Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Jack Wright. We are in the interview room of the Southwest Special Collections Library. It’s December 17, 2002. We’re on the campus of Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. Mr. Wright let’s start with a brief biographical sketch. Tell me when and where you were born.

Jack Wright: I was born, by the way the official name is Jackie V. [which stands for Vernon] Jackie V. Wright. I go back by Jack Wright.

RV: Ok.

JW: I’ve been a called a lot worse [laughs]. I was born in Jefferson County, Oklahoma on September the 14th 1936. Born at home, I might say I’m kind of lucky to be here because I was born with yellow jaundice.

RV: Really?

JW: I managed to get through that. My father was, well we were poor folks. Born during the Depression. Mother and father had moved over into Oklahoma. They were from Texas. They had moved over there to try to find work. Dad was working in the fields. Moved back to Texas shortly after my birth. My first memories are living on a farm out north of Electra, Texas. We weren’t even sharecroppers. Dad was working the farm for a man named Al Robb who lived in Electra. He was making $30 a month.

RV: Wow.
JW: But we had good life. My memories when I’m three, four years old, vague, but it was good life. As World War II came along, am I getting ahead of you?

RV: Not at all.

JW: As World War II came along, I have an older sister and a younger brother. Actually my mother’s first two children were twins. They died in infancy within hours after their birth. That’s how the children were back then. The doctor was there and said, “those kids are all right.” And he left. One of them lived an hour and a half and the other one lived two hours.

RV: Were they born at home as well?

JW: Pardon me?

RV: Were they born at home?

JW: Yes. My younger brother was the only one that was born in a hospital. He was born in a little hospital in Electra, Texas. My sister was born in 1935, January of ‘35. Me in September of ’36. My younger brother was born in December of ’41. So as World War II came along, I don’t know my dad’s feeling toward should I go into the military or not. I know dad was very strong on taking care of his family. His family was so important to him. He was trying to take care of his family. He wasn’t trying to find a job to get out of the military I don’t think, but he happened to get that job in probably late 1941. Dad got a job with Firestone Rubber Company in San Antonio. You know we lost our rubber supply when the Philippines fell. We, the U.S., the rubber makers went to developing the synthetic rubber. That’s what Firestone was doing. Dad was driving a truck. They put these various formulas for synthetic rubber on these trucks and they’d drive. They were driving trucks 24 hours a day, Firestone was. So the people that were working for Firestone were exempt from the draft.

RV: Hmm, because they were contributing to the war effort?

JW: They were contributing to the war effort. So Dad worked during the war throughout the war years. I first started to school in a little town south of San Antonio called Summerset. Didn’t complete my first year there. Then we moved into San Antonio. I completed my first year of school in San Antonio and started my second. By this time, the war was winding down, the job was winding down. So dad sent the family back to Burkburnett, to my mother’s parents. We lived with them for a few months until
Dad’s job wound down. He went into the oil field. Dad was just a laborer. Dad had
eighth grade education. Again the family was the important thing.

RV: Do you remember anything about World War II? Do you have any
memories of the war?

JW: No.

RV: You were four, five, six years old.

JW: Yes. I remember it being there. I had an uncle; Dad’s next older brother
was drafted in the Navy. This was I believe a draft board thing. The Electra draft board
drafted my uncle into the Navy. He was 35 years old. He had four children. He had a
bad back and he was drafted in the Navy, sent to San Diego. Went through the basic
training and never left San Diego. He was discharged from the Navy after the war ended
in San Diego. It really cost the government. He had bad teeth. They had to pull his teeth
and make him false teeth. They had to operate on his back. It was just blind luck. I
don’t believe that the draft board was really looking closely at what was going on.

RV: Probably not.

JW: Anyway I really didn’t have any relatives in World War II. The first relative
that was in any service I can go back to a great-grandfather Wright. Never knew him but
he was in the Civil War. I’ve got a picture of him in his Union uniform with crossed
pistols across like this, across his chest. That’s all I know of great-granddaddy Nathan
Wright.

RV: What a great picture?

JW: Yes, I’ve made copies of that and gave it to all of my children.

RV: Tell me about your schooling. What do you remember most about going to
school?

JW: Playing, having fun. In the early years when I went to Burkburnett in the
second grade, finished out the second grade there. Then when Dad moved back we
moved out between Electra and Burkburnett in the oil field a place called the Hershey
Field. I went into the Electra School District for the third grade. But it was a little
country school called Sunshine Hill. A little three-room schoolhouse, a man and wife,
schoolteachers lived in a house right there. They were just two teachers. She taught the
first, second and third grade in one room. He taught the fourth, fifth and sixth grade in the
other room. Then when you went into the seventh grade, you went into Electra.

RV: Ok.

JW: We went there for the third grade. Then during the summer between the
third and fourth grade we moved back into the Burkburnett School District. So they put
me right back in with the kids I was with in the second grade. So I knew them in the
second grade and picked them up in the fourth grade and went all the way through
school. Graduated from Burkburnett School System in 1955. Fall of ’55 went to then
Midwestern University. It wasn’t State supported yet. Actually it was two schools in
one. There was Hardin Junior College that was state supported. Then Midwestern
University, which was the final two years and it was not state supported. So, sometime
between the time I graduated in 1960 to whenever the whole school became combined
and became Midwestern State University.

RV: Before we get into your college careers, what do you remember most about
high school? Were you a good student in high school?

JW: Yes, as a matter of a fact I graduated third in my class. Football was very
important to me. I played high school football. I was a four-year letterman.

RV: What position did you play?

JW: I started out playing guard and end, defensive end and offensive end. I
played more defensive end than anything else. When injuries would occur I could play
either right or left guard. I could play right or left end. As a matter of fact, I was more of
a left end than a right end. I scored my first touchdown playing right end. Caught a pass
and jumped up into the end zone.

RV: What were your favorite subjects?


RV: Ok [laughs]. Tell me about your family growing up through high school.

Were you guys close or not?

JW: The family was generally close. My younger brother and I, we knocked
heads a lot. He was about four years younger than me. He had a stubborn streak, like his
father. We knocked heads a lot. A problem that you have in a small school system like
Burkburnett, my younger brother came along and had some of the same teachers that I had.

RV: Right.

JW: And I was a good boy. I loved to be teacher’s pet. I was for most of it. Anyway, he wasn’t. He was rambunctious. He had some problems. The teachers would say, “Why can’t you be like your brother?” Oh me, that caused some problems. But generally yeah. As young kids I can remember we lived out in the country until I was a junior in high school. We still had the old outdoor bathroom, little latrine.

RV: Really?

JW: Until we finally moved to town in 1953. Boy we were really in high cotton. There wasn’t any television. We listened to ball games on the radio. Every evening at about suppertime, about 6:00 there was the top 10 tunes, music of the day. We’d listen to that. One of the Top 10 was Vaughn Monroe’s *Mule Train*. I wonder if you’ve heard that or not? That goes way on back. Anyway we would do that. Our dinner meal we called it supper. As a family, there’s times when Mom would pop up a bunch of popcorn and we’d set around and play Bingo and Monopoly or those kind of games as a family. I can remember those kinds of things. The joys of being with family.

RV: Did you work when you were a little older in high school?

JW: Yes, I started working in a grocery store I guess when I was a freshman in high school. I worked in the grocery store probably until my freshman or sophomore year. Of course part-time. Then I moved into a service station and worked in a service station. This was back here during the days of a “service station.” It wasn’t just a gas pump. We filled the cars up with gas. I washed cars, greased cars, changed oil, fixed flats. They didn’t have all this power equipment you’ve got today. It was tough. I did that basically all through high school. When I graduated and before I went into college, my dad at this time was working for what was then Magnolia Petroleum Company, which later became Mobile Oil Company. Magnolia had a schoolboy summer program. They would hire primarily children of employees. I managed to get in that program. I worked during the summer for Magnolia, and Magnolia paid top wage.

RV: Really?
JW: Yes. We were no different from the older hands. If they were hired at the same time we were, we made the same wage. Of course we only worked during the summer period. That paid for most of my college.

RV: Good.

RV: Did your parents emphasize education to you? Did you think you were going to go to college? Did you have a personal desire or were they saying “Jack you’re going to go.”

JW: No. I cannot remember my parents urging me to go on [to college]. It was very subtle if it was. It was, “I’m going to go to college.” Way back when I was in junior high and high school, a high school diploma was about all you needed. By this time, it was a college degree. You needed a degree and of course it’s gone on from there to the Master’s to the Doctorate.

RV: Tell me about what you remember about college. You started at Hardin Junior College.

JW: Yes.

RV: What do you remember about it?

JW: First of all, I did get a scholarship. It paid tuition, books and fees to the junior college.

RV: It was an academic scholarship?

JW: No, it was an individual scholarship.

RV: Just an individual scholarship.

