing to go with us. I said, 'Roger. Leave him. Out.' Well it was just really
that simple of a circumstance. He's going to go with us, right? Where else is he going? Are we
going to call a taxi in for him? The point is it was very simplistic to me. I understand the young
man. It was scary. I mean this was his first time in the field, all this shooting going on. Both good
guys and bad guys and noise, etc. But hey, you've got to come along. You really do. We
marched out and it wasn't a problem. Just one of those cute little things in my mind that you
remember. This lieutenant, who was a good lieutenant really thought he had a problem.

RV: Tell me about what you did in Cambodia and how long were you in there?
JW: Probably two maybe three weeks. I'm not fully sure. We never made any major
contacts. The same old scenario of sorts, Doctor. We did lot of walking or as we say, humping.
One time I was making a speech to the Chamber of Commerce. I think it was in the city of
Anchorage. I was speaking to all these civilians at this luncheon. I kept talking about humping. I
was getting the oddest looks from these civilians until someone finally brought it up and I had to
explain what we were really doing. We did a lot of that in Cambodia. I can see in fact I have the
crossbow. I brought a crossbow out of there from a village that we were told there were
sympathizers in there. We went on line, and I can remember at that particular incident where we
went online early in the morning and moved through and the village was empty. The little town so
to speak, but everybody was gone. We were told to destroy it because it was primarily or at least
the intelligence would have us believe or tell us that there’s no rhyme or reason why this village
should be here. It’s got to be a bad guy village. Even if it isn’t it’s in support of. We had to destroy
it. Anything that the enemy can use, we must destroy. We weren’t jumping ahead but I just
thought about that. At one time this is back in the other part.

RV: Let me ask you a question real quick before we leave that. How did you actually
destroy the village? How do you go about destroying a village?

JW: Just burn it down. There’s no real textbook to it. We obviously we thought it looking
for weapons. I can’t remember if we ever really found any cache of hardcore weapons. I can’t
remember all that, but we did go through it. Not like we pillaged and did all that. It was pretty
emptied out. At the same time I remember taking this crossbow, because if I didn’t make it a point,
if I didn’t, someone would because it was there. I really was somewhat remorseful because my
mind was, first of all this wasn’t really a weapon. Well it isn’t used against us. Someone spent a
lot of time constructing this thing, fabricating it. We took it, I took it in that particular case. There
were others I’m sure. That’s the kind of little human thing. Yes, this might be a bad guy village of
sorts but these are people just trying to get by, too.

RV: Were you issued any special instruction when you went into Cambodia about how to
react? You’re in a ‘neutral’ country. This is the official U.S. government position. This is what you
should or should not say if you’re captured. This is what you should or should not talk about. Any
special instructions?

JW: I’m sure that there were but none that come to me, that were out of the ordinary or
out of the norm. It was pretty much business as usual. For all intensive purposes his would be my
statement based on your question. If I hadn’t been told that we were in Cambodia, one, I don’t
know that I would know the difference number one terrain wise in a sense. Number two, I’m there
to kill the enemy. So if I have run in with him, we fight. So I don’t remember any dramatics, any
dramatical rules changes or anything like that.

RV: Did you ever run into any Khmer forces?

JW: No, no, no.

RV: So this was basically a two or three week search and destroy mission, on foot?

JW: Yes.

RV: You had air support obviously. Same kind of air support you would have over in
South Vietnam?
JW: Yes and artillery. I think we were probably on the outer ranges on the fans of artillery.

I'm confident we had some artillery. I say that but having said that I'd like to think we were. But then I can't remember any artillery as such at Plei Djereng. So maybe we were a little higher and drier than normally. But certainly we had chopper support.

RV: Anything else that happened in Cambodia that you would like to talk about?

JW: No, it really was even though it was into Cambodia but it wasn't much more than a standard excursion for us if you will. I do remember brigadier General Wheelock coming out and visiting with my unit in particular. Which worked to my gain I guess. I'm sure he visited many units. But two things out of that, remember I lost my battalion commander later. I got ahead of myself there. That loss was after Cambodia. It turned out that General Wheelock who ultimately because two star commanders in Ft. Polk I never met him back then. He, I guess, endorsed my OER. He couldn't rate it because the rater would have been the battalion commander. But because my rater went away through death they had to exercise an OER, officer efficiency report and General Wheelock wrote a very strong report for me. One of if not the finest company commanders in the division kind of a thing which I guess helped me because I was promoted ultimately below the zone. What happened when we came out of Cambodia what worked against me there was whatever the reason he personally selected my company to go into some ambush sites north of Pleiku. In other words there was a pretty good infiltration of sorts while we were in Cambodia coming into the Pleiku area. When we were pulled out of Cambodia and everybody got to go home, I had a little stand down I guess you could say. We got resupplied, my company got resupplied with double rations and ammo. We were inserted north of Pleiku not to be resupplied for the week or so that we were there. We were going to ambush kind of sights. So we did that. But there again there were no significant battles as such. Then ironically this is another little story maybe we can stop at this point perhaps or whatever. Another one of these stories came out. This is one and we may have mentioned it informally when we were visiting. We were supposed to be pulled out by a given time of the day by some trucks coming out of Camp Enari or Camp Holloway, which was some base there, support troops. Anyway they got stuck, got stuck up some trucks and the point is we were late getting out of this area north of Pleiku. Then we had to get back to Pleiku. The plan was to drive from Pleiku over to Camp Ratliff, which is the division base camp. Well because of the delay with the stuck trucks and everything we did get fed. We got fed the evening meal at some base there in Pleiku, like the helicopter facility or whatever. But I still had all our
deuce and half's with us. My plan was we were to go into Camp Ratcliff. So we got my boys fed. We got out on the outskirts of Pleiku on the highway, which runs through Man Yang Pass. Got out to a military police station and they said you can't go; it's too late. There can be no more convoys. We don't have any military police escort to take you. Of course I'm the lead truck right now. I've got any number of 20 guys hanging off this old deuce and a half behind me and all the trucks behind that. They're taking all this in. They're thinking, what's the old captain going to do here? I'm thinking what in the hell do I need a gun jeep for? Look behind me. I probably said it, I know I was thinking it. I said, 'Look behind me. I've got 120 or 30 guys with x number of M-60s and 100 M-16s and x number of M-79 grenade launchers, all that stuff.' Whatever I said. I have no place to go, number one and I think we can handle anything that's out there on the road. 'But sir, you can't go.' I think there was an arm down across the road there. I'm just confident that there is. There was something, there had to be. I basically said I know my boys are listening. I said, 'Sergeant, do whatever.' Whatever I had to have him do. 'We're going to Camp Ratcliff.' I just jumped back up on my truck to get in. He said, 'But sir,' and said something pretty dramatic. 'You just can't do this,' or whatever. It was kind of like my beret story of sorts, Doctor, because they raised the arm. I know I didn't bash anything down. We just kind of pushed through their barrier, or whatever it was and off we went. So my boys cheered mightily. Well, that's all well and good if we don't get ambushed. Once again I hung it out there for my boys that if anything had gone awry and it didn't. Anything had gone awry because the MPs hollering at you, 'They're going to get you over there. They're going to be waiting on you,' and all this that and the other. We rode into Camp Ratcliff. I may have got a dressing. I don't even remember a dressing down though. I probably caught some trash at the MPs going in, but we went right into our battalion area. I can't even consciously remember a dressing down or the battalion commander saying, 'Naughty, naughty.' I don't remember anything like that. So no consequences suffered other than the point is I got my troops. We've been out in Cambodia and then totally in the bush and ambush sites for over a week up in Pleiku. I wanted my boys home. Not home but where they could bathe, sleep in a rack.

RV: It seems that you had a good relationship with your men in your company.

JW: I really did. I truly, truly did.

RV: Did you ever ear of any incidents or witness any incidents of fragging?

JW: No. I must say to you that I was fearful for myself on an occasion that I will share with you. There were two times in firefights my first tour, my second tour that I twice found E-6s hiding
in a firefight. We always say you have the legal right to shoot them and all that stuff and I’d like to
think I would. Almost if I had it to do over, when I think about it in both cases I literally crawled
across these guys trying to maneuver people or do whatever. Here we go those as I mentioned
earlier those draftees, those U.S. guys with the U.S. service number doing everything they can to
return fire on the enemy. Here’s so help me I can’t remember. I wouldn’t know the first guys name
in my first tour because I got him out of there in a hurry. That was my first day in the field right with
my platoon. He was gone. The other one was a sergeant first class. He was an E-7, that’s right,
Maldonado was hiding in a like manner. Got him out of there. But what happened is anytime when
I had my troops come in, there were two things that I always told them. One of the things that I told
them was we have no room for prejudice out here in the field. No room for that. If you’ve got that,
leave it. We don’t have time for it. So I had a black E-6 mortar man. So he was an 11 Charlie I
guess versus an 11-B. Well we didn’t hump our mortars. You can’t carry a 81mm base plate out in
the field or a tube. You can’t do that. That one place where the battalion commander died I had
them out there then because we had a stationary facility. On the hills I needed an indirect fire
support. Anyway for the most part the mortar men got over as we used to say. Here we had an E-
6 and I say black to make a point. He was a get over. These three incidents, the two guys that hid
and this guy were all, this is Jim Wheeler’s term. I don’t like the word lifer, so I used the term lifer
for a careerist who just uses the system. So when I saw an E-6 and an E-7 in the field hide they’re
lifers to me. They’re not careerists. That’s just my Jim Wheeler. So here I had a guy acting like a
careerist but he was a lifer in my opinion who stayed in the rear. He was an E-6, took no initiative
to do anything. I got these reports back from my first sergeant and from my XO, my lieutenant. He
took no initiative to do anything. Well it’s the very end because I’m at the end of my tour. Just
before my last major move in the field, I had sent back an order for him to go out with a particular
platoon to hump the bush, to exercise his role as a non-commissioned officer and to learn and
benefit and gain from this for his on good. For his own development. So this is my last combat
assault. We were on an operation. We’re going into an old firebase place it was terrible because
now we’re booby-trapped. All the sandbags were all overrun with elephant grass and all that stuff.
We went in and everybody was getting stuck with these dad gummed punji stakes. I’m moving
down and I’m trying to do my work as a commander. I want my M-60s in on high avenues of
approach, all these different things where I need to employ my weapons. I’m going down this little
trail and this elephant grass is everywhere and zap. Boy I got zapped in my left calf. I took a punji
stake deep into my leg. So I wound up getting dusted off, would you believe with one of our
resupply Chinooks. They dropped me in the middle of a field back at our forward support area and
I couldn’t walk. I just crawled off of this Ch-47 by myself. There I was and I could see a couple of
hundred meters over there, the row of tents and things. I couldn’t do anything about it for the
longest. I think they finally found me or saw me waving or something. Somebody came and
picked me up. That’s not the point of the story. But I was hospitalized. I wound up over there with
a number of my guys as we got opened up and all that stuff. Anyway I got released and had two or
three days to DEROS. I’m going home. So now I’ve returned to the battalion rear. I’m on
crutches. I came home on crutches. I’m walking one day, hobbling down the battalion area
towards the mess hall and here comes this sergeant. Don’t know his name, can’t remember his
name. I’m hobbling along here and we’re coming one on one. We’re coming up to one another.
He starts giving me some shit.