JW: Individual scholarship, which helped a lot. My summer employment helped pay the rest of the bill. I lived at home during the first semester. I went to my Dad and said, “Dad, is there any way I could move into the dorms? Those guys have so much fun.” So Dad worked out, you could live in the dorm for about $35 a month. You didn’t have to eat in the cafeteria. The programs have change since then. I moved into the dorm my second semester of my freshman year. College work was tough. Learning does not come easy to me. It did in high school, but when I got into college I had to really hit the books and work hard. Yet, we still had a lot of fun.

RV: Were you a good student?
JW: Yes, I was a good student. Just had trouble learning [laughs]. I enjoyed freshman and sophomore work. I never will forget one of my English professors. Barton was his name. English Literature. We were reading and discussing in class the novel, *Return of the Native*. Have you ever heard of that one?

RV: Yes.

JW: I can remember Mr. Barton was a lieutenant colonel in the National Guard. We called him Colonel Barton. He was talking about the various ironies in the book. Just a lot of time I would take issue with him. I would speak up. Basically the only one in the class that would counter him. “I don’t agree with that.” One day I was absent and someone told me this, “Mr. Wright, Mr. Wright? No competition today.” Yeah, I was a good student. Probably didn’t study as hard as I thought I did. I managed to make mostly B’s, a few A’s and some C’s and two D’s.

RV: What were your favorite subjects? What did you get the two D’s in?

JW: Calculus. Both of them. Differential Calculus and interval Calculus. I will always believe. It was the same teacher in both courses and he also taught trigonometry. I never did take any trig in high school. But he believed in open book tests. I never did learn trig because on one of the final exams in trig, he took one of the example problems right out of the book and put it on the test.

RV: It was right there in the book.

JW: So, you open it up and copied it down. Bless his heart. He was a fine man, but I didn’t learn trig. Without trig, you get into Calculus and you’re lost and I was lost. I made D’s because he didn’t give me F’s. That’s the two lowest grades I have.

RV: What subjects did you enjoy the most?

JW: Well, I majored in Geology. I enjoyed one of those freshman courses, historical geology. I loved that. I enjoyed the geology courses a lot.

RV: Did you have aspirations to be a geologist when you graduated?

JW: That’s my major. I’ve got a Bachelor of Science degree in geology and a minor in math. I never worked a day in geology. I can’t even spell it now.

RV: You went to school from ’55 to ’59 is that right?

JW: Actually I crammed a four-year course into 4 ½ years. ROTC in a state supported school in those days like Hardin Junior College, ROTC was a requirement.
Freshman and sophomore boys had to take ROTC. I enjoyed ROTC. I went in the first two years and because of the world situation we were facing at that time I decided well, I’m going to go ahead and apply for the advanced courses, the advanced ROTC. If I’ve got to go in the service, it looks like that’s what is going to happen anyway, might as well go in as an officer. I applied and was accepted. I went through the last two years of ROTC and was commissioned.

RV: Army ROTC?

JW: Pardon me?

RV: Army ROTC?

JW: Army ROTC. Yes. The ROTC courses and some of the courses that I needed for my degree were in conflict. Then I got married between my junior and senior year too. So I had to back off a little bit. It took me an extra semester to go ahead and complete my degree, all the parts of it.

RV: So you decided to go from college into the military based on getting commissioned and going the full route?

JW: Yes. It wasn’t my decision that’s the way it was. Once you graduated you either went into the military or you had to get a deferment for whatever reason. I was ready to go.

RV: What did you family think about you going in to the military?

JW: I was married by this time. My wife thought that’s fine. We’ll go. We had a child also. First son was born in ’59. We were married in ’58. Born in ’59 and we went away. My mother was a little upset because her son, her oldest son was going to be gone. Went to Ft. Benning, Georgia. I was commissioned in the infantry. I had to go to Ft. Benning, Georgia for the infantry officer’s basic course.

RV: Right. Tell me about that.

JW: That was a lot of fun. We played soldier. We had a lot of physical training, tactical training, classroom training. Trying to make officers out of us.

RV: What do you remember most about basic training?

JW: The long hours. We were taught then that you belong to the Army 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You worked for whatever. Most of it was long days and then just like in the old cavalry days when you got through with the days work you had to take
care of the horse. At the end of the days work you have to clean your weapon and you go
home and clean up your boots and spit shine your boots for the next day. Put all this
together it doesn’t leave a lot for family life. But we adjusted to it.

RV: Did you live with your wife there or did they live on base separately?
JW: Yes.

RV: You lived together with her?
JW: Yes, ok. We couldn’t get on base because there wasn’t base housing for
students. So we lived in an apartment home.

RV: Were you able to adapt to that military lifestyle ok, the regimented lifestyle?
JW: Yes and no. Yes after a time. As a second lieutenant we went from there
after I finished the basic course we went to Ft. Rucker, Alabama, which was the Army
flight school. I went to flight school and decided I didn’t like it. When I resigned, got
out of flight school and went to Ft. Riley, Kansas in the 1st infantry division. We were
preparing to go to Korea. This was in 1961 at this time the Berlin Crisis came up. The
Cuban Crisis, primarily the Cuban Crisis. We got involved and the first infantry division
was scheduled to be the second American unit to hit the beach in Cuba if we invaded
Cuba. The Marines were going first and we were right behind them. We started out with
basic training. Basic training was normally eight weeks. We condensed that down to six
weeks. Advanced individual training which is the next course for the trainees is eight
weeks, we condensed that into five. Then it was just catch as catch can. Basic unit
training, advanced unit training. Advanced unit training. Army training tests. It was
really, really tough. We got all that behind us, the Cuban crisis went away. My wife, her
name is Gayle, G-A-Y-L-E. We talked and said, “No, maybe this is not for us. Maybe
it’s time for us to get out.” I was commissioned in the regular Army. You got a regular
Army commission and Reserve commission. As a reservist you were committed to two
years, active duty and six years reserve duty. If you accepted the regular Army
commission, which I did, you were committed to three years minimum. Then if you
resigned you had no reserve. I said, “Hey we’ve got three years in. I can resign my
commission. Let’s get out. I’ll go to school and get a teaching certificate and teach
school.” Ok, here come orders to Germany. Wait a minute! Let’s talk about this. When
will we ever get a chance to see Europe? So we decided to stay in. We went to
Germany. That was a three-year tour, we went over together.

RV: This is in 1963?

JW: 1963. We managed to get the current travel. Went over on a ship called the
U.S.N.S. Gallier. Heard later it was sunk about three times. It was a unique experience.
We kind of wanted to go over by boat but when we finished the tour we wanted to come
back by air. By this time, I was first lieutenant. Got into Germany, got into the unit 3rd
armored division and was promoted to captain and I got a command, company command.
That was the turning point. That’s when I said, “Hey this is the life for me.”

RV: Why did you think that?

JW: I loved command.

RV: What did you like about it?

JW: Feeling of power. “I am the company commander. I give the orders. You
listen to me, sergeant. You private have screwed up and I’m going to take 14 days pay
away from you. You’re going to have to perform extra duty for 14 days. I’m going to
reduce you one rank.” There’s nothing to compare with being a company commander.
Even higher-level commanders don’t compare with being a company commander. Like I
said that one-day.

RV: Were you a good leader do you think?

JW: Yes, I was an excellent leader. I loved my men and yet I demanded
perfection if you will. I said, “You give me your best. If your best doesn’t quite add up,
I’ll accept that as long as you’re giving me your best. Then I will take care of you.” I
really believe that. I really feel strongly that I took care of my men. But if you screwed
up, then I could come down hard on you. I never will forget John S. Miracle, one of my
troops.

RV: In Germany?

JW: In Germany. He was in my company. John went to Germany I think as an
E-4. When I knew him, he was an E-1. He had been busted all the way down. John got
a taste of the German nightlife and he loved it. So he’d just come and go as he pleased.
If he wanted to take off and be gone for three or four days, week, ten days, he’d just go.
What could you do to him? He was already an E-nothing. Couldn’t reduce him any
further. One day I got John back. He came back in and I said, “John, you’re not going to
go AWOL.” I had his platoon sergeant there. “Sergeant, I want you to go up and
inventory all of his military clothing, put them in a duffle bag, lock them up in the supply
room. Leave him one set of fatigues and his underwear. You will inventory all of his
civilian clothing. Put it in a duffle bag, lock it up in the supply room.” After the evening
meal the charter of quarters is then required [to get the uniform John is wearing], and we
put a special notice in the charge quarters instructors. He goes and gets John’s set of
fatigues and John has to run around the barracks in his underwear. Just before breakfast
the next morning the charge of quarters gives him back a set of fatigues.

RV: So that kept him on base?

JW: That kept him there, but he went to the inspector general. Now, if a troop
wants to go see the IG, there’s nothing you can do. You’ve got to let him go. Well, the
IG was located in Frankfurt, Germany. Where we were located about 35 miles north of
Frankfurt. Lived in a little town called Hoopsbarg. I could hear the IG scream all the
way from Frankfurt. “You can’t do that!”