RV: What did he say?
JW: Words to the effect that I was racist or prejudice, whichever word it might use
because if he hadn’t have been black he wouldn’t have been sent to the field. That theme. Well
that runs red with me. But that kind of a theme. It happened real fast and I had to lock his heels as
we say. I mean he was very emotional about it. But it wasn’t about that. It was about him having
to do something. It boiled down to the fact that he was having to soldier for a change because he
had been getting over and I knew it and he knew it. But he turned it around and threw it back to
me. When he said the only reason that happened was he was black I could have shot him to make
a point. I wouldn’t have shot him. He incensed me to no end because that’s the farthest thing from
my mind. But the point I’m getting to when you mention fragging. I had another night, probably
two nights. I’m sure at least two nights. I was there about three days before I was to leave. So I
had at least one more night if not two still there in the battalion area. Of course I slept up on a little
officer things. Steel tents and stuff. So help me Lord, Doctor, now he never threatened me.
Please understand that. In other words I locked him up, locked his heels and told him what the
reality was. Not what he was trying to make. That was a fact, then I excused him. Well, we’d
heard stories of fragging. I’d never had anything close to me or anybody I knew, I never knew of
any personally. Well I was never in the rear, anyway. I never had any dealings whatsoever with
that. But I said to myself, you know what an irony because this guy was mad. He was mad. Mad
at what he had built in his mind as aggravated as I got when he threw that in my face. So I feared.
I was more fearful there the next two nights of sleeping there than I was ever any time in the field because I really was fearful. Because one the ironic of life, Murphy's Law or whatever you want to call it. The irony of life to have lived through two full tours, still got wounded on my last combat assault. Then to die with a fragging was just unacceptable. So I did not rest well, still don’t. I did not rest well those two nights. I say were two nights, whatever they were. What a way to have to end it because of that circumstance.

RV: But you made it through there?

JW: Absolutely. There was like I say I don’t even remember seeing him again. It wasn’t like I was ever threatened or anything else but that was absolutely on my mind.

RV: What kind of tension did you see between draftees and enlisted or regular military?

JW: None. I didn’t see any. I saw them all the same. I’m just saying what I’m trying to say I’m giving if you will extra credit to those guys who never asked to be here to begin with. But because they were here, they’re doing their job. Above and beyond especially those guys that literally hid in battle. Not that every U.S. was perfect. I’m not saying that, we know that. I’m saying that I was mightily impressed many, many times with my U.S. soldiers, not to mention the RAs of course but especially those who were drafted. They rose to the occasion.

RV: How much tension did you see between those who were out in the field, like yourself a lot and the personnel who were in the rear most of the time? Was there any tension that you witnessed?

JW: Amen. Big time. There again the good fortune in my opinion of the 4th division soldier as a rule. Remember we stayed in the field. We were just always in the field versus say the first infantry who never even humped with their rucks but had them flown in at night, worked in and around Saigon and the populated places. We stayed in the field. Again we did not have an awful lot of contact with the rear. I’ve got another story and it’s pretty dang dramatic to tell you how bad it could be. There was something else I wanted to say and I hope I’ll think of it. We stayed in the field. And the irony was, this is the perspective from a field troop. We were just field troops. But the most dramatic photos that I’ve seen of Vietnam soldiers, guys with all the bandoliers and all this stuff. They’re always the rear guys, the wannabes. I don’t mean that bad. They’re the wannabes. It’s just human nature. But this happens. This is a true story, all my stories are true. We were in a stand down. Let me think now, let me get this right. I know I’m saying this true. I thought it was Camp Enari. I guess it was. It was Camp Enari when I moved up from Ban Me
Thout and before we moved. I say we, maybe not me personally but we were moving over to
Camp Ratcliff so we’re in division rear. Another irony is I know what I wanted to tell you. The
average life of a soldier in the 4th Division. We rarely as I’ve said before, if ever got to the rear.
The irony was so often if a guy got to the rear because he had a bad tooth or he had to come in for
something like that to get to the PX. It’s either closed or they’ve sold everything. The rear guys
always got all the good stuff. But this happened. I’m in my command in a little old barracks. One
of the nicest young men I ever knew was one of my radio operators. Nice, nice young man. Had
gone off, way across. Now this is 4th Division base camp so it’s huge. He like many others had
gone off to the PX. He was coming back to our area, wandering in and out in a maze through
barracks and this that and the other, or quasi barracks. This is another time I’m saying black and
I’m not apologizing for it because this is the way it happened. They’re not meant to be in the purest
sense black stories. This is the reality of this. I’m sitting in my CP and this kid comes in beat to
hell and back. He had wandered through, meandered working his way back over wherever we
were. He’d been jumped about six black guys, American soldiers. Rear Area MFers as we called
them. Not only did they take all the little things that he bought, which couldn’t amount to hardly
anything, but would be a luxury to him in the field. Versus they who have refrigerators and things
in the rear. They beat the crap out of him.

RV: This is one of your soldiers?

JW: My radio operator. I went over to my rack, I buckled on my .45. Put on my cap after
I’d gotten all the word and how he had traveled. God as my witness Richard I prayed that they
would jump me because now it’s pure dark. It was just dusky when he came in. I went in and
around every place that he told me he had traveled through. I prayed, I promise you to the Lord. I
prayed that they would come out and jump me, I’d have killed them.

RV: But nothing happened?

JW: Nothing happened.

RV: Is it because they saw your captain’s bars?

JW: I don’t know. I’d like to think I know I said I put on my cap and I did because I
wouldn’t go out without my cap. I’d like to think that I don’t know that I would have camouflaged.
Whatever it would have been I wasn’t trying to look like a captain in that regard. I put on a .45 and
I thirsted. I make no apologies. I thirsted for them to jump me. Thank God they didn’t.

RV: What would have happened?
JW: I would have killed them?
RV: Seriously?
JW: Yes, unequivocally. They messed with my troop, a fellow American. Just beat him.
Not that he was going to die but they just beat the hell out of him. That sounds like a contradiction there when I say I’d kill them but I’m telling you at that time and God knows better for me. He watched out after me, but I wouldn’t have hesitated. I’d locked and loaded and I was ready. So help me.
RV: Well why don’t we end on that story and end for the day?
JW: Yes, sir.
RV: Ok, thank you very much for your time today.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Jim Wheeler. Today is August 19, 2003. It's about 8:33 AM Central Standard Time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas again. Mr. Wheeler you are in Denton, Texas.

JW: Denton, Texas, correct.

RV: Let's pick up with your second tour sir. I wanted to ask you. Does anything come to mind when you think about your second tour? We've talked about some of the specifics. Any incidents, any missions? What highlights in your mind your second tour?

JW: Well from the personal perspective of simply being able to command a rifle company, that in itself was the essence of my second tour. Taking command in December of 1969 and again commanding until July of the next year, 1970. I know we've already talked to it certainly the official or formal incursion into Cambodia into class was a pretty good highlight of my tour there. That was just very unique and different. I think we finished off last time that I had been selected to do some ambush work north of Pleiku coming out of Cambodia. That in itself was a highlight because being handpicked kind of a thing. Once we finished up and I think I crashed through that MP barrier so to speak and got my boys back home is about where we left off. From then on out, it was pretty much standard search and destroy. A lot of combat air assaults, you know via helicopter obviously into primarily in Binh Dinh Province, which was in proximity of Camp Ratcliff which was the division base camp. A lot of mountainous terrain. A lot of mountain climbing. Not an overabundance of contact with the enemy as such.

RV: On March 27, 1970, you were in some action in which you were later awarded the Soldier’s Medal for Heroism. Could you tell me about what happened that day?

JW: Well what really happened is we were in literally what we call triple canopy jungle. So that when you're in that kind of a setting there's just very little break in the trees so that when it comes time for resupply you really need if you will, a hole in the canopy to be able to access or drop resupply, C-rations, etc into. In this particular circumstance the best I could do with that was literally on the side of a mountain. So it's hard to describe fully. I was literally holding onto a tree so to speak on the side of a mountain with my radio guy talking to the helicopters that were coming in to drop our supplies. Where the supplies were dropping were well below us, well into a revine.
It was the only, if you will hole around that we could access. So I was talking the choppers in for resupply and they were coming in and throwing out cases of soda and our c rations and other resupply. Well above the treeline, which was well above us. But there was a hole there that I felt if a guy wanted to they could literally bring a helicopter down in there. It may be a little precarious but at least from my perspective it seemed like that could. I didn't ask for that, but what I did done this one particular deal. A chopper had two or three come in. I don't know the count but out of a 24 case of sodas if you will, probably 20 of them were getting busted as they hit the ground because they were so high. So I simply asked this helicopter pilot if he would at least consider bringing his skids down to tree top level, which was still way above where I am and the ravine way down below. So still a tremendous fall for whatever was dropping. So I simply asked that he at least do that, come down to at least treetop level. As I say there was hole there, I think large enough certainly for a chopper to descend through. I don't really know. I don't know that I ever knew from him. He may have but I just don't remember if he literally chose to just descend down through the hole and down closer to the bottom of the ravine, which would have taken some pretty good piloting, but I thought could be done. Or if he literally just went down to treetop level with the skids and lost power. Because what he did, he jacked his aircraft around and his tail boom hit a tree. So I mean it's out in front of me, maybe 50 meters, probably not even that, but he hit the tree with the tail boom. Needless to say you know what happened then. Right before my eyes, not only with the pilots on the bird and the gun guys, the M-60 guys. But also my own, guy or two soldiers from my company that were in the rear working supply. When I tried to ship back to he rear as best we could with the consideration of our given mission, when a guy got really short I tried to send them back to the rear for just a very short time to keep them out of harm’s way if you will. So my emotions were much involved because I had either one or two of my own soldiers on the aircraft and they were short timers. All of a sudden I see this quarter of a million dollar aircraft falling right before my eyes, just passing right in front of me as it fell to the floor of this ravine. As soon as it hit, if not before of course I'm there on the side of this mountain. Of course I've got his secured area up above in the jungle part. But I'm on the side of the mountain here with my CP guys, three or four of my radio operators etc. As I see the aircraft falling, as soon as it hits and I can still see it rocking. I was bolting down this hillside, this mountain side, probably 15 meters give or take bolting down it like a hurdler you could say to get down there to render assistance. As I got to the bottom where the aircraft was resting, being the commander that I was or was supposed to
be, I turned around immediately to start giving instructions to my soldiers who no doubt had
followed me down there right? Well they weren’t there. They were probably the smart guys,
because it worked out just fine. But at the moment we’ve got an aircraft that just fell out of the sky.
How injured, we don’t know at this point are the pilots, etc, etc. Crewmembers. So as I say it
wasn’t humorous at the time, but I literally turned around to immediately start giving directions and
orders and there was nobody there. I looked way back up other side of this mountain where I just
left. I saw all of my guys saying, ‘Captain I think we’re smarter than you are, because that thing’s
fixing to blow up and we’re staying up here, dummy.’ Of course it didn’t blow up. In short order I
did suggest that they join me, which they did. As soon as I told them to get on down here, they did.
It wasn’t humorous at the time. But when I reflect back on the little vignette I just stated I’m sure
going through their minds was kind of what I just said. They didn’t chose to go down and get blown
up. But nothing like that happened. So I got them down. We were able to get the soldiers and
pilots and all out of the aircraft. We ultimately, of course they brought a team in to bring these guys
out. Plus we stripped the aircraft of radios and the guns etc. Then a couple of days later after
they’d done whatever they did I just about blew myself up. It had a pretty good load of AV gas on
it. We rigged it to blow it up because there was no way it could be pulled out of there. So I chose
myself to push the plunger and I don’t know how much cord I had but I thought I was far enough
away from the aircraft but I did get behind a big log or a fallen tree there. Had everybody clear. I
mean I was the only one down on the ground. Everybody was again up on topside now. I pushed
the plunger Doctor to blow up this aircraft and u had a ball of fire that blew over me. Fortunately as
I said I had taken refuge behind this fallen tree but I had a ball of fire blow over me and singe my
hair and my eyebrows. That sort of thing. I wasn’t really hurt. Again that’s an aside to the finish of
that little episode. Well, unbeknownst to me as one of my lieutenants and some of the others wrote
up an award for this soldiers medal. The soldier’s medal is not for hostile environments, at least for
hostile action. Certainly this was not hostile territory. It was just a pure, pure unadulterated
accident if you will. But my actions I guess impressed my people. So unbeknownst to me they
submitted me for a very, very nice award, the Soldier’s Medal. Obviously I kind of remember that
episode pretty well, based upon all of the above. That’s the essence of the Soldier’s Medal that I
almost got blown up twice but neither time did.