RV: Talking to you?

JW: Talking to me. “You can’t do that!” I said, “Sir, I did.” “You can’t do that,”
he was a major and I was a captain. “Sir he didn’t go AWOL.” “You can’t do that.” Ok.
So I gave him back his clothes. Brought him in and I said, “John you beat me this time.
What are you going to do now?” He said, “Sir I ain’t going AWOL no more.” He didn’t
have but about six or eight weeks left before he rotated back to the States and got out of
the service.

RV: So, he learned?

JW: He learned I meant what I said and he didn’t go.

RV: Let me ask you a question going back to your basic and then going into Ft.
Rucker. Why did you choose to go into flying? You said you didn’t want to do that, why
not?

JW: I finished the basic flying course. I soloed. I flew. I could fly by myself. It
just didn’t sit right with me.

RV: Why not?
JW: I don’t know. That’s one of those things that it’s just a feeling. I just didn’t want to fly.

RV: You felt like you could do more for the Army on the ground or was it safer for you on the ground?

JW: I can’t answer that. I just don’t know. I just didn’t want to fly. Did I want to be an infantryman rather than an aviator, I don’t know. I just didn’t want to fly. I made that decision on my own. One of the first and last. Didn’t even talk to my wife about it. Just came in one day and said, “I don’t want to fly.”

RV: They respected that decision?

JW: Well, I had to go before a board of officers and I told them. “The past few weeks I have not enjoyed flying. I don’t want to fly.” “Ok.”

RV: So no problem?

JW: No problem.

RV: Then they sent you to Ft. Riley?

JW: They assigned me to Ft. Riley.

RV: What kind of weapons training did you have at Ft. Benning, Ft. Rucker?

JW: Ft. Benning we were trained on the M-1 rifle then, which was the basic rifle. The M-1 and M-2 carbine. The difference in the carbine: the M-1 is semi-automatic, the M-2 has a selector switch it can be fired full automatic. That’s the only difference in the two weapons. We fired the .45 caliber pistol, and we fired machine guns. We did some practice with the 106mm recoilless rifle. We never qualified in that weapon. They had a sub-caliber device that, the 106mm recoilless rifle, as the main gun and then a spotter rifle on top of it. You would fire at your target with a spotter rifle and it had a phosphorous round in it. When you’d see that you hit the target with that spotter rifle all you have to do is push. You pull to fire the spotter rifle and push. That main round was gone. When you saw that whit puff of smoke the main round was right behind it.

RV: Which was your favorite weapon through all your training? Which do you feel most comfortable with?

JW: I love shooting the machine gun. Of course that was never a weapon, an officer did not shoot the machine gun. I loved shooting that old .30 caliber machine gun.

RV: Were you pretty good with weapons, did you feel comfortable?
JW: I felt comfortable with them. I wasn’t anything exceptional with a weapon. I wasn’t a crack shot. Let’s see I fired. How did it go? Marksman was the lowest, sharpshooter, expert. I fired sharpshooter with the M-1 rifle. Really I think that’s the only weapon I qualified on. The rest of it was familiarization fire.

RV: Looking back at your training do you feel like you received adequate training, poor, fair or excellent? How would you rate it?

JW: Adequate to excellent. We had real good instructors. They did a good job, they were well trained to be instructors. It was primarily non-commissioned officers instructing I’ll say “wanna-be” officer even though we were commissioned second lieutenants. They did a real fine job.

RV: Do you think looking back they could have done anything better, differently for you once you got overseas and once you got into Vietnam?

JW: Yes, there was one thing prior to Vietnam. After Germany I came back and went to the infantry officer’s career course. I was a captain and went to the career course.

RV: This was at Ft. Benning?

JW: At Ft. Benning.

RV: 1966?

JW: Yes. There was about 200 students in my class. There were two categories of students. Those that just got back from Vietnam and those that were going to Vietnam. I fit in the second category.

RV: Did you know you were going?

JW: Yes.

RV: You felt pretty certain?

JW: Yes, no doubt about it. That’s where I was going. There were several things. I’ll get back to the weapons in just minute. The instructors, a lot of the instructors just got so old. “Pay attention gentleman because this instruction could save your life.” We got so tired of that. Anyway, after we completed the career curse and those of us that were going to Vietnam they took us out to a range and gave us an infantry carbine. We want you to zero this carbine. We fired on 1,000 range. It took about nine rounds to zero that carbine. Ok, now put the carbine over here and we’ll go over to another range and get another carbine that you’ve never had in your hands before and fire
for qualification. Ok fine, now you’re qualified with a carbine. You put it down and
we’ll send you to Vietnam and give you another weapon when you get over there.

RV: A different weapon?
JW: A different weapon. A carbine but a different weapon. You’ve never fired
it.

RV: Every gun zero is a little different. You set the windage and elevation and
you see it a little differently than I see it. The waste of time of having to zero one
weapon, qualify with another weapon and then pick up third weapon when we got to
Vietnam. Why not wait until we get to Vietnam and let’s do it all over there. Either that
or issue us that weapon and let us take it with us. You could not do that of course
because you were flying on civilian air.

RV: So that was a problem?
JW: It bothered me. I don’t think it was a real problem. It seemed like it was a
waste of time.

RV: Anything else about the training? You said it was fair or good to excellent.
Were these instructors World War II vets, Korean Vets that you know of?

JW: There were some of each and some Vietnam veterans.

RV: The Vietnam veterans specifically what do they tell you about Vietnam and
about preparations for going there?

JW: The thing that I remember most about how to function in Vietnam is don’t
set a pattern. You’ve got to vary the things that you do. Don’t do the same thing
everyday, every week at the same time. It just gets away from you. Because I did that.
A sniper picked out the American advisor; he didn’t pick out Jack Wright. He picked out
the American advisor and shot at me. That’s the only time I ever fired a shot in anger. I
was angry because that turkey shot at me twice. I shot at him 16 times. I never did see
him. Never did see him. He was out across a rice paddy about 300 meters out in the
woodline. I had an M-16 rifle this time. It was one we took away from a VC. That’s the
only M-16 rifle I saw in Vietnam was one we took away from the VC. Anyway I had it
lying across my lap. I flipped that thing on semi-automatic and was firing left-handed,
I’m a right-handed shooter. I went to shooting and I mean I was shooting all the way out
there. I shot 16 times.
RV: You don’t know if you hit him or not? Probably scared him though?

JW: Right. My assistant was driving and we were in a jeep. This was my mistake. When I got in country, went down to my district here was my jeep with the top on it. I said, “Wait a minute. You don’t have a top on a jeep in combat.” I had been taught this all my career. “Take that top off!” Of course my people there, “The Major has spoken.” So they took the top off. The Vietnamese had the tops off their jeeps. We had the same kind of jeep that they did. It took a while in Hoa Dong district for the guerillas, and that was our primary enemy at that time, to realize that that jeep without the top on it was the American advisor’s. When we were traveling down here in Tan Yut Village, driving down a wide rice paddy dyke is what it was. There were several Vietnam jeeps in front of me and behind me.

RV: They could easily see yours.

JW: They know exactly who was in that jeep without the top. You know what I did as soon as we got back?

RV: Took the tops off the other jeeps?

JW: Put the top on my jeep [laughs].

RV: Put the top on your jeep [laughs].

JW: Yes, I couldn’t make them take their tops off. During the rainy season we’d be out there and we’d be setting there in my jeep and getting soaking wet and the Vietnamese sitting there with their tops on. I didn’t have sense enough to say wait a minute. Training, that’s the way I had been trained. I did the things that I’d been trained to do, except I forgot, I set a pattern.

RV: You forgot to set a pattern?

JW: I forgot to not set a pattern. When I set the pattern of taking that top off, and my jeep run around without a top on it, it was clear who was in that jeep.

RV: Before you went to Vietnam how much did you know about American foreign policy, and what the United States was trying to do in Vietnam?

JW: Very little.

RV: Is that by choice or just by basically your lifestyle?
JW: Lifestyle. I’d heard about Vietnam. My company commander at Ft. Riley, Kansas wanted to go to Vietnam. Of course at this stage, it was still in an advisory capacity.

RV: That was ’61 to ’63 to ’64.

JW: Yes, but he wanted to go. Then I began to hear various things. Of course while I was in Germany in ’65 and ’66 it really began to heat up in Vietnam. I didn’t know whether I would be sent to Vietnam before the career course or after the career course. As the Lord would have it, it was after the career course. There were people that came to Germany, concurrent travel, brought their family with them, had their household goods en route, arrived in Germany and were handed orders to Vietnam. They had to leave. Here was their family without any father! All the household goods had to be shipped back. It was really a hardship on some people. It was not on my family.