RV: How much on your second tour did you work with the snipers in your unit? Did you
have?
JW: No snipers.
RV: No snipers with you?
JW: No snipers.
RV: How about canine units?
JW: We had one mission again. This was up in Binh Dinh Province Area. Very, very far north because well I know I was on the outer fringes of the artillery fan and I'll speak to that. We did have a mission. We had some escaped South Vietnamese POWs. As they had gone through the process back in the rear again I wound up in this particular case. My company had the mission to take these South Vietnamese soldiers and a canine unit and go back into they thought they knew about where they were kept in captivity. So we did a pretty good-sized operation of taking these ex-prisoners and canine unit in with us as we searched for the POW camp if you will. If you could even call it that. It wasn't like something we see in the movies. We worked with them to include the dogs. We did find one of the locations that they were kept. Of course here was nobody there then. I can remember now there was a huge rice cache there. It just comes to mind because this has been a long time since I thought about it. But a huge rice cache there. But nothing of any significance from that other than we did our normal travels, our normal searches. We had the unique little circumstances that comes to pass because we had these guys with us. We also had with us a translator. I can remember I'm traveling in a company-sized element. I can remember we were out into some pretty dense stuff. We were finding crops, we were out in the middle of nowhere and we were finding crops being grown. Ultimately later on we get into again that triple canopy stuff where we literally had trails, that at least Lambretta type vehicles were moving on if not small trucks. This was very unique and different for me. On one occasion I had set up a pretty good-sized perimeter. Of course take an M-60 go down this trail kind of a thing. High speed avenue of advance here and was doing whatever I was doing, communicating with my lieutenants. We got a call that one of our machine gun emplacements out down on one trail, he saw some of what we call dinks. What looked like bad guys. So they hesitated to fire. This is one of those classic little unique things. They hesitated to fire because we had South Vietnamese with us. They didn't know that perhaps these were the South Vietnamese just walking around. Although they shouldn't have been outside the perimeter. But what happened was there was enough hesitation on their part that they were really two bad guys literally walking down the trail. They made a little curve in the trail and then looked straight down I don't know how many meters now.
But two bad guys walking with their rifles literally thrown back over their shoulder made this little curve. Straight down there say 50 to 100 meters, I don't know the distance exactly was an M-60 there with a crew on it my guys. Again my guys saw them, hesitated actually called back to question. Well, so help me these guys had the wherewithal when they saw the M-60 they literally waved at our guys. Of course they weren't going to immediately fire anyway because they were trying to be safe. If we had not had those South Vietnamese with us then of course they would have fired immediately and no doubt killed the enemy. But these were enemy. The enemy did a delaying tactic so to speak by raising their hands and waving. If our guys were really going to fire, which they weren't in the circumstances, but just enough delay that would cause those guys not to fire. These two guys cut out fast and escaped. Needless to say we went looking for them, but needle in a haystack kind of a thing there. That happened when our canine units were there. I loved all my troops. I had a sergeant, what we used to call a shake and bake E-6. He looked like a take off on Hershel Walker, Sergeant Martin Walker was his name. He was one of the stories was when he got into base camp, when he first came to the division, before he came to the field we lived and died with our poncho liners. He had a brand new issued poncho liner. I think I’ve mentioned this possibly informally when we were visiting. But nonetheless he was in the rear at the division base camp, battalion area barracks and went outside to use the latrine and came back. His new poncho liner was gone. There were just a handful of guys there. So he made an announcement to those in attendance and basically told them, 'Ok, it's gone. I'm going to step back outside, I'll be back in three minutes. It would be best if my poncho liner was back on my rack here.' Miraculously enough it was. I want to talk about him Sergeant Walker. So while we had this canine unit we were in as I said into some pretty spooky stuff. After this episode, well I’ll come to it. For the first time, really and truly kind of uneasy in the field that I didn't share with any of my troops because we were so far removed from artillery support. I'm not saying we were out of range. That didn't normally happen. But we were on such a far end of it that I don't think we could have gotten very effective firepower out there if we had to do that. Anyway in other words, another one of these stops where we had a nice big perimeter out and Sergeant Walker's platoon was going to be, let's say it was lunchtime. We were on our next move out Sergeant Walker's platoon and he had a platoon leader Lieutenant LeValley they were going to be my lead platoon. I had just watched this man just days before. We bathed in a river one day and I watched him. When I say shake and bake he was like a draftee and had excelled in basic and AIT, etc and was able to become a
sergeant. So a young soldier but yet he had all the attributes of what we look for in leadership because I can remember just two or three days before his incident that I'm fixing to share I watched him cover his troops while they bathed. In other words he did just what a good leader's supposed to do. The welfare of the troops comes first. I watched him do this and I had a great, great respect for him. What happened is it was a resupply deal was what this was. I remember we had mail breakdown and stuff in the center of he perimeter is where I was. A lot of activity going on. We had the dogs and different things. All of a sudden in the midst of all this, the choppers have come and gone. I heard the report of a weapon, a rifle fire, just one shot. Realizing that just the day before I had a soldier from Alabama, old tall lanky boy just the day before take a burst of 6 in a little fire fight. He survived. I'm making a comparison that I'm coming to here. So here's a guy that took literally a burst of 6 and lived to talk about it a day or two before this particular incident. Now I'm talking about Hershel Walker looking football player because this man was going back to Ohio State to play football. So I heard the shot and then almost immediately there was a radio call to my CP radio. In short order what I learned was Sergeant Walker had been shot. So I went, moving over there as quickly as I could. I walked down this trail, naughty, naughty, naughty. You know I preach, preach, preach, preach don't walk on trails as such. What had happened is Sergeant Walker, taking the initiative he was doing his little map reconnaissance and getting his azimuth readings and all. He walked down this trail and the last person he spoke to ironically when you mentioned canine was my canine unit guy there. Was sitting right there on the trail right where I walked by to go down there. It turns out he was the last guy to speak to Walker. All he was doing was stepping outside the perimeter if you will just going down this little trail a little ways to check it out, to make sure of his readings and all those things. Well, there were bad guys. The enemy was down the trail. We talk so often about them being the unseen enemy which they were more times than not. So Sergeant Walker took one round in this big massive strong body of his, right in the heart. So when I got there, the lieutenant, Lieutenant Bruce LeValley was kind of losing it because this was one of his key guys. This shouldn't have happened kind of a thing. He was talking to Sergeant Walker. Well I knew when I saw the man's eyes that he was dead. So we had to deal with that. Such a tragedy. Really and truly I don't throw it back on him but it was a mistake. It was a mistake on his part. I don't make light of that by any means. It was what we preach and preach. You can have a false sense of security, which I taught and taught and taught. We're never safe. This was just a prime example. We were in such terribly high canopy. We wrapped him up in a
poncho and had to hoist him out by rope. I just was so bothered. I can still see it, I hadn’t thought
about it in a long time. Again the tree the thickness of all the vegetation, the limbs and all were just
so thick. He just got beat up. There was nothing we could do. We had to get him out. It was
unheard of by ground. That couldn’t even be considered. I can still see him being pulled up
through the trees in a helicopter. We had him covered well, but that bothered me. It still bothers
me to this day. They all do but this one in particular had bothered me over the years, Sergeant
Walker.

RV: How do you move forward with your men after such a loss?

JW: Well again in our circumstance now we ultimately now I don’t know how or why we
got back to division base camp but we ultimately did have a memorial service that I spoke at back
in the rear, which was unusual. I guess when we finished this big operation we were pulled back
in. But in the field the best I could do was call together. I’ve got to use the chain of command. I
have no way to sit on a personal plane with all these 100 plus soldiers. All I could do was one
speak to my chain of command, my lieutenants and possibly their platoon sergeants. But the
normal chain would be I would speak of course to the lieutenants, they would share back to the
platoon sergeants etc. But one speak to the vein of first of all, it’s a tragedy beyond expression.
But at the same time, I don’t want to lose focus of the fact that there’s a lesson to be learned here.
I’m sure that’s what I dwell on more than. It’s terrible we lost him, but he made a mistake. He
made an error. That’s what we’re supposed to be all about, not making errors. Let’s go back and
reinforce what I preach all the time, the security was pretty much bad. Speaking of that, I can’t
remember if it was my first or second tour, which sparks this thought when I speak of the unseen
enemy. Again I think I spoke to this informally. In my second tour I’m sure it was is where I had
the one as we were moving out from a night logger and my soldier took a picture of his buddy.
Turned around and took a picture in this dense foliage and his buddy was the last guy moving out
of that particular site. Then in months later when they get the pictures back, they’re looking at the
pictures and the picture of his buddy that he took, in the background in the dense jungle if you will,
the dense vegetation there’s a face of the enemy. Guy was already looking at us. We had our
normal LPs and Ops out at night. We did all of our little stuff, but those little suckers were often
times around and we never knew it.

RV: Did you think that the overall United States policy in Vietnam and you being on the
ground and being one of the enforcers of that policy, right there at the spear point if you will, did
you think it was an effective thing? Were there different things that the United States could have
done looking back?

JW: There again at the time, I don’t know. Well certainly my first tour in particular I was
young and green and I’m there as a charge of my government to do what my government charges
me to do, undeniably, unquestionably and all that. My second tour a little wiser perhaps but still a
charge of the government and still under my orders to follow my orders within reason of course. Of
course I did that. On my second tour, in my own mind I certainly started questioning how we were
going about what we were doing. I suppose by having spent that five months or so at brigade level
gave me a much larger picture, of the total picture if you will. I’m sure I had many discourses
probably from Colonel Warner right on down as we talked about he concept of what we were doing
in Vietnam etc. But I saw early on in that tenure that what we were doing was mightily ineffective.
In other words, I’m saying my goodness I’m walking over the same ground that I walked over two
years ago, that the 1st Cav walked over two years before that. We’re still going in circles here.
What really are we accomplishing? I’m not going to be a Monday morning quarterback but I think
that we certainly did not go about it in the most effective manner.

RV: What do you think could have been done differently?

JW: I think that we could have had. Well I could go back to I’ve lost the name. I was
trying to think of a quote but I’m not getting it here Doctor. Well, I think without question the playing
with the borders made all the difference in the world. The infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran from
North Vietnam, right on down and infiltrated in. Just like my experience at Dak To in ’67, when that
huge mass infiltration was taking place that ultimately became the battle of Dak To, where I was
with my recon platoon. I’ve already mentioned field artillery, a good part of one night because they
were coming in from right there at that corner of Laos and Cambodia, right into Vietnam. Surely, I
mean I was sent out there for a reason because higher, higher headquarters had to have Intel. But
I was just one little recon platoon that happened to see them moving at night across the valley,
fired artillery on them. Within the next two or three weeks, whatever the time frame there was one
huge major battle where we lost an immense number of soldiers at the battle of Dak To over
Thanksgiving of ’67. I think it was Hill 885 right where I CAed into as I started my reconnaissance,
a couple weeks before. So something like that doesn’t add up. I found out the book called SOG,
by John Plaster. I literally found intelligence in that book is by far, in my mind the best book I have
ever read regarding Vietnam, even though it was oriented to quite a degree to SOG operations. I
enjoyed it. It’s a terrible book when it describes what happened to a lot of our soldiers that were captured. But it gives a great overview of the war at large in it I actually found Intel that surrounded. It wasn’t addressing me specifically by no means. After all these years learned of intelligence that caused me to do what I was doing. Intelligence that I didn’t even have then. So I felt kind of unique and different. But nonetheless, that aside the fact that we played the political game and I think the right word is honored the conditions of borders, etc in my mind I think that was our greater downfall. Because that’s where the greater part of their logistics was coming from. We played this little game of dropping little bombs here and there through the trees down to this thing called Ho Chi Minh Trail. An understatement or an overstatement on how you look at it, we should have so to speak, gone online. That’s what I was thinking of Goldwater. I don’t make any apologies. Goldwater at one point said, hey words to the effect of maybe I’ve lost it in time, but let’s put you know B-52s wing tip to wing tip and go north. Let’s get it over with. If we’re going to do it, let’s do it. If you’re going to get in the ring with Mike Tyson you better get in the ring to fight to win. Let’s go for it. I don’t think we ever made a full, full effort to really win the war. I don’t understand politics but I understand politics are part of the play here. We did our soldiers great injustice by pussy footing around with this border thing when we knew that they were there.

RV: What did you think of the body count policy?

JW: Over the years as I have read it never was a factor in any sort in my own personal experience. In other words it was never suggested to me. Of course they always wanted to know what your body count was I understand that. There was never any, ever an event or a higher commander that told me as I’ve read so often, if you’ve got four then there really must be another eight. Whatever that equation might be. I never had any personal dealings with anything outside the truth. I never felt pressured by anybody to do that. Now human beings are human beings. There are guys with egos and this that and the other. The reality of life is I’m sure there were false reports just from an egotistical standpoint. I’m just speaking totally for the first time off the top of my head. A given person, a lieutenant that took the oath just as I did, in his own value system might say, ‘Well his two kills represent 12 to him.’ And report it unequivocally as 12 in his own mind, heart and soul. I could never begin to even think about doing something like that. There’s no doubt that it did and there’s no doubt as I’ve read over the years. There was pressure brought on from higher headquarters at various places for that count to be higher. I guess I’m just an honest, honest guy. But I can’t deal with that. I wouldn’t.
RV: Continue with your second tour. As you were getting shorter and shorter did you do anything differently? Did you take different measures in the field for yourself personally?

JW: Not really. That makes me think back to what I was speaking of earlier that will be part of the answer to that Doctor. For the first time after we got Sergeant Walker out of there and finished up that particular operation as I said we were out at the farthest fan, the artillery fan. We were in such thick stuff there were no LZs anywhere. It came time for us to be pulled out and we really wound up. It seems like a couple of days at least. I had one lieutenant that was really good with demolitions. Boy we used, and we all did it to a degree. We had to blow an LZ. I don’t mean just dropping a 500-pound bomb and blowing it out. We had to go chopping literally tree by tree and blowing the bigger ones. This is a time, this is probably. I was DEROSing in July. This could have been either late May or June but I was starting to get pretty short. I would never suffer principle for me or anybody else. Certainly I had in my mind that I am getting short. I’ll tell about my last CA, but this was the time, the first time I can say it without question. I was really, really concerned. It was an intuitive thing because there was no intelligence presented to me to support what I’m going to say. I know in my own mind and I’m not trying to dramatize it. As I say we were so far out there and there were areas where there’d been at least mini-trucks whatever they might be. I mean big trails under the canopy, which means there can be some hellacious reinforcements brought in or what have you. So we were delayed getting out of there a few days because we just couldn’t come up with an LZ. The final decision we were just going to have to blow one and cut one. We just cut and cut and blew and blew but this took so much time. Each night whether it was two or three nights in my own mind I tell you and I shared this with no one. I was first of all fearful for my troops. Because I just felt we were so far away from everything. By being so far away we were in his haven. I’ll never know but I just believe in my mind that the bad guys were massing a force to annihilate us. That’s just Jim Wheeler. That’s where I was emotionally worrying about my soldiers. I wasn’t trying to make too much of it. But at the same time if I could ever really know I would just believe that where we were and it was in his AO if you will that I just believe that if we had been there another day or two I just believe we would have been into one hell of a fight with a force much, much, much superior to ours. Don’t know that. Thank God we didn’t have to experience it because we finally got out of there. I’ve got pictures of the dogs on the LZ at that time, etc. But we got out and that was the only time that I was ever really and truly consciously fearful in a sense or worried about my soldiers. I mean just the normal course of the day of course.
you are. This wratched it up another three or four notches so to speak. Somewhere in there, now
I'm not without error. One day we're up in these darn mountains. We got mortared a couple of
times. But I had my platoons working separately. It's terrible that I don't remember his name but I
had on his 21st birthday. I had a young man who was Hollywood handsome, great, great heart,
great kid. I can still see him cutting, chopping up on point. Good kid. His platoon he became a
victim of a booby trap, which was very, very unusual. It was a serious booby trap. It killed one kid.
This kid lost his legs. I believe that he lived but it was on his 21st birthday. Well, they weren't a
great distance from where my CP group was. I made an error. Here I am talking about all this
stuff, but I'm not without fault. I was up on the top of one mountain top, hilltop but it was in the
mountains. They were down the hill and up the other side and what have you into another little
valley. So I grabbed my radio operator and my medic. There were two of us, possibly three. I
know for sure I took my medic of course because we had wounded, at least one radio. May have
just been the three of us, possibly a fourth person. But we were up where there we lots of trails.
Now we had been traversing this area for some days now. So I grabbed these guys as a captain,
a company commander and took off. Now I guess I had a platoon out there. My security and
maybe they were going to follow me later. We're just three or four on our own. I take off boogying
down this trail, leading the way because I'm trying to get to these wounded. Straight down this trail
I could still see it looked almost like a cartoon with the roadrunner when he paints the trestle thing
on the side of a mountain. In other words it was kind of broken up vegetation but straight down this
trail it looked just like a black pit. Just looked like a black door so to speak to this real thick
vegetation that we were fixing to have to go through, go down through there down this trail. Well
dad gum if somebody didn't start shooting at us. What they did and it wasn't an AK. Again you
don't want to kill a friendly right? You don't want to shoot a friendly. So I'm walking and here
comes this person, shooting at us. He walked it down the trail. In other words rather than shooting
at knee or waist level straight down the trail he could have shot us all. Just like a movie or like in
slow motion because just like when you see the bullets hit the ground it was just popping up dirt
straight down the trail at us. Just like we were trained to do, we dived off to the side of the trail
right? Well I didn't immediately return fire because they weren't AKs. More than once especially
working at brigade I knew that we had LRPs out and about that we didn't necessarily even know
were there. Sometimes the LRPs, the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols would get lost. So
because the weapon that was fired was not an AK, I can't say if it was an M-16. Anyway it wasn't
an AK and my concern was I didn’t want to return fire as silly as that sounds and kill a friendly,
even though he’s shooting at us. I didn’t know if it was a spooked LRP. I don’t know and we never
knew. We never really knew. As it turns out we ultimately broke contact and to this day I have to
presume it was the bad guys because I never really knew. We never saw these guys. That was a
little squirrelly for a little while because we didn’t know what was coming next necessarily. Once
we got through all that and got down, the more important part was to get to these wounded
soldiers, was that. That was probably a month or so before my return to the States. Yes, there’s
no question in my mind that I was concerned that I wanted to go home to my wife and daughters. I
am a principled person. There’s no way I would ever suffer principle or short change anything in
the scenario of operating in the field. Internally, I’d certainly want to go home. But I’m still going to
do my job. I’m not trying to be rah-rah about that. That’s just Jim Wheeler. Ironically, on my last
combat assault which is like let’s see if I can get it on this third oak leaf cluster to the Purple Heart.
Let’s see if we’ve got the date here. That can’t be right. 28th day of June. I think my DEROS date
was the 11th of July. So on the 28th of June, a day before my wife’s birthday we’re making a big,
huge move. We’ve got CH-47s. Well what it was my company was going into an old firebase, a
small firebase, like a battery size artillery to secure this. I think they were 105s little artillery base.
It was terrible because we were going into an area that the old bunkers and all are still there and all
the sandbags but it’s grown over with elephant grass. Terrible stuff elephant grass. So we got in
there a big air assault into there. What happened is the bad guys had put punji stakes just
everywhere. Of course the jungle just takes over anyway. High elephant grass everywhere. All of
a sudden I don’t remember the number, I had any number of guys walking in, getting stuck in
different manners with punji stakes. Meanwhile we’ve got all this aircraft coming. We got Ch-47s
bringing in the tubes and artillery rounds etc. So I’m on the ground out there running here and
there trying to direct my troops to here and there. Trying to direct my troops to where I want them.
You know first platoon you take from 12 to 4. You know that sort of a thing, that’s your sector of
the perimeter. Get your machine guns. Just the standard stuff. I’m walking down this little trail,
meandering what was once a little firebase. There was a punji stake of course I didn’t see it it was
under the grass but a punji stake was sticking out to my left front. Boy it caught my left calf and it
ripped me real good. So that kind of did me in. I ultimately had to, I actually was medevaced.
Can’t even call it medevaced. I ultimately crawled on to a CH-47 to get back to the forward supply
base area. They basically dumped me out. Here I am a captain commanding this company and
see I had been wounded with a modest punji stake about a month or two before and chose not to
go to the rear. My battalion commander leaned about it and he chewed me a good one. He told
on one of his visits. My medic worked on it in the field and all. Fortunately it did not get infected or
cause me any serious problems. But as you know the punji stakes, generally speaking were
dipped in feces, all that kind of stuff. I guess internally he was impressed that I stayed with my
troops that time. At the same time as a commander he had the responsibility to tell me ‘Hey boy,
captain you need to look after yourself’. So this time was much, much worse. So I wound up
crawling off this CH-47 this Chinook out in the middle of this great big old resupply field and way
across the way there probably 100 or 200meters I could see the tents of the resupply, different
companies. But I was helpless. I couldn’t walk. I don’t know somehow somebody must have seen
me, had to. But I finally got picked up and was hauled off to the little quasi-hospital there. When I
got there, I got all my soldiers. There must have been a half a dozen or so. Doctor lying on these
cots outside, being evaluated or taken into the operating room. So I got on a cot and to my
immediate left was my FO’s radio operator who I called Audie Murphy and then three or four more
guys before him. The doctors were coming down the line and they get to this kid. As I say I called
him Audie Murphy he was a radio operator for our forward observer. Every time we had a little
firefight he wanted to play infantry instead of stay on his radio and work with his lieutenant. He was
always wanting to get into the mix of things. So I nicknamed him Audie Murphy. So he was tough
little guy, right? So he has a pretty good little hole in his leg. The doctor walks up and he sticks his
finger in this guy’s wound to feel around for any foreign matter or what have you. Of course my
young soldier, he levitated off the table about a foot in pain. So I’m the next guy. I kid you not, in
the midst of all the emotions that are going on. Here’s this emotional thing I guess you could say,
I’m two weeks from going home. I’ve had to leave my company because I’m wounded. The last
thing I wanted to do was get stuck with a punji stake. I guess I just thought I was above it. You
know? How could I get stuck? Well, easy, it’s all camouflaged stuff. Anyway all these emotions
going on and the pain of it. Then I see my toughie little spec-4 hurting so badly when this guy
sticks his finger in his leg. So help me, I was next. So I remember laying my hand down off of the
cot, this sounds crazy Richard. But it’s true. I know, I don’t think I was going to hit this guy if
thought about sticking his finger into this leg wound of mine. I mean I know they’ve got to do that,
but hey we can go to the operating room. I don’t know if I would have done it. I really was totally
prepared. I remember dropping my hand off the cot and reared back and get his attention. But
Fortunately it was probably because I was a captain when they got to me, they probably already
knew they obviously saw that I was a captain here. They hauled me into the operating room
immediately and opened it up and did all that stuff. That kind of ended up my tour except for the
story I’ve already told you. After I was released from the hospital I was just back in the division
base camp for two or three days to write OERs and things and was on crutches etc. I told you the
one story of the NCO.