RV: You got to go back to the States.

JW: We went back to the States, Ft. Benning and transitioned into getting my family settled. Actually settled them in Burk Burnett and then away I went.

RV: You said you’ve got them back to Burk Burnett?

JW: Yes.

RV: Tell me about your family how did Gayle feel about you going to Vietnam?

JW: That’s interesting. We both knew that was coming. Have you ever heard of the officer’s preference statement?

RV: Yes, I think so.

JW: Preference statement is when you’re first re-assigned, like to Germany you fill out a preference statement for a CONUS, Continental United States assignment. “I would rather go first choice, second choice, third choice.” For a short tour assignment which basically was Korea at that time. There were some other short tour areas but I don’t remember them. Basically Korea and then of course Vietnam was coming up. When I got to Ft. Benning to the career course I filed out the preference statement. Here’s where I want to go in CONUS. For the short tour area, I’ve never lost anything in Korea. Vietnam is the place to go. So, Vietnam was my first choice for a sort tour. Well, when my orders came down it stated on the orders, “You’re going to Vietnam. Officer is Vietnam volunteer.” When my wife read that she went right into orbit. “What do you
mean you volunteered?” Wait a minute. That’s the way I volunteered. The political
aspect of Vietnam if they could say, “Look how many volunteers we’ve got going.” That
looks a lot better than we’re having to just assign them there. So, I volunteered for
Vietnam.

RV: So she was not very happy about that?
JW: About the volunteering.
RV: Was she ok with you going over to Vietnam?
JW: Yes, we sat down and we talked about it. That’s what it’s all about. I don’t
know what the percentage is, but I may not come back except in a box. That’s the life we
chose. My government said it’s your turn. You go. It was just kind of the toss of a coin
as to whether I went into the military assistance command, the advisory capacity or to a
U.S. unit. Because the U.S. build-up was in ’65 or ’66. Because I was selected to go into
the advisory channel, I had a couple of other schools that I had to go to before I went [to
Vietnam] is the reason my career course ended I think in May of ’66. Then I went to
what they call the MATA course, Military Advisory something at Ft. Bragg, North
Carolina. I was at Ft. Bragg six weeks. Then I went for eight weeks to Ft. Bliss, Texas
for Vietnamese language training. Because of this training it was November before I
actually got in country, [November] ’67.

RV: Let me ask you about your career course at Ft. Benning. What was that
like?
JW: Sat through some long boring classes.
RV: What were they teaching you in the classrooms?
JW: You’ve got everything from weapons to tactics to nuclear, biological,
chemical warfare. Some of that aspect was actually classified secret. You couldn’t take
any notes. You had to listen. It was really kind of boring.
RV: Do you think it did you any good?
JW: Yes, we had some field training exercises. A three-day exercise, we’d go
out and we’d play the games. This guy was your battalion commander. For one
particular exercise I was the XO. These guys were your staff officers. Of course we
didn’t have any troops out. We were playing war/map exercises. The battalion
commander would do his thing. We would decide how we were going to attack and
defend and whatever we were going to do.

RV: How were you at that? Did you feel comfortable doing that, that sort of war
game?

JW: Yes. That’s what it was all about.

RV: Were they teaching you ambushes?

JW: Mostly attack and defend. Ambushes are on a much smaller level. I was
never taught an ambush. Let me retract that. Yes in the classroom. We never did any
ambushing in our field training exercises.

RV: When you went to Ft. Bragg what did they teach you there?

JW: How to be an advisor. That’s what they tried to teach you.

RV: Tried to teach you, why do you say tried?

JW: They would teach one thing. Let me concentrate on that just a minute as to
how I want to put that. There’s utopia; this is the way we would like it to be. Then
there’s the actuality on the ground. Of course personalities enter in. Your counterpart,
the guy that you’re supposed to be advising, how competent is he? The more competent
he is, the less advising you can do. About the only thing you can do and I ran into this
when I finally did get down to Hoa Dong district. About all I could do with that first
district chief that I had contact with was kind of coordinate the American effort. We had
an 01 bird dog observation airplane. When we were doing some of their little operations
we could get that observation airplane up. I could get maybe some supplies or equipment
that the Vietnamese had a hard time getting. You’d run into in a lot of cases the
Vietnamese would say, “Ok, you do it.” No, no, no that’s not what we’re here for.
We’re here to assist, you do it. Jumping ahead, because I’m getting into the time I was in
Vietnam. I cannot remember the general officer’s name but he was a one star general at
Corps level. You remember how I Corps, 1st Corps, 2nd Corps, 3rd Corps, 4th Corps was
in the Delta. He was at Corps level and he came down to visit. I almost fell out of my
chair. I couldn’t believe I was hearing this from that high a level. “We can’t trust these
people to do these things. We’ve got to get in there and do that for them.”

RV: He was saying this about his Vietnamese soldiers?

JW: Now he was an American.
RV: This is an American?

JW: This was an American general talking to low-level advisors. See, this was in

direct contravention to everything that we had been trained to do. You don’t do it for

them. You get them to do it. You assist them in doing it. He says, “We can’t trust these
guys to do that. You get in there and do it for them!” I couldn’t believe what I was

hearing.

RV: You were taught the opposite at Ft. Bragg?

JW: That’s right. That’s why I say there’s the utopia up here. There’s various

levels below that depending up on the personality of the leaders, of the Vietnamese, and

of course in this case, the American leader, a brigadier general saying exactly the

opposite of what the advisory courses are teaching in the States.

RV: It sounds like you really took your advising role very seriously and literally.

I am advising, I’m not doing.

JW: Absolutely. That’s what I was sent over there to do. I was sent over there to

be the district senior advisor, or at least that where I was assigned to whatever advisory

position I got. It wound up being the district senior advisor in Hoa Dong district, Gio

Linh Province. When I say I couldn’t do much advising when I got there the district chief

that was there had been there for eight or ten years. He knew everything about this

district.

RV: This is Vietnamese?

JW: Vietnamese, yes. He was a Vietnamese major, Nguyen Van Tien. Did you

ever learn how to say that N-G?

RV: Nguyen?

JW: Yes. That’s tough; there’s no comparable American sound. Anyway, he

had been there and he knew. He knew where the Vietnamese families lived, the good

guys. He knew where the VC families lived. He knew it. He knew the ins and outs of

everything about that district. He had been there that long. Very competent, very

competent. All I could do was just try to coordinate the American effort for him.

RV: This was your counterpart?

JW: This was my counterpart.
Before we get there and do that, let me ask a couple questions about before you went over to Vietnam. We talked about Ft. Bragg, what about Ft. Bliss?

JW: Vietnamese language training.

RV: How were you with Vietnamese? Was it hard for you to pick up?

JW: Yes, I picked up enough that I could get along. With my broken Vietnamese and their broken English, we could communicate. One of these very close friends, a Vietnamese sergeant Sang, S-A-N-G, he didn’t speak much English but he spent a lot of time at our house. He loved to come over to my team house to visit and play dominos. We could communicate. I’m sorry to say that I didn’t learn more Vietnamese. I’m just slow at picking up a foreign language. I had Spanish in college and it was very difficult for me. I knew enough that we could communicate.

RV: It didn’t really impede your job in Vietnam is what you’re saying?

JW: Pardon me?

RV: It didn’t really impede your job in Vietnam?

JW: No.

RV: They could speak good enough English, you could speak good enough Vietnamese to communicate.

JW: Yes. The final district chief that I worked with did not speak much English. He spoke fluent French. I don’t speak French.

RV: How did you get to the advising track? You said there was two tracks, basically assigned to an American infantry company whatever and then go to the advisory. How did you go to the advisory side?

JW: Because in that great headquarters in the sky.

RV: Washington D.C.?

JW: I guess when they threw the dart it hit “advisor.” That’s all.

RV: You were just assigned that?

JW: Yes.

RV: You were never told why. Yours is not the reason why. Yours is but to do or die. That was what my orders said. Actually, I’m glad. I could have never had the experiences if I hadn’t have been there. It would have been a whole different ball game being assigned to an American combat unit. You know if they had advisors down to
battalion level, this is the regular South Vietnamese Army. Why I went into the district
level, I don’t know. That’s what I wanted in my heart. But I never did have any one ask
me, “Major Wright do you want here or there?” “You’re going here.” Boom. When I
got to Go Quao before I was ever assigned that, I could have been maintained right there
at sector headquarters. Do you know what sector, how it corresponds to province?
RV: Yes, I do but why don’t you go ahead and say it for the record, so that
people listening to this would know.
JW: Sector in the same as province. If you called it a sector operation that’s
dealing with a military operation. If you say it’s a province function, then you might say
a civilian function. So, I was not only the district senior advisor in Hoa Dong district, but
I was the sub-sector advisor on the military side.
RV: So you handled everything?
JW: Yes.
RV: Did you like that?
JW: Yes, very much so. Most of my sub-sector duties when we’d run a sector
operation, sector would put together two or three companies. They called them regional
force companies. They would take a Vietnamese officer off the staff at sector level and
make him the battalion commander for this particular operation. If it was in my district
then I would go out as his advisor. We’d function/work the operation throughout the
district. Very seldom did I ever go on a military operation with my district chief. More
often than not it was a single day operation, we’d start in the morning and come back in
the evening. Occasionally we got caught out at night. Two times I liked to have got
eaten up by mosquitoes because I didn’t go out prepared to spend the night. Anyway,
because of the operation and the way things were going we were required to spend the
night.
RV: Leaving Ft. Bliss did you have some time home with Gayle?
JW: Yes.
RV: You had one child at this point or more?
JW: I had three at this time.
RV: Three, so you were able to spend some time with the family before you went
over. How long did they give you?
JW: I think I had about 30 days from the time I finished Ft. Bliss until I actually had to leave.