RV: Were you ever able to say goodbye to your men?
JW: No.

RV: Has that bothered you or did that bother you at the time?
JW: You know it was happening so quickly at the time, I think you’re just caught up in the
moment. So no I can remember at least one of my lieutenants and I don’t even know how he got
out of the field. I remember one of my lieutenants coming to the hospital to visit. How he did that, I
don’t know off hand. No that was kind of the way it worked there in a sense. I cared for my
soldiers etc. I know I did a good job in my heart and mind and soul today. So then I know a lot of
them lived because of my attention to detail. But hey it was just the way it worked, no way I could
formally see them. You just go with the flow I guess.

RV: Right you didn’t have any control over the matter. Let me ask you a couple of general
questions. Do you know if you were ever exposed to Agent Orange or any of the other defoliants?
JW: According to the Department of Veterans Affairs I was and I say that lightly of course.
What I’m saying is what I’m dealing with everyday as you know. First of all any soldier that served
in country in Vietnam is presumed to have been exposed. That’s just a statement. There are
some who know unequivocally that they were. Either it happened or they played it so much in their
minds that they just know they were sprayed. I’m sure that there are occasions. I’ve had guys tell
me that they got wet from it. God love them. Of course we didn’t know the significance of it at that
time. I dare say that I was exposed to it. I cannot say that I watched an airplane fly over and
watched the mist fall into the foliage. I also know that a greater part of my time spent was in the
Central Highlands, just in the bush at large where there was no regular defoliating going on. But
around a firebase or something like that where it was used, I had to be in proximity of it. But to
know emphatically, I don’t. Yet just yesterday, I had a DD 214 sent to me from another county
where the guy is not happy with his veteran’s service person. He’s heard of me if you will and
wants me to help him. He sent me an article out of a newspaper that was just in the paper over the
weekend that gives the statistics of and I wish I had it before me of how badly the Vietnamese 
people of today are still suffering the consequences of that. It gave some pretty interesting. I have 
it saved, it’s just in a folder, not at my desk where these people can still identify in various sources.
In the ground or what have you. Surely it’s not still in the water, but somehow it’s still about and 
still seething. You’ve been there and causing serious health problems to those people there yet 
today.

RV: What kind of drug and alcohol use did you witness during your two tours?

JW: This is an area that I have gotten on my soapbox on behalf of the 4th Division soldier 
many times in a very proud way. Again fortunately I’ve mentioned the fact the way we operated in 
the 4th Division we weren’t faced with a lot of booby trap circumstances. For that I’m grateful. In 
like manner, our soldiers for the most part spent 99% of their time in the field. That’s not a 
scientific percentage. What I’m saying is they didn’t have access to those things such as us taking 
the 1st Infantry Division who operated in and around Saigon as an example where they were in the 
mix of populated areas and had access to those things, more readily. I’ve been giving classes on 
marijuana as a lieutenant. It’s one of those things once you smell the pungent smell of marijuana 
you know that smell. I can say with my hand on this SOG book or the Bible so to speak, is I never 
once, and shame on me if I was this oblivious to it. I know I never once smelled marijuana in the 
field in my two years in Vietnam. I never once smelled any marijuana, certainly no alcohol. Seems 
like we used to get a beer in the field. Something like two sodas and one beer or something like 
that. But of course, that’s hot. It’s not even like alcohol anyway. It’s like insignificant. It was a 
non-issue. In all of my time in Vietnam, I did not personally have one circumstance, one issue 
whatsoever of drug and alcohol. The story that I’ve given is the life in a nutshell here. The life of a 
4th Division soldier, Doctor, he came in country, he came to the division. He was given a rifle, if he 
was lucky he got to go sight it before he was put on an aircraft and flown to the field. For the next 
six months, he humped everyday. He dug a hole every night. So he slept, what? Maybe four 
hours a night. Then every third night or so he’s probably out on LP OP wakeup the next morning 
and do the same thing for six months. If he lived for six months, he go to go on R&R for a week. 
He comes back from R&R and he gets to come back to the field and do the same exact thing, 
every day for the next six months. Hump, dig a hole, hump, dig a hole. There was no access to 
the civilian. I’m not saying my guys wouldn’t do it necessarily, or didn’t do it on occasion, whatever 
it would have been. In the field I never had any issue with it whatsoever I say that so proudly about
my soldiers, the guys that fought the war. That’s not to say the same kid, in the heart of Saigon at
19 with all the booze and broads and drugs that he may not would have partaken. That’s part of
my story though. Those guys and I’m not calling them bad, they’re the guys that had access to it.
They’re the guys that the writers wrote about. I never had any writer make the trip all the way up to
Pleiku, and all the way out into Binh Dinh Province to hump with my unit, where the real war was
at. They stayed in general terms in my mind in and around Saigon. That’s the kind of story they
wrote. Well, remember there’s eight support troops to one grunt. The grunt fought the war. There
were eight guys back there in the rear supporting him. Yes, they had access too. They partook, as
young men will. But I think the guy that really fought the war got a bad rap for that. That’s my story
of the 4th Division soldier.

RV: Jim what would you say was the bravest action you witnessed during your two tours?
JW: They bravest action I ever saw personally?
RV: Yes, sir.
JW: I don’t know if it was he bravest one. I mentioned my first tour, my first seven or nine
days, I wish I knew which. I remember we had some kind of a contact with the enemy every day.
It seemed like it was always saddle up second, which was my platoon, which was ok. But on I
think I mentioned to you, I did not know what the sound of a bullet sounded like passing your head.
Talking the moves and pop that cap and stuff, that’s what it kind of sounds like. This was one of
those very first days when I probably should have died because the guys were in the trees
shooting back at us. I’ve described this already. But that particular event, we were in a huge
bombed out, burned out big field. We were having to advance forward. There were snipers or at
least rifleman up in the trees shooting back at us. They were fighting down below there at a water
point with our water resupply guys, which is why we were having to go down and break that
contact. They had set up something of an ambush knowing full well that we would come down.
They were fixed to shoot back at us. So this was in those first two or three days. I remember
jumping down behind his burned out tree thing, stump and doing my arm and hand signals.
Remember just a day or two before is when I had the E-6, when I had that first contact where my
RTO was shot sitting next to me through the neck. I was doing my thing and wound up literally
crawling over an E-6 that I call a lifer, hiding in the midst of this battle. So here I was seeing an E-6
hiding. Now this day, I’m getting to the point. He was black kid, I forget where he was from. He
was a U.S. draftee. He took command of my left flank. I can see him as I’m lifting my hand right
now watching Specialist Johnson move those forces. Out of the clearing into the woods area. I had lost visual control of them and could not work with them effectively. My point is, he in the midst of all the firing that was coming at us. He stood up and he moved these troops like a seasoned pro. Yes, it was very valorous on his part. Was it the greatest thing I saw over there? Well, it was pretty close, just because of the uniqueness to me that early in my tenure and what I had already seen a day or two before. I saw that a lot Richard. I saw that in our young soldiers. You know it’s my understanding in what I’ve read the average age of a World War II soldier was 25. The average age of a Vietnam soldier was 19. I love them so dearly because that’s an example. This kid was a draftee just like Sergeant Walker was. They went there and they served in a marvelous capacity. You know statistically only about 20% of the riflemen fired their weapons in World War II. Yet it may be 90% in Vietnam. There are a lot of reasons for that. I understand training and all. I’m saying the Vietnam soldier; the kid that fought the war was magnificent. They stood up and were counted. They did their job, day in and day out. By overstating it or by trying to overly romanticize it, I’m not. I just had little to no problems.

RV: That’s what you witnessed.

JW: That’s all I know.

RV: Is there a particularly humorous event that stands out in your mind when you think back?

JW: Well the most humorous I’ve told you. It was my big element to the front. Do you remember the kid that I sent out on that patrol and the big element, which turned out to be a big elephant?

RV: Right.

JW: That was without question the most humorous thing that I experienced. You can chuckle about the one I gave you. It’s not nearly the same. With those two bad guys waving. I mean that is smart soldiering. Those guys were trained. Just long enough to make the difference in getting away. You know those kind of little things. This isn’t so funny. In my first tour when we had gotten our APCs, we were breaking trail one day. Here we are literally out in a free fire zone, bad guys can be anywhere. I’m sitting in the cupola of my APC. I’ve got two tracks in front of me. One of them, here we are in our flak jackets, our steel pots etc. This APC pushes up to this tree, which may have been three inches in diameter or something like that. Just pushes up to it to push it over. When he hit it a big nest of hornets fell down. Boom! Right down on top of the APC and
you had the track driver down below in front. You had the other guy, the track commander in the
cupola. And the guy sitting in around the top. I stood there. Again it wasn’t humorous at the time,
but it was to see these guys. It did not matter if they had been in a firefight. You’ve never seen
helmets thrown, flak jackets ripped off, thrown. I mean these guys in the midst. We weren’t in a
firefight so it wasn’t like we were. But the bad guys could have just been right there too. The bad
guy in this case, I don’t know if they were hornets or bees. But this nest fell down. These guys
disrobed in a hurry. Threw stuff everywhere. They were stung pretty good. I don’t know that these
were another time on the ground. I remember some guys getting into that kind of a deal. We
actually had to medevac them they were stung so badly. They had to be pulled out. There were
probably a thousand other styles that I can’t pull up to mind. Yes, you had to have the good
humor, a little humor there to see it through I think.

RV:  Jim, let’s take a break.
JW:  All right.
RV:  Ok, Jim let’s pick up with you leaving Vietnam. After you recovered from your wound.
Actually how long did it take you to recover from that wound?
JW:  Well I left country on crutches. I remember getting to Cam Rahn Bay which was our
exit point and having the leg serviced there. It was like metal. It was sewn up with metal thread I
guess you could say, kind of an odd stuff. But literally left on crutches because ironically enough
when we left Vietnam, of course it was in a commercial airliner we had to stop in Japan. Of all
things we’re so anxious to get home, the plane broke down. So we had an over night in Japan.
We were on a base. I guess just got BOQ quarters. I remember hobbling on my crutches with a
group of guys, officers as we went over to the officers club I guess to eat dinner. The irony was the
last thing we wanted on Earth was to be delayed. Something on the airplane broke and caused us
to stay over, maybe an extra night. Not an inordinate amount of time, but an hour was in ordinate
in our minds. Certainly a 12 hour to 24 hour period we were delayed getting out of there.

RV:  What was that flight out of Vietnam like when you cleared Vietnamese air space?
JW:  No question we were happy, happy boys. You know I’ve said this to someone
recently. I don’t remember an awful lot about any of those flights. I mean I know I can remember
leaving there. I certainly remember arriving and I think it was in Seattle was where we landed.
Then I had to get my civilian flights on to El Paso. I just really don’t remember a lot about the flight.
I just don’t. Maybe I was already Stateside in my mind. I can remember, I do know that the
steward, if you will, were very pleasant and warm. They were very gracious to us. I remember
that. I don’t remember who I sat by. I don’t remember any conversations or anything whatsoever.
I think I was in my own little world just wanting to extract myself from there and be with my family.

RV: What was your reception in Seattle with civilian airlines and being in a civilian airport?
Any incidents?

JW: No. I’m going to make a little comparison if I may. You’re an amazing guy Richard.
You get me talking I don’t know the way you do it. You just cause me to think of things. I
appreciate that because we don’t dwell in this world understandably. Another area that I have
talked about before. I don’t make light of anybody that had the negativity surround them in an
airport. I once heard Bart Starr, Green Bay’s quarterback say after all the years that he had been
on the speaking circuit and speaking at all the events that he’s been to over the years. He said
words to the effect, if everybody that has told me that they were at the Ice Bowl was really in that
stadium that day, you know the stadium would have had to been four to five times that it is. My
little analogy, not making light of any ill received soldier. I went and came back twice. So there’s
four opportunities. I flew out of L.A. the second time or maybe both times. I came back. I never
had one incident whatsoever. I assure you had I had I would have known it because I would have
pulled no punches. My comparison to Bart Starr is simply and I’ve qualified it already. If as many
guys were spit on as told the tale, the clothing would still be in the cleaners. I think that it
happened. I think it’s a line that’s gotten a bit overused. In my own mind I don’t know that
factually. In my own mind I don’t think it happened to the great numbers that it’s been reported.
That’s just Jim Wheeler on it. I never had a problem. I assure you I would have grabbed them by
the throat if anybody even look like they wanted to spit on me. We would have had little firefight
right there so to speak.

RV: You were in uniform, weren’t you?

JW: Yes, I would have grabbed them. It would have not been pretty. When I have guys in
here. I deal with guys here that start saying that. I have to evaluate those things. When I hear
them say that, just using an example here Richard. They say it with no emotion. They don’t bang
on my desk. They don’t grit their teeth. In my own mind, Jim Wheeler that tells me this never
happened. This didn’t happen to you. I’d get emotional about it, just talking about it if it happened
to me. You’re sitting there telling me you were spit on and you just walked on through. I just think
that kind of unscientifically supports my little theory. That’s my story.
RV: Did you have 30 days leave?

JW: Yes, sir.

RV: What was it like coming back home to El Paso?

JW: Heaven on Earth, needless to say. Both times of course. Of course we had 30 days. I'm a homeboy. Of course my wife being in proximity of her parents the year I was gone we were quickly in the car and heading to Memphis, Tennessee, to see my folks. Especially this particular. No, it may have been the first trip. I ate a hamburger and I think it was the first trip more so. I'm a hamburger guy as you know. We talked about eating. I ate hamburgers morning, noon and night. Morning, noon, and night. My mother was prone to cook me hamburgers growing up anyway for breakfast, silly as it sounds. I just remember eating hamburgers every place we stopped. I ate hamburgers. It was one of the things I remember about vacation.

RV: How much did you talk about your war experience? First with your family members and then with other people in the military and then civilians?

JW: I think the family, not too much problem necessarily I guess with my brother who had served in Vietnam for a year with the Air Force. I think the family at large, really didn't know how to go about approaching it. In fact I had a little friction with my sister at one point I remember because she seemed...I don't know if it was a defense. She was so unspoken to it. To me it was almost insulting. What I just did. I had to accept it as honesty. She said, 'I just felt awkward. I didn't think you wanted to talk.' Those kind of standard statements there. So from a family perspective there wasn't a whole lot of discourse outside maybe my brother. Certainly my mother. Nothing to talk about with her in that regard as an example. My dad was World War II, it wasn't a whole lot to talk about I don't believe.

RV: Did they ask about it?

JW: Modestly. Again I think it's a matter of trying. I guess they're presupposing themselves into your mind but they're trying to be nice about it. War does have its atrocities. I think they were just trying to be considerate I guess you could say of my own emotions if you will. So no there was no real sit down and along discourse about the war at large.

RV: How about civilians? I want to lead into your thoughts about the anti-war movement.

JW: Sure. There again my life though, even though I realize at this moment as we speak. I'm on a 30-day leave. It wasn't anything that I would hide. I have stickers on my car for getting on post. I didn't hide the fact by any means that I was a soldier. I'm sure my haircut showed it. I don't
remember anything out of the ordinary as we traveled around on our vacation. Then unlike as I said to you before. Unlike the standard young man who went to war as either a U.S. or an RA for three years and went back home to the block as they say. My environment was pure military. So I think that certainly caused it to be a totally different event in a sense than the guy that goes back home and is right back out on the factory floor, whatever he’s doing. Where there was a bit more anti-war kind of circumstance. My whole environment is military. That’s all I really basically knew.

RV: What did you think of the anti-war movement? How did that affect you when you came back and what were your thoughts?

JW: Certainly being the kind of citizen that I am and not to mention military person, I was not very happy with all that was going on with that. Again I have to be careful thinking about then versus the knowledge if you will that I have today. Obviously a lot of time has passed and a lot of reading and all the above. At the time again I’m probably operating, Jim Wheeler speaking again of course, just somewhat with blinders on. I am something of an idealistic person to this day. My government has gone to war for what they believed to be the right thing. I’m in charge of them and that’s what I do. It isn’t really up to me to be frankly questioning or challenging too much in my everyday role as a military officer. Just trying to do the best I can with the job assignment that I have, period. So I think we’re kind of non-political military guys by makeup and by design I guess you could say as well. So frankly I’ve called myself over the years quite a bit. I’m a non-political animal. Certainly during those years for the most part, it just wasn’t apart of my makeup.

RV: What about anti-war movement now? Looking back?

JW: Looking back to Vietnam you’re talking about?

RV: Yes, sir.

JW: Well certainly I think the citizenry at large were sold, probably not the right term, to a certain degree a bill of goods. Because there again I’ve said it so many times over the years. You know, what’s the problem here? We were just soldiers, just like Korea. We’re just the boy next door doing what the government has asked of us. But of course you know much better than I as a historian. It was media driven. There was some lies. Our citizens were lied to to a certain degree. Both from over there with Westmoreland. Not to mention over her with LBJ and the whiz kids. I gave more credit. At the time I thought McNamara, well he was certainly quite an intelligent man. In retrospect, I’ve tried to read his book. An apology of sorts. I just couldn’t get into his book. I guess because I saw how we were really used. I guess again by being a little older and wiser a
guy from his background was a very intelligent man. What did he know about what he was doing anyway in that role as you reflect back. But at the time he just was a bright man if you will, an intelligent man. A lot of mistakes on all fronts really.

RV: What did you think of the media coverage of the war? You just alluded to that.

JW: I think anything can be painted negative was done that way. I think in my mind the media was the greatest negative impact of the whole war. I think the way the media was used and the liberal attitude of it all is what if you will turned the population in a sense. I’m not speaking nearly as smart and sharp as I should to you on that subject. I think the media was the core of the problem. I realize that all the politics that went into building the public government and all those kinds of things. They were there too. They weren’t right. I just think our own media really twisted it for us.

RV: How much did you keep up with what was happening in Vietnam after you came back to the United States?

JW: I was again just by wearing the uniform and having it was still our war. I was fairly tuned to it. Much more so than I am. I mean I monitor Iraq, but I’m certainly not as emotionally involved. I’m very much concerned and interested in all of the above. But certainly that being my war I was tuned to it quite a bit more. Again it was impacting on me someway most everyday as just serving on the active duty at that time. Again I was simply around fellow soldiers that had the same experience. It was kind of a common circumstance versus being out in the civilian environment.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamization policy? Turning the war over to the South Vietnamese who fight for themselves?

JW: Well first of all obviously we knew it was doomed to failure to begin with. It tuned out to be that way. In fact it happened so quickly it’s almost embarrassingly so. But then quite frankly that’s the way I saw the South Vietnamese soldiers operate in my little time there. I’d heard stories of them running in battle. One of my first firefights what did I experience? Running in battle. It was such a confusing thing to a second lieutenant. What am I doing here fighting for him if he’s running? It never got any better.

RV: Do you remember how you felt in 1973 when the United States officially withdrew from Vietnam?
JW: I never have and I’m not trying to beat a dead horse. Because we never lost a major battle. I personally if you whoop me I accept that. I don’t feel that we the soldiers lost the war I guess in the same breath you could say we did lose over there but we lost at the political levels. At the fighting man level, we did what we were charged to do even though we could have done it a lot better in a lot of different ways. I don’t accept that we lost the war. I guess you can say, yes we did. I don’t accept that from a soldier’s perspective. I think it dishonors the soldiers that fought and died over there to say that. There’s no question of what was to come with the Vietnamization of it. There’s just no stopping that. I mean our government had to know that understandably when that was finally done. In short order it would happen. My God it happened probably quicker than even I thought it would happen, the Communists rolled down from the North.

RV: How did you feel in 1975 when that happened?

JW: Again not surprised. First of all I didn’t want to see, if you can call it a Democratic country. See a country, South Vietnam in this case literally taken over by a Communist regime just from the perspective of freedom versus Communism if you will. I was not at all pleased. Whether I’d been there or not you hate to see that take place.

RV: Do you think the United States achieved peace with honor as was said during the time?

JW: No I don’t. Peace with honor?


JW: No, no, no, no, no. It’s blight on a history. Nothing. An overstatement. Nothing about it was good. Nothing about tiding it up or wrapping it up. Nothing about it was done in my mind as it should have been done. That’s a very broad statement I know. I’m not at all pleased. Then when you compound Nixon on top of it, it just makes it worse.

RV: Let’s expand on that. What kind of lessons did the United States learn from this experience?

JW: Well, I guess from a soldier’s perspective, if you’re going to commit to a war, you need to commit to it fully and wholly, with no holds barred so to speak. Sure, today we can look back and say what’s it’s like. If you go back and look at McCarthy you can look at that and it almost seems like a joke. How could that have happened? Living in those times it was a very real thing. What I’m working back to of course is the Domino Effect of what we were seeing and believing and expecting to take place. I know it goes well passed that. In the simplest terms, the
United States government just did not want another country regardless of its size or location shaded in with Communist red. That’s what we saw and believed and only knew. That was our box. Again today, looking back you could say what a joke this is. When you start looking to the Domino Theory, how silly can this be? Going back to Truman. Those were the conditions we were living under. I’d like to think for the most part our government was seeking for that not to happen. There we were mixing into somebody else’s government and trying to install our own etc, etc. I hope we learned that really doesn’t work. It doesn’t work just like you don’t go over there without any forethought of putting in long hull rice when they eat short hull rice or whatever the right term is. You don’t change those things. You can’t change them, nor should you. We tried. We failed.