RV: How did you spend that time?

JW: Getting settled in the house in Burkburnett, getting bank accounts squared away, getting military pay squared away so she was getting sufficient money to survive. Being with the family.

RV: How did you feel when the day came that you had to leave?

JW: Well, it’s time to go. This is what I’ve trained for six, eight years since ’60, seven years. It’s time to leave.

RV: Very duty oriented.

JW: Yes, I had no problem. I don’t think Gayle had any problem.

RV: She understood as well?

JW: Yes. Flew out of Dallas to the San Francisco area. We drove to Dallas, spent the night in a hotel. The next morning I got up, got on the airplane and I flew out and she drove back home. Began to write letters.

RV: How was that flight out of San Francisco? Was this a civilian or military flight?

JW: It was what they called a Flying Tiger Line. I believe it was a 707. It had been stretched. There was about 200 of us on there. It was tight. Little bitty seats. There was about, I think, five to the side, ten across. Of course you had your civilian stewardess, flight attendants they called them then. It seemed like about the time you managed to get a little sleep it was time to eat again. We flew from San Francisco out of the Air Force Base there, can’t remember the name of it to Alaska. Anchorage, re-fueled, got off the airplane for a few minutes. Then we flew to Hawaii, then we flew into Long Binh Base I believe. Then we flew into Saigon.

RV: Into Tan Son Nhut?

JW: Then they bussed us downtown to Koppler Compound. That’s where we did all of our in-processing.

RV: Before we get there, what was the mood on the airplane flying over?

JW: Near festive.

RV: Really?
JW: There wasn’t any “Oh, I’m about to die. I’m going to combat.” I never did see any of that, never did.

RV: Well, when you got into Tan Son Nhut, what did you think about Vietnam, first impressions when you got off the airplane?

JW: Good gravy. Look at the level of their lives, you know, the shanties in downtown Saigon. Koppler Compound was right in downtown Saigon. It was a cultural shock. I had never seen anything like that.

RV: What was your rank were you a major?

JW: I was captain when I got there. We were enduring the in-processing. You had to fill out all kinds of paperwork. During the course of filling out that paperwork a warrant officer came in and said, “Captain Wright?” “Yes, what do you want?” “Don’t fill out anything else as Captain. You’re a major.”

RV: So you got promoted right away?

JW: Yes. I had been promoted two or three days before but it finally caught up. So I went to put on my gold leaf and I was a big tough feel great officer.

RV: Besides noticing the impoverishment of the country what else did you notice about Vietnam, the Vietnamese civilians, the country itself when you first arrived.

JW: The traffic flow, the people. There were just people everywhere. If you had a vehicle you drove with your horn blasting all the time. Trying to get people out of your way. The rickshaws, the bicycles, the little cushman buses with people hanging allover them. I’m trying think of the word. The confusion, it just seemed to be mass confusion. I guess they knew where they were going but I didn’t.

RV: What do you know about what America was doing in Vietnam when you arrived, what were you told? What was the goal for America?

JW: Our goal was to, as I understood it was to make these people self-sufficient so that they could do for themselves and maintain a democracy in their own country versus the Communists of the North. We wanted to get them to the point to where they could do that. That’s where we failed miserably.

RV: Did you believe that could be done? Did you believe in that goal?

JW: Yes. Yes, I certainly did.

RV: Did that continue throughout your tour there, your first tour?
JW: Yes.

RV: Did you find that the other men with you, the other Americans also understood what America was doing in Vietnam and why they were there?

JW: Yes. I believe so. That’s not something that we can really sit down and discuss. I never ran into anyone that didn’t think they ought to be there.

RV: How much time did you spend there in Saigon before you went to your district?

JW: I don’t remember exactly. Three or four days.

RV: What was involved in those three or four days?

JW: Mostly in-processing and being issued equipment. You got issued your weapon there. The M-14 rifle was the rifle that the American units were using at that time. Those advisors or not advisors, those people that were going to American units they got the M-14 rifle. We got the M-2 carbine. And in the in-processing it just seemed like that thing just went on forever, the paperwork that you had to fill out, getting allotments and things for your family. One point I actually saw it on TV part of I believe the Superbowl game.

RV: Really?

JW: No, it wasn’t because this was in November. Anyway it was an NFL game.

RV: Football.

JW: They’d have been playing two or three days before. I just watched it.

RV: I’m going to take a break. Ok, Jack let’s continue. I just wanted to mention we have your map here in front of us. This is your original map that you had with you in Vietnam?

JW: Yes. I had a copy. This is a map that I sent to my wife through the mail. When I said, “We’re here, here or here.” She could kind of follow along. She wanted to know everything about what I was doing, what was going on in my life in Vietnam. So I sent her this map.

RV: Great. So when you wrote her and said I spent x- amount of day here and there. She could look on there and tell exactly where you were.
JW: In some cases I attached overlays to the letter so that she could put the
overlay on there and see exactly where the military operation went that I was tethered
around.

RV: So the Army sensors had no problem with this, or did they know about it?

JW: I stand on the fifth [laughs].

RV: That’s great that you go the information to her. So she could really follow
what you’d done.

JW: I was never told specifically I couldn’t do that. I never asked. Because once
the operation was completed. It was never classified in the first place. [I never sent her
anything until the operation was completed].

RV: We also have your letters from your first tour and your second tour with us
here.

JW: This is the first tour.

RV: How often did you write?

JW: I wrote virtually everyday. I didn’t mail a letter everyday. Here’s the
primary road to Go Cong. This road was never crowded. This road was not open
everyday. We couldn’t get to Go Cong just anytime we wanted to.

RV: Because of the weather?

JW: Because of the Vietcong. And if this road wasn’t open we couldn’t get to
Go Cong. We could get to Go Cong three to five times a week.

RV: How far is that? How long is that distance?

JW: About 15 miles.

RV: Dirt road I’m assuming.

JW: Well, it was some what paved. One two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight,
nine, ten, about 12 kilometers, which is about 10 miles.

RV: So whenever you could go from what’s the name of the small town here?

Vinh Binh?

JW: Vinh Binh, yes.

RV: You could go from there to Go Cong? That’s where you could mail you
letters?
JW: Yes, we’d mail, pick up. This was our main supply base. We could pick up food. They had a commissary there. You have to buy the food and prepare it here. Well there was few occasions when we did travel that road when there had to be a road clearing operation. Now road-clearing operation we sent troops down that road from various locations to be sure there wasn’t any mines in the road, there wasn’t any ambushes along the road. That’s a road clearing operation.

RV: These are ARVN forces you’re sending out?

JW: No. Let me take a minute and explain the level of the troops in Vietnam. Your lowest level troops are your popular force, PF, troops. They received about six weeks of training, issued a weapon and sent back to their home where they lived.

RV: These villages, small villages?

JW: Village, out in the middle of nowhere, wherever they lived. The idea was that these people would do their rice farming during the day and then man outposts or whatever during the night.

RV: How often did that happen? Did they actually man an outpost with a weapon?

JW: Frequently. There was a lot of outposts. We had a lot of outposts. When they manned the outpost, they lived there. Their family was in there with them. These are mud burms. They lived there. These were your popular forces. Their pay was somewhat equivalent to less than $30 a month. Your next level then was your regional forces, RF. Your popular forces were organized no higher than platoon level. About 35 men. Your regional forces received more training a little higher caliber, higher class weapon and were organized in companies. There was about 100 men in a regional force company. They were usually located within their home province or home district. For example, we had, I don’t remember how many PF platoons we had scattered throughout Hoa Dong district, but we had one regional force company. They were co-located with the district headquarters. They had their own compound just adjacent to the district compound. This was our regional force company.

RV: What weapons did the PF forces have? What were they issued?

JW: M-1 carbines.

RV: How about the RF forces?
JW: Basically the same thing. They had some of the M-1 rifles. Some of the VC weapons that we took away. Primarily were the old M-1 rifles.