RV: Do you think the politicians in Washington, the policy makers are more to fault than the military commanders in the field?

JW: Emphatically. Yes, we talk about the public commanders over there. I know that. As I’ve done some reading certainly I don’t think there was ever a man in a uniform looking more military than General Westmoreland. He just looks the perfect part of a general officer. But did he not get caught up in politics? Of course he did. I’m sure Eisenhower did in his own way, in Europe of course. I still may be a bit too idealistic in my world Richard because I know the world is a dirty place. It isn’t squeaky clean and easy to work I think. I know that guys go to Washington with the best of intentions and get all caught up in the power elite of it all. I’m sure to a degree Westmoreland had to play that game too. There was some lying and deceit going on. That’s what bothers me as much as anything.

RV: How do you feel about your personal service in Vietnam?

JW: I’m very pleased. I’m very comfortable with my time there. As I’ve said to you before, if I hadn’t have left my sweetie I wouldn’t have left anytime soon. That would have been another story for me. I could have very easily died over there. I don’t say that for drama, but I’ve said that to my wife. That’s probably true. For me, Jim Wheeler I know that I did my job to the best of my abilities. I know that I did not suffer principle. I know that I was lost on more than one occasion and we don’t like to admit it. That’s just a little sidebar. A guy tells you he was never lost in Vietnam, you have to say he lies. Because the maps weren’t the greatest. More than once I’ve stood somewhere and fired a smoke round to triangulate where I am. I’m off a hilltop you know? But that’s for fun on the side. As far as I know. In my own little world no super hero. No great, great battles. That’s good because great, great battles cause casualties. It’s just assume not be
part of that. I'd like to be part of it, on the reverse of course that relates to injured and dead
soldiers. So that's all ok. So I'm very content with Jim Wheeler and how he served as a leader in
Vietnam. Yes, sir.

RV: Did you suffer any disabilities from your service?

JW: Any disabilities?

RV: Yes, sir.

JW: Well anyone who goes to war, again. Especially the fighting soldier is affected for life
on one way or the other. The greatest problem that fighting soldiers bring back from war, I've read
and been told is the problem with noise. We may have already talked about that. So if my
Albatross is noise, which it is in a great way. If that's the worst thing that I have to deal with versus
those without legs etc, then I'm doing ok. In fact, my case I am rated by the VA as 30% post
traumatic stress disorder. It isn't that I don't have any of the classics if you will, the bell curve thing.
The classic of alcoholism, and multiple jobs and multiple wives and all those kinds of things.
Spousal abuse, none of that is even. It's so far off the map removed from me that it's not even
discussable. My own is the noise problem that I didn't understand what it was until a few years
ago.

RV: Can you give me an example?

JW: Sir?

RV: Can you give me an example?

JW: Sure. I definitely will. Did I not tell you about the deer in the woods thing?

RV: I believe so.

JW: I use that example a lot here. The point is until I knew that I had a problem with
noise. I just figured it was Jim Wheeler, but I didn't have it before. When I went to the Agent
Orange registry years ago and saw a psychiatrist I basically learned part of what I just said that
noise is a great problem. About the only way you can deal with it is to get away from it. Your mind
is geared almost like an old '78 record, you know grooved that you practice noise discipline. So
when the noise level goes up, even though you're 30 years removed from a war, nothing about a
war, you get edgy. So just last night I was edgy. My granddaughter was four years old yesterday.
Our daughter took us to dinner at a wonderful nice little restaurant, but the music was too loud. I
wasn't going to make any scenes. I don't usually make scenes. I often times ask that music be
turned down. I coped with it but I was on edge. Here I am celebrating my granddaughter's fourth
birthday but I was on edge like no one else because this noise thing affects you. There’s really no control over it, because it’s affecting you to a subconscious. It’s just there. You know I have a leg wound. That leg wound bothers me modestly to this day. But it is very minor again in comparison to so many others. So all told, I am in great, great shape. The noise is just something I deal with. As I said more than once now, if that’s the very worst thing then I’m good to go. I have no regrets. My only regret would be that I wasn’t able to kill a little bit more of the enemy if you please. I don’t have any problem with that. I’m a Christian man. So on a personal plane, I am pleased with the way I preformed and my time in Vietnam. Absolutely.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about it if you could?

JW: Change? I don’t know that there is, Richard. I mean I took my assignments. I did them to the best of my ability. If I didn’t I can say that to you, but I know I did. Of course. I am very comfortable with what took place. I’m comfortable with that. I’m pleased.

RV: Jim what do you think the most significant thing was that you learned there?

JW: That’s an interesting question my friend. Pose it again.

RV: The most significant thing that you learned while you were there in Vietnam. Or another way to look at that is, how had the war most affected you? What did you take from it, internally?

JW: I don’t have a good, quick answer for that.

RV: Take your time.

JW: Unto myself, and that’s probably most important. Unto myself I know that I faced up to harsh times and that I stood the course. I never wimped out in any way. I took it on the chin. Everything that was a part of that war scenario I proved to myself what I already know. That I am a man and that people hide behind. They’ve got to have booze before they can go out and do this. I’ve always taken everything so to speak, figuratively speaking on the chin. I don’t hide behind anything. I’m not a 6’8” guy but I think in a sense I probably am 6’8” mentally, in a sense. In that I fear no man. I don’t hide behind any crutches. I am what I am. I am very proud of that. I guess I proved that to myself. I guess you could say in Vietnam. I just know that unto myself I am an honest and principled person. I stood up to it both mentally and physically. There is a sidebar. I don’t know how anybody. I guess I kind of know where they wind up if they don’t. I was raised in church. First of all, I don’t know how anyone could go through life, much less a war and not have a close relationship with our maker. I don’t know where I’d be without that. Probably I do know
where I’d be. Secondly of course I was an athlete and loved football. Could have done junior college, chose university track and was sprinter. A fast guy and all that stuff. The point I’m making is I don’t know how guys. I had those two things to fall back on because out there in Vietnam or even when I went to jump school. See I didn’t get to go to jump school until after Vietnam, my second tour. I went there with stitches in my leg, which didn’t make it easy. But I reached down for that old stuff you learn in athletics. I’ve had those two things principally to turn to. My spiritual strength and then my physical strength all from my background. I give great credit or both of those. From my upbringing in the church and the strength that comes with that. Then my interest in athletics from a little boy all the way up with the coaches and my ownself, doing what I did. Those are the two sources of strength that I drew from and still do for that matter. I don’t know how those who don’t have it, do it.

RV: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam?

JW: I haven’t had it very high on my priority list. Primarily because there are so many other places I haven’t been to so to speak. Secondly whereas my wife and I, I was stationed in Paris I may have mentioned before back in the mid ’60s. I lived in downtown Paris for two years so when I went back to Paris I could walk the Champs Elysee. I didn’t drive, but pass through the Place de L’Toule etc, etc. I’ve been there before. I can go back to those places. In Vietnam I don’t think the LZ Oasis is there. I don’t think I could find. Where I operated the greater, greater part of the time. I can’t go back to there. So I’m not going back to something absolute. It would be more broader than that. Probably with that said I haven’t been really drawn. I must say to you, since I’ve come to know Dr. Verrone and spoken with you, you’ve caused me to think about a lot of things that I haven’t thought about for years etc. Vietnam has probably bumped itself up my little list. I can’t say that it’s number one yet. I do have a greater interest of wanting to do that, even though I read and had him sign for me some years ago. Ollie North’s book when he went back. I read it, he signed it for me and all these things. I wasn’t particularly drawn. But I mean a bit more that way right now.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam the country, today how it’s turned out and where it is today?

JW: I like what you said earlier, the South still calls it Saigon. I think that’s a positive if nothing else. I have come to know a few Vietnamese. We have a restaurant that’s one of our favorites that my wife and I go to. The owner is probably 10 years my junior so he remembers
certainly the war. He took his family and did the movement through the camps if you will to
ultimately get to the States. So I visited with him and can appreciate what they went through
immediately after in ’75 and what took place. In the same manner I now have a Vietnamese barber
believe it or not. When I first started going to this place I thought she was Vietnamese. I asked her
and she confirmed that she was. I said, ‘Well, golly gee, I lived two years in your country.’ ‘Oh,
when was that?’ I told her ’67, ’68, ’69. She said, ‘I wasn’t born until 1975.’ She wasn’t flippant,
that wasn’t the point at all. She said, ‘So I can’t really appreciate what went on before then.’ I find
the irony of that is this. Like I say she didn’t mean anything other than the statement of the fact.

Here I am as I said to you earlier I’m affected every day of my life just by the noise thing alone
right?

RV: Right.

JW: Not dramatic. I wash my car and I’m hyper vigilant. I see every movement of every
tree moving. I know I’m in my front yard. I don’t fear anything but it is a subconscious. When I’m
out there just doing my car as the example, any movement of trees or somebody moving I’m
keenly aware of it. The average person isn’t. I’m affected on a daily basis but much, much less
dramatically than a lot of the fellows that I deal with. Saturday night my wife and I, this is a little
unusual, but this is exactly what happened. My wife and I were at Billy Bob’s to see Dwight
Yoakum, wonderful show. At some point, I’m sitting there watching someone threw, I’m sure it was
a girl. Out of the dark and into the spotlight it just passed over there real quickly, a flower. I’m
thinking it was probably yellow rose. The way the lights hit it and the way it flashed across here I
immediately saw tracers, incoming tracers. As a rule I don’t have flashbacks. I don’t have those
kinds of things as such. I have the hypervigilance and the noise. But so help me I said, ‘Honey,
did you see that flower?’ She said, ‘Yes.’ That’s what she saw. I saw tracers. That’s very rare for me. I’m not usually bothered, that wasn’t a bother but that’s what I saw. I’m aware there must be a
very wealthy guy that lives out in the county because I think there’s private helicopter that comes
across our house every so often. My neighbors just hear a little old helicopter it doesn’t sound like
a huey. When I hear a helicopter my ears perk up just like that deer out there in the woods. I perk
up. It’s just another sound of daily life. But to me, it’s part of my daily life back to Vietnam. We
never leave the war zone in the fullest sense. We just don’t. That’s what I see so much of in my
work. Guys are much, much more dramatic than what I’m speaking of Jim Wheeler. I’m high and
dry.
RV: Talk about your work, what you do with vets today.

JW: I serve as Denton County veteran service officer. Why I'm here is the great state of Texas many years ago passed a law that says any county in Texas of a given size or greater will have a veteran's service office. So here in Denton a very, very fast moving, fast growing county. We're growing by leaps and bounds we have a very busy office. What I serve is, I serve many roles here. I am primarily though a conduit between the veteran and the Department of Veterans Affairs. The law says if you have a medical condition that was generated while wearing the uniform. Whether it's a wound from war or dropping a wrench on your toe and breaking it in the motor pool and now you limp from it. The law says you should be compensated accordingly.

Because you now have a shortcoming. Well the average person doesn't give a lot to the military after they leave and don't necessarily know that they can file a claim. If they do know, they don't know how to go about it. We play a little bit physician, a little bit attorney as we put together what the VA calls a well-grounded claim and file for that particular medical issue, be it mental so to speak. Mental from PTSD to diabetes. You know we have about 11 issues now related to Agent Orange that are very winnable. Most everything that we file with the VA is a battle. I often talk about putting on my flak jacket and my pot when guys are in here. Even under the best conditions it's a difficult process because the VA really and truly is going to do literally everything they cannot to approve the client. It's just a game. Now they can't break a law and do it. I'm not saying that. They really hide behind every letter of the law.