RV: How much contact did you have with the PF forces? Did you go visit them and make sure everything was ok?

JW: That was one of our biggest things that we did was to move throughout where we could to visit our troops. To show our support to our troops that we’re out here in these lonely mud huts if you will.

RV: When you say go visit the troops was it just you and your South Vietnamese forces with you or was there more than you just one American?

JW: No. I very seldom ever went out alone. I would go out with my district chief. When he went out, I knew it was safe to go with him. I accompanied him whenever we’d go throughout the district to visit, to make his presence known. Like I said, this first district chief all I did was follow around like a little puppy dog.

RV: This was an American or this was a Vietnamese?

JW: This was Vietnamese. District chief is Vietnamese.

RV: So you were the only American out on some of these?

JW: I had part of my team with me. I think I was authorized a seven-man team. When I got there there was an assistant, a medic and a radio operator. Later on we got an operations sergeant, then the district assistant senior advisor and me. There was four or five of us there all the time.

RV: Just wanted to kind of get clear exactly what it is.

JW: Two or three of us would go, accompany him. We’d jump in our jeep and go with the district chief. The district chief depending upon where we were going he always had his bodyguards with him. He had 10 specially selected, handpicked bodyguards. The district chief would get in his jeep and they were hanging all over that jeep. All 10 of them got on that jeep somewhere with the district chief.

RV: How many Vietnamese or ARVN troops would go out with you on average?

JW: Like I say, depended on where you were going. If we’re going close, it’d be just the 10 bodyguards. Sometimes we’d take one or two platoons, 30 to 60 men with us. They’d jump on an old truck and here we go. Depending on where we were going, how far we were going and how long he planned to be out. We loved to go up here to this
village on this river Dong Toi in Dong Son Village. That was through contested territory. We had Vietnamese controlled territory, VC controlled territory, and contested territory. The contested territory was the territory that the Vietnamese owned in the daytime and the Vietcong owned at night.

RV: Before we get in more detail on that, continue popular forces, regional forces and then is that it that you had to deal with?

JW: No. Your next level is your Army of Vietnam, ARVN forces. They received basically the same type training that American type troops received, basic training, advanced individual training. At least that was the goal. I was never with those people so I don’t know how much training they actually did receive. They had the high level equipment. The best equipment. They had radios, communications equipment. We saw very few of those.

RV: Very few of the ARVN?

JW: Yes, in this area. At some point, mid-1968 we had elements of the U.S. 9th infantry division come into Go Cong province to conduct some operations.

RV: Why don’t you go ahead and say what exactly your job was as it was explained to you and then what it was in reality for you, what you had to do on a daily basis.

JW: As I recall basically the school program was that you are there to primarily advise and assist your Vietnamese counterpart in his daily operation. As a sub-sector advisor, this was the military. How you advance, how you move, how you deploy your troops. As a district senior advisor was to assist in the pacification and that’s a good term. Pacification of the countryside, the civilian operations. We were I’ll say, somewhat instrumental in getting supplies and needed material for schools, primarily the schools, bridges, road repair. That’s what, that’s the way we were taught. When you got down there you just had to move very slowly. Especially with this first district chief. He had been there a long time, he had a lot of American advisors. If you crossed him he’d get rid of you. All he had to do was go to his next higher headquarters in the Vietnamese chain and they would go right to the province level advisor and they’d jerk you out of there. I never did see this, but I know that happened. I moved very carefully and tried to work with him. It takes a long time to win the confidence of the Vietnamese. Especially those
That have been there a long time like Major Tien had. So I had to move very carefully. Kind of tiptoe around. I didn’t really win his confidence until just a few weeks before he was be medevaced and never came back. He was wounded and was medevaced out. He never came back. I was just beginning to get some rapport with him.

RV: Why did you say it was hard to gain their trust?
JW: I don’t know why they had distrust of Americans?
RV: Was it just Americans or westerners?
JW: Just Americans. I didn’t see any other--There were some other westerners at province level but I had very little contact with them. I really think they had the impression that we were wanting to take over and run their country for them. This was what was tearing some of us advisors up. We were taught, “No, we’re not trying to take over.” Yet here’s this general officer saying, “You take over.” I didn’t want to run his district. I didn’t want to be the boss of his district or his sub-sector. I wanted to assist him. In some cases, not in major Tien’s case but specifically the man that was the temporary district chief between Major Tien and Major Sang, you do it for me. I don’t have the order I can’t do it. You do it. That was a rough period. Again, it’s that utopia and what’s actually on the ground. It’s personalities. I had a very strong district chief. Hoa Loc for example, over in this area had a weak district chief. The American advisors there, he ran that district Hoa Loc. This district chief over here was a first lieutenant. My district chief was a major. He [the Lieutenant] was young and inexperienced. That advisor because of his strong personality, he did a lot of things over there that I could never do here.

RV: Did it cause bad problems between the two of you? Did you ever have to coordinate your forces with his forces?
JW: No, never did. The coordination was normally done at province level. When they were going to run a province exercise in my district they had pulled together a regional force company from here, a regional force company from here. And then my regional force company. Maybe they’d get three PF platoons and they’d pick somebody [a Vietnamese officer from the district] to be a PF company commander of Vietnamese. Then we’d have three or four companies in an operation in Hoa Dong district. That’s when I became the advisor to the subsector operation.
RV: You would help coordinate their movements and what they needed to do?
JW: Yes, as best as I could. This was all done in province headquarters. We’d get the copies of the overlays there. I keep thinking I’m going to run into one of those. We just went along with them, got your mortars, ammunition, communications. Yes, everything’s ready. Here we go. Many of these operations especially early on were just a walk in the hot sun. Go in here and come back out.
RV: What exactly would you do when say you went in there?
JW: I guess they were similar to what they call search and destroy operations. We were going in hoping to flush out VC, the guerillas, and kill or capture. It’s just that simple. Kill or capture. In Hoa Dong district, we had better luck with ambushes that we did with high-level operations.
RV: Stuff that you set up? Ambushes that you set up personally or your guys did it at your level?
JW: At my level. My district chief set them up. He trained his own people. He would bring in his civilian cadre, village chief, hamlet chief and give them military type training, and they were just civilians. These were elected positions. He would try to give them military type training. He would put his people out in ambush positions. We had a lot of success. When I say a lot of success, maybe during the time I was there our ambushes killed our captured 15 or 20 VC. That was a bunch because of the type of enemy we were fighting.
RV: So you r success was based on the body count?
JW: Yes. Body count. One night one of our ambushes scored and they brought in a civilian type hat that had a human brain in it. Well, ok you get a kill for that.
RV: Did you keep a chart of how many killed, how many wounded enemy?
JW: I didn’t. The district chief did. Then whenever we would have to brief someone [he furnished], we had the charts with the figures on it. How many, going back about six or eight years, bad guy losses versus good guy losses. VC versus friendly troops.
RV: Did the district chief or anybody that you know of ever inflate those numbers to make it look like you were having more success?
JW: Not during my tour there.
RV: Did you hear about that happening?

JW: Yes, I heard about it. That was more up in the northern areas than down here. I’ve said this before. This is one of the most pacified areas in country at that time. Our province senior advisor was a civilian. His assistant was the military man. You get up into the less pacified region, your province senior advisor is the military man and his assistant in a civilian.

RV: Right.

JW: So we have a civilian sitting here. His assistant, deputy province advisor was my boss. But he [the civilian] was my boss’ boss. I had some good rapport if you will with the province senior advisor. I had better communications with the civilian than I did with my boss.

RV: How did the other Americans that were with you there how did they get along with the Vietnamese forces?

JW: Like me, very well. With the people that we lived with and we had contact with we loved them and they loved us.

RV: So you had good rapport with these people. I guess that really aided your operations.

JW: Yes. For the first several months I had better rapport with the people than I did with the district chief. He was rather aloof.

RV: Major Tien?

JW: Major Tien. Because he had been there so long, he was of the opinion that he wasn’t going to be there much longer. He was going to be transferred. He didn’t know where. I think the province would have been in good hands if they had promoted him and made him the province chief. But they didn’t do that because he was wounded and shipped out and I lost track of him.

RV: How was he wounded?

JW: That’s kind of interesting too. The only real mortar attack that we came under in Vinh Binh city, the mortars were set up somewhere here in what we called the Coconut Grove. As you can see this is VC controlled territory.

RV: Let me just say you’re pointing a little bit southwest of Vinh Binh City.
JW: Yes, they set up their mortars. We saw this from the air. Flew over the area after it happened. There was a rice paddy dyke that was pointed right straight at the district headquarters. Just as straight as you could point your finger. They set their mortar up there. Either five or seven rounds that they got in the air before the first one ever landed, you know a mortar is a high angle of fire weapon. Boy they pumped those rounds in there and then they grabbed the mortar and run. Those rounds never did get inside the district compound. One of them hit just outside the wall, the cement block wall that was around the district compound. The district chief’s house set here and his headquarters, district headquarters was here. There was a tin roof breezeway. So the district chief would come out of his house and get into his office or into his tactical operations center without getting wet during the rainy season. Somehow a little piece of shrapnel got up under that tin roof and we could see the mark where it ricocheted down and caught the district chief right in here. As he was going from his house to his tactical operations center.