RV: Why is that?

JW: Well I'd like to think, I don't know if you call it fiscal responsibility. The example I give here often times here, especially to the soldiers. Now the VA in this circumstance is kind of like the old supply sergeant. You know you need clean sheets or you need new blanket and that supply sergeant is as stingy as can be. Like it's his very own personal blanket that he's got to give you. Now if you're the commander you're pleased about that because you want accountability from your supply room. If you're the private on the other side of the counter or in this case, you're the veteran filing a claim, then you are very emotionally involved. When they kick it back as a denial, you're not very pleased because they've gone down to sub paragraph E to quote some little Charlie Sierra thing that causes it to be denied. Then we have to regroup as I say to the soldiers. Ok, we're going to regroup, redistribute ammunition and go back up the hill. So we have to go back and get another doctor's opinion and this that and the other. They are very tough. To a certain degree it is
good fiscal responsibility. But sometimes they’re over the top. I’ve got more examples than you
care to hear at this time. One example I’ve got a military policeman who we’ve been in the process
for PTSD now for two years. The last submission I gave Hank, my boss said I have 17 enclosures.
Never heard of something so large. He said if this doesn’t win, nothing will. Well the VA is still
riding behind a law that says, in other words if he had a Silver Star or a Purple Heart or a CIB, or
any kind of valor award that puts him in harms way. This man is consumed with PTSD, had an
alcohol problem for years, etc. I even found records when they identified he had PTSD in a Waco
or Temple Hospital years and years ago which was part of my retort to them. Their answer is hey,
nothing but you soldier places you in harms way. In other words I’ve written back to them and I say
look, only an infantryman had a CIB. He can’t have a CIB. He’s not a medic so he can’t have a
combat medic. Just because he wasn’t wounded, not everybody gets wounded, so he doesn’t
have a Purple Heart. I go through that little obvious stuff. So I felt like we were going to win this
last go around just almost automatically when they read my 17 enclosures to include pictures of
him on the V-100 in Vietnam because his unit, whatever the number is combat MP battalion.
Combat is even in their title. The VA is still saying no, the only thing that places you in harms way
is your word. So I just called on its status the other day and this is after two years. Now they tell
me they’ve gone to try to get the morning reports, or the after action reports of this particular MP
unit buried somewhere in the archives, somewhere in the great hinder land.

RV: Jim let me pause you just for a moment and change out this disk. Hold on for just a
second.

JW: Ok.

RV: Ok, go ahead.

JW: So I think you can maybe even hear my frustration here. So now the VA armed with
all that information, to include their own records that said he had PTSD years ago. They’ve gone
off to try to see if they can acquire morning reports or after action reports from this particular MP
unit. I even have a letter that a lieutenant wrote for him, but his statement carry a pretty strong
impact. He even was able to find this lieutenant who came after this event but the lieutenant at that
time remembers the particular event and so states in what we call a buddy statement. Even with
all that, they still refuse to approve it and/or disapprove it at this point. They’ve gone after those
reports to see if they can find an entry to see if one of his stressors was his particular vehicle took
an RPG in the right front. That a particular morning because they were running behind schedule
they had filled up the left tank of fuel but didn't fill up the right front. So if they had filled up the right front like good soldiers should have done, the thing would have exploded and he'd have died and it'd have been all done anyway. But we wrote up that event, almost to the day that it happened. Now they're trying to find an after action report to see if that's true. So it can get very, very frustrating in those kinds of situations. That is the greater thrust of what we do. Now we do a myriad of other things, from ordering soldiers DD214s to helping little old widows who may be eligible for widow's pension and on and on and on. But the greater thrust of what we do are claims for compensation.

RV: You mentioned a couple books that you had read. The SOG book and McNamara's book. Any other books that you would recommend on Vietnam or that had a particular impact upon you?

JW: Well I have one that's James Griffith's book called *Vietnam Insight*. Logic of involvement and conventional perspectives, unconventional perspectives is a book that I've read. This Griffith served with the 11th Army Cavalry regiment in '68 and '69. Taught high school history for more than 20 years. It is a nice general overview of the history leading up to when we entered the war, going back to the French reign of course, French Indo-China. Quite a build up because one of the short comings that I feel from having served in Vietnam is we didn't get any kind of a real history lesson on where we were going. I mean other than superficially. Which I didn't have. I guess we all know in a sense Dinh Binh Phu took place in '54. We didn't know an awful lot about the country and it's people. Both my tours I just went there as a fresh lieutenant and went back as a captain. There was nothing in between, other than my own self to learn any of this. Again for Jim Wheeler I never had any language lessons. Now there was a Vietnamese school at Biggs Army Airfield at Ft. Bliss for those who were going over as advisors and stuff I think. But the everyday soldier, not to mention me as an everyday officer I didn't have any language at all. Ever now and then I finally got to meet someone wherever it was that spoke a little French. That's interesting that the people of today, French is lost. Like this barber that I mentioned as an example. Parle France means nothing to her. Well, that's a different time I realize from when the French if you will owned it. Anyways this is a very nice book, *Viet Insights* by Griffiths. But SOG, far and above. Now, I've read some fictional. *The Thirteenth Valley* comes to mind as one of the most enjoyable fictional books of Vietnam that I read. *Thirteenth Valley* just jumps out at me. I've read a few of those kinds of books. But far and above SOG is my book.
RV: How about Vietnam movies, do you go see them?

JW: I have no problems with them. I have some problems with the way they were presented of course. On a personal note, no. Of course I think *We Were Soldiers* is just a magnificent piece of work.

RV: What made it good?

JW: You know I think it just was very real. We have one of our clients is a helicopter pilot from Vietnam, three tours. One as gunship guy. One as a Chinook so he saw all sides. Those are the guys when you mentioned heroism we’ve talked about it before. How I love these guys and the way they could max out those aircraft and that low-density air and haul some people out. I just have the greatest respect for helicopter pilots. This particular pilot, saw *We Were Soldiers* very early on and came in. He walks stooped. He’s 100%. He’s just really messed up from shot and crashed in helicopters I think three times. He praised the flying in this particular movie. It might be subtle to most people just looking at the movie but he was mightily impressed with the way the pilots worked in the movie. So just the overall perspective of the way they presented the battle and all. Speaks volumes. To me, Jim Wheeler because I have been there and I spent a lot of time in the Ia Drang. As I said more than once, never anything a battle like that, thank the lord. What touched me more about the movie than anything was the emotions of the wives back home. Because that’s something I didn’t get to experience. My wife’s back home and she’s not on a base. She’s at home living in an apartment near her mom and dad. So she didn’t even have that kind of a support group, either time. But I think I was emphatically greatly, greatly moved by all that we got to see behind the scenes with the ladies. Their battalion commander’s wife, Colonel Moore’s wife taking command. Now that said, I take exception personally that they showed and I just want to believe with my heart and soul that taxi driver delivering a death notice was just for the movie. There’s no way on earth that I can comprehend that we would have taxi drivers delivering death notices. So I think to me, my impression of that was all driven for the dramatics of the movies. Ok, finally got back into the hands of the wives. You know and I know. You may be able to tell me that happened. I accept that, but I just can’t believe it. We always have chaplains on board that personally deliver these things. Now I know that was early in the war, it was as new concept with the 11th Air and all that kind of stuff. That’s the one exception to the movie, the exception that I take to the movie was the taxi driver delivering a death notice. I don’t buy that.

RV: What about the poorly done movies?
JW: Well, I’ve probably forgotten them to a degree. Because over the years I’ve been asked on occasion that. I always said with the exception, particularly the drama of the ending of it, I thought *Platoon* captured it as well as any other movie. Anything can be taken apart. I’m not saying it was all perfect by any means. I thought the very beginning when you see the FNG guy arriving all clean and crisp and there’s the bodies or the caskets fixing to be loaded on the Freedom Bird that just brought you in. There’s that sense of smell that you had now over there etc, that’s there. You kind of felt that. So all told I thought *Platoon* was the better of the bunch. I don’t consider it great but I thought with some exceptions that it did all right. *Full Metal Jacket* comes to mind. I can’t remember the titles of them all. I’ve just placed over the years until now. *Platoon* was close as you could get. I can’t even call it a favorite but it was the one that I put over the others in my on mind.

RV: For the younger generation today Jim, what would you tell them about the Vietnam War? If you had to go into a high school classroom or a college classroom?

JW: Well, I can speak from any number of directions. If I wasn’t told that I had an open invitation I would go there and brag on my soldiers. I don’t want to get into politics. I would just talk to them about the 19 year old soldier and how well he performed in battle and how proud they should be of him. I would take the approach of talking about the soldiers who fought the war without question.

RV: Have you been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.?

JW: I’m embarrassed to say that I haven’t. I’ve been to the moving wall. I said boy if this wall, and I’ve got two books right there on the wall. Right in my library here. If the replica can move me this greatly, I don’t know if I can handle it so to speak up there. Because the first time was well over 10 years ago. Well over 10 when they brought it to El Paso. It was put inside the auditorium. My wife and I went, Dia and I. Gosh, I went in there and was just, I’m not a weepy guy. But it sure does it in a hurry. This is just, if you will, a facsimile. Then about three or four years ago they had one here over like Memorial Day or what have you. My son happened to be visiting. So he and I and his mother, my wife and I think his fiancée was with us. But in both cases just like when I got off the plane in Hawaii to see my wife. She’s such a class act. You know there’s all these people up front. She just stands back out of the way and so subtle and perfect and all that. What happened here both in the El Paso event and then at this event my wife just backed away. Of course my son Trey stayed with her and they gave me my space because you
need it. It’s an event. I know you’ve talked to many, many people now. But like I say if this facsimile can do this to you, God only knows what that wall must do. I’m sad to say I have not been to Washington, D.C.

RV: Jim is there anything else that you want to talk about, anything that we have not touched upon that you would like to before we wrap this up?

JW: Gosh I think we’ve run it pretty well. Needless to say I had a life after Vietnam, a very successful and full career. I had some great assignments all the way to Alaska, not my favorite place but was on jump assignment in Alaska but did a lot of mountain and glacier training there and on and on. Finally in ’83, kind of chose my family over my career. Because I had been below the zone of promotion. I was certainly geared to what I wanted to be as a general officer. I know that I could have been that. At the same time I reached a point where I just said I don’t choose. If I choose to make O-6 then I’m choosing to leave my family for a year to Korea and I choose not to do that. I just don’t want to do that at this point in my life. That was a very good decision. Some days, every now and then I’ve got that little twist in the stomach that says dog gone. You could have been at least a One Star retired that would have been nice. But bottom line is, I made a good decision. I got to keep our girls home throughout their college careers, which I wouldn’t have done otherwise, [as well as their brother]. I would have dropped them off along the way like so many have. That would have worked. I’ve got the greatest military wife that ever lived. It would have all worked. But bottom line is, I kept my babies much longer than otherwise and that’s ok. So it was a good run for this little old Tennessee country boy. Believe me.

RV: Well, Jim thank you very much for your time. I very much appreciate it. We’ll go ahead and end the oral history interview with James Wheeler Jr. Thank you sir.

JW: Thank you Richard.