RV: In his upper chest.

JW: Upper chest, yes.

RV: Right side.

JW: He went down. I was notified real quick. I grabbed my medic and there were still explosions going on. We rushed over there. My medic ripped his shirt off. The shirt off where he could see what it was and treated it as a sucking chest wound although it wasn’t. It never did get into the lung. We had to treat it that way. As soon as I saw what was happening, having my medic give him the immediate first aid I went back and got on my radio. I called province headquarters and I said, “I need a medevac. My chief is down.” Province said, “Ah you can’t--We haven’t got,” and about that time someone cut in. Someone was a Navy armed helicopter. We called them sea wolf. They operated up and down these rivers frequently. That pilot cut in, cut province off, “This is sea wolf” whatever his call sign was “I’ve got to get some people off here. I’ll be there in 15 minutes. Be prepared to pop smoke.” Man we grabbed that chief and went out of the north edge of the town here to an open area. Her comes sea wolf and man we popped smoke. You don’t tell what color smoke you’re going to pop. We popped a smoke grenade and he said, “I see green smoke” or whatever it was. “That’s us come on in.”
Within 15 minutes we had that wounded district chief on his way to a U.S. hospital in My Tao. They took care of him. It wasn’t nearly as serious as it could have been. But we didn’t know. We treated it as very serious. My stock went up several levels in the Vietnamese eyes in this town because I took care of their district chief. But the Vietnamese, when they lose a leader they don’t know what to do. They don’t have the, what am I trying to say? The initiative that American troops do. If the sergeant goes down, someone will step up and take his place. If the lieutenant goes down they won’t do that. By the time I got back to he district compound after getting the chief medevaced out, here were soldiers wondering around with what do I do now? Coming out of the fighting positions, the defensive positions around that district headquarters. Our chief’s gone, what are we going to do now? This is where that communication came in. I grabbed that Vietnamese sergeant literally, grabbed his collar. I said, “Sergeant Son if you don’t get those people back in those fighting positions I’ll get a stick and I’ll get them back in there!” I mean he turned around and went to shouting. Literally I saw people go in headfirst. They dove back into those fighting positions. Someone had to take command. I told my boss the next day I said, "I got a little command time in yesterday.” When the leader goes down, they don’t know what to do.

RV: Right. Did you find that pretty consistent throughout your tour?

JW: Yes, I did.

RV: These are regional forces?

JW: Pardon me?

RV: Were these regional forces there?

JW: No, these were popular forces.

RV: Those were popular forces guarding the city.

JW: When that mortar attack started we had a .60mm mortar, an .81mm mortar, and of course all kinds of small arms: machine guns and rifles and what have you. When that attack, when those rounds landed we answered. I can’t remember how many, several hundred-mortar rounds [.60mm .81mm] literally several hundred rounds. One of our outposts on the southeastern edge of the city, we had to resupplied them with small arms ammunition because they had expended so much and I never did see anybody. They knew about where it came from. Oh my gosh, the shooting was going on [laughs].
RV: Why don’t you tell me what your typical mission was like when you would go out on an operation? First of all would you do them mostly during the day?

JW: Yes.

RV: How long typically would they last? Would you leave say, in the morning and come back before sundown or what?

JW: Most of the time that’s the way it was. We would go out, and I’ll called it a search and destroy operation. It was more search than destroy because we had very little contact. We would gather our forces together at a pre-determined location. We would start moving and we would go to various objectives. We would go through and very few times did we ever have any major contact. We never did have any major contact.

RV: What was the average contact that you would have?

JW: You mean the average number of contacts?

RV: Yes, well that too. The average what was it like, the average unit? One or two shots fired?

JW: Yes.

RV: And that was it?

JW: Yes. One or two shots fired. There was exceptions to that. The first time that we went out and had to stay over night I probably got that overlay there somewhere. We went in and got along a river line somewhere. A boatload of VC were trying to get across that river. All of us were shooting. Our guys weren’t very good shots. They weren’t but 150 yards or so out there. They couldn’t hit them. They were shooting BARs, rifles, machine guns. They still got across the river.

RV: Did you fire at any of your Americans fire?

JW: No.

RV: Why not?

JW: Why? They're shooting enough.

RV: You figured they would probably hit something.

JW: Even though I had a rifle an M-2 carbine, most of the time I’d leave it back at the compound. Someone had come up with a .38 caliber revolver. I felt like I was John Wayne. I had my six-gun on my hip.

RV: That’s what you’d go in the field with most of the time?
JW: Yes, I would carry that. After we captured that M-16 rifle I carried it. Had it out that time when I shot it. I would carry a pistol. I wasn’t out there to fight. I was out there to advise. I would try to move the people around when they were shooting. “Move up a little closer.” It got frustrating sometimes. That was one of the major contacts that we had. We probably killed five or six Vietnamese in that operation. We got hung up and had to stay out overnight. We were going through mud. I got in mud literally up to here.

RV: You’re pointing to just below your waist.

JW: Yes, just below my waist. I couldn’t get my legs up. I was trying to get out and a Vietnamese came up and I reached out. He pulled and broke me over. I liked to drown before I could get back up. That’s the kind of thing that we were in. In this particular operation we had to cross a smaller river. Actually my operations sergeant, an E-6 was carrying the radio. I don’t know where my RTO was. I ran one RTO off and maybe I hadn’t got a replacement yet. But he was carrying the radio. We went across this little old stream. I say little old stream, he went completely under. Of course that wiped out he radio. We had no contact with province headquarters. The Vietnamese did.

RV: How many operations did you actually conduct during a tour there? Do you remember or ball park? Was it like 2 or 300 or 25.

JW: Closer to 25 that I actually participated in.

RV: Were you able to call in American assets, airpower if you needed it?

JW: Not during any of the operations. We have that observation aircraft up and may contact him and get him to check things out. We got something off over here vicinity coordinates such and such. Of course he had his map and he’d go check out things for us. We like to lost an American radio operator on one of the operations through exhaustion. I can’t tell you where it was but it was in my district. I was out as the battalion advisor. He went down and we lost contact with him. I never will forgive those people that were out there with him, the Americans and they left him.

RV: A wounded American?

JW: He wasn’t wounded, he was just exhausted. In fact, he had passed out. They stayed with their Vietnamese counterpart and left this RTO there. I knew where they were coming out of the operational area. I stayed there until after dark until I saw
that RTO come out. The Vietnamese brought him out. He was completely unconscious. They had put a sling type affair on a stick of some kind. You know big enough to carry his weight and they carried him out.

**RV:** Why did the Americans leave him?

**JW:** I can’t answer that. I don’t know. I know if I’d been their boss, they’d have been missing some parts of their backside. I just could not believe that they’d run off and leave him. When that kid came out I saw that he was taken care of and then I went on home.

**RV:** What would you go out in the field with? You said you had your .38 with you. What else would you carry?

**JW:** Always use to carry some C-rations. Wear a flak vest. Sometimes a flak vest got too hot and heavy so I’d leave it home. Never did were a steel pot. I always wore soft canvas bush hat. I liked that.

**RV:** Were you ever worried about snipers? Obviously you relayed that one incident where you were shot at?

**JW:** No. That’s part of the game, if you will. You learn to live with danger. You’re in a combat zone. It is dangerous. If you dwell on those kind of things, you’re going to lose your mind. You’re going to go crazy. For example, when we did get shot at down here. The sniper fired two shots. One of them passed overhead because I could hear the crack of the bullet as it was breaking the sound barrier. It’s a very distinct crack. The second one went and punctured the rear tire over on this side. This Vietnamese sergeant friend of mine was sitting there with his feet over that tire. It went right between his legs. Well, when it happened, I went to shooting. I turned to my assistant who was driving I said, “Di, di, di, di!” That’s go, as you know, in Vietnamese. I was yelling, “Di di!” And he was yelling at me, “Keep shooting! Keep shooting!” As we got on down the road a short piece there was an old French built armored car behind us mounted on rubber, four wheels with twin .30 caliber machine gun turret on the top. He swung that turret over and he went to firing out in that vicinity. The driver was more interested in watching out here and ran off of the dyke and turned over. The only injury on that contact, we had some troops further up the road here. As that armored car went over and he was falling, he kept his hands on the trigger. He was holding on, and wounded one of
our troops out there. When we got back to our house, we sat around and laughed about it. 

Ha ha ha. You don’t sit around and say, “Oh, my gosh did you see how close that was?”

At the angle I could see that second round coming. It was a tracer. I could see it. If we 
hadn’t have been moving forward it would have caught me somewhere in this area.

That’s about the height it came in.

RV: You’re pointing to your right waist.
JW: Yes.

RV: Right side waist.
JW: Yes, somewhere in the hip area or maybe even up into the abdominal cavity area. I didn’t set around and cry, “Oh my Lord, look how close.” I was hollering at you, “di, di.” “Yes, I was hollering at you to keep shooting.” You don’t sit around and mope about it. That’s what you’re getting paid for. I trained for seven years to get into something like this. I wanted to see if I had been trained well. I think I had. I felt confident in what I was trying to do.

RV: Did your troopers; did they have confidence in you? Did this confidence go back and forth?

JW: Yes. We would sit down and discuss the pros and cons of what we were trying to do. After Tet 1968 I got my team together and we said, look if we’re going to be overrun what are we going to do? Well, try to get into Go Cong? How? There’s no way. If we’re being overrun and if we’re going to be overrun its going to come from a southerly direction. Actually this was a VC, Vietcong R&R area down here is in this Coconut Grove. This is where it’s going to come. The chances of us getting into Go Cong were two: slim and none. We said we’ll sty here with our friends. We will fight along side them and if we get killed so be it. We agreed. This is what we’re going to do. We had a big bunker built on to our house. We said, “Ok when you’re next to rotate out to go home, then you’ll move out of the house into the bunker. You can sleep in that bunker.” Because if a mortar round or RPG rocket propelled grenade hits our house we’re going to all be wounded at least, if not killed. Our house had a metal frame, but it had the bamboo coverings. You get to move in there to sleep if you want to. None of us ever did. We agreed upon that. I was the boss; they knew I was the boss, but we sat down and we talked. I had a real good team.
RV: What were your living quarters like?
JW: I’ve got some pictures of them. Like I say it was a metal frame house.
About 2/3 of the way up was a wood wall and then screened. It had to be open for ventilation. Then the bamboo roof. Hoa Dong district, Hoa Dong, Vinh Binh City, my headquarters there was the R&R center of the Go Cong province. People loved to come down there. The town had a diesel-powered generator and supplied electricity to the town. We paid about $30 a month for our electricity. But we had electricity, we had ceiling fans. We had oscillating fans. We had a, our refrigerator was one of the old kerosene fired refrigerators. Have you ever seen one of those?
RV: No I have not.
JW: They’re quite old. It was old. The kerosene fire somehow through that system, gave us freezer. We could make ice and keep our food cool. We had propane for our kitchen stove. Our Vietnamese houseboy was our cook. Oh, he was good.
RV: All the Americans lived together in this one place?
JW: Yes, we had that one house. As you went in that was basically the office area until we got our bunker completed. Then we moved the office and radios out to the bunker. That was our office area and out living room. We had a TV. We got TV from Saigon. Oh, it’d come on about 3:00 in the afternoon and went to about 10:00 at night. We’d watch TV. Remember the TV series Combat? We’d watch Combat. If you watch Combat so many nights, then you go to CIB. 12:00 High? They took 12:00 High off just before we had enough time to get the air medal.
RV: What other programs, did you see news programs?
JW: Yes, they had news. They’d wind up every night with a news broadcast and weather report for the Vietnam area. Then the R&R areas, Thailand and then the final part, just before they’d go off the air, they’d have flight. Fly amongst the clouds, touch the face of God and then the National Anthem. That was it for the night.
RV: Were you able to keep up with news back in the United States at all?
JW: Yes, but I have very few memories of that because I didn’t want to know what they were doing. The things they were doing were so contrary to everything I believed in.
RV: You’re talking about the anti-war protests?
JW: The anti-war, yes. I just didn’t want to hear it. If I don’t hear it, then it’s not happening. Probably not a good philosophy. I was busy and I had things to do. I believed in what I was doing. I believed in my government. I believed in following orders, not to the extent of the Nazis in World War II. I would never do that. But the Vietnamese did it.

RV: What do you mean?

JW: I saw some very harsh treatment of POWs during the course. Especially one of the operations. That particular operation, where we caught the VC going across the river, we captured a VC. They put a rod between his, had his hands back here. He was down on his knees. They had a pistol to his head. They were trying to get some information out of him. All of a sudden one of the Vietnamese kicked him right in the face. Just kicked him. I got on the radio as quick as I could and said, “You better get someone down here to get this guy out,” talking to the Americans. “Get this guy out of here or they’re going to kill him.” Well they did.

RV: They killed him.

JW: No, no they got him out. That was one time that the province responded to me and got there. I believe his name was Ruth, Major Ruth. He was a major, got promoted to lieutenant colonel and he because the deputy province advisor when the other province advisor rotated out. He came in a helicopter and extracted that prisoner and got him out of there.

RV: He probably would have been killed.

JW: No doubt in my mind.

RV: Anything else you see that was like that?

JW: Yes and it was rather disgusting. On one of the operations somewhere in this area of Hoa Dong district.

RV: You’re pointing to the northeast.

JW: Yes, the northeast sector. We’d been out all day. We’d had no contact since early morning. People get tired and lax. A couple of our soldiers, there was one of the Vietnamese houses, grass roof, grass sides. They went up to the front door and they caught a belly full of fire [VC rifle fire].

RV: The popular forces guys went up to the front door.
JW: Yes, they were careless. They just walked up to that door and there was two VC in there. They just shout through the door and cut them both down. We managed to get them out and one of them died. The other was seriously wounded. Of course we went to putting a heavy volume of fire into that house. In all of the Vietnamese houses over in one corner of the house they had one of these thick walled mud bunkers. Because they never knew when someone was going to be shooting. The family would go in there. The two VC managed to get in there. We found out later that one of them was severely wounded and died in there. The other one would stay back in a corner there. When the firing would let up he’d run out and shoot through the wall with an automatic weapon, AK-47. [blam, blam, blam]. He wasn’t shooting up there. Let me tell you he wasn’t shooting up there because another dumb stunt that a foolish American did. Actually my intention was good. I was trying to find a way to get this guy, capture him. I crawled, literally crawled on my belly up behind a little old rice paddy, a little old dyke about this high and was looking in it [at the house]. He went to shooting. I mean I went down as low as I could get. Dirt was literally coming over that dyke and hitting me on the head and the back. I decide that wasn’t any place for me and I got out of there. Well, we had no way to set that building on fire. We tried tracers and it wouldn’t do it. An ARVN battalion, Vietnamese regular force battalion came onto the scene about that time. They had one thermite grenade. A thermite grenade you know is a burning grenade. It was decided that one soldier would crawl up as close as he could get to the house while we’re putting a heavy volume of fire into that house to keep the Vietnamese head down. He gets up as close as he can crawl. We stop the fire. He runs up a few steps and throws that grenade all the way over the house.

RV: Oh, no.

JW: As luck would have it, as it passed over the top of the house a piece of the burning element, fell out and set the house on fire. The house burns fast, that dry bamboo. It’s fully engulfed. The VC, the one live VC comes running out. He’s literally on fire. He’s burning, I’m watching him. He is burning. He runs out and gets through the wall because it’s all burned away. He takes about three or four steps out and they open fire, everything they’ve got. Literally blast him back into the house.

RV: Wow.
JW: What?

RV: I said, “Wow.”

JW: I guess that’s the first and last human being I’ve ever watched killed. I thought, “Oh, no.” He didn’t have his weapon. He was on fire, probably wounded. All we got was a body.

RV: How did you deal with death in that sense and also overall when you would experience that?

JW: In that sense was of course disgust. Then you have to go back and place it in context of the kind of people they were. The kind of life they had. What was life to these people. I didn’t see any American casualties, any Americans killed. I heard about them. We had one or two killed within the province while I was there. That’s one of the hazards of the game. You have to know as a military man in a combat zone, you may get killed. I’m sorry. I felt for them. I felt for their families, but it’s awful. It’s done.

RV: How did you deal with the stresses of combat like that in that sense in general and the stress of being in a combat zone? How did you deal with that?

JW: Didn’t think about it. I didn’t feel any stress per se because of the combat zone. I guess most of my stress was the fact that I was separated from my family. Later on in the tour there was some personal problems developed at home that was putting a lot of pressure on Gayle, my wife. That created some stress problems on me, but it wasn’t because of the combat situation. In my own mind, there wasn’t any stress there. I lived with, accepted the fact that I could get killed or wounded any day. That didn’t bother me. I didn’t dwell on that. That’s a fact of life. Just as sure as the sun comes up in the morning that could be my last day on this earth. Ok, so be it. Honestly that was my opinion. That’s not 30 years later thinking about it. That’s the way I felt then.

RV: How would you rate the Vietcong as an enemy?

JW: There’s several levels of the enemy there. You’ve got your guerillas, you’ve got your Vietcong. You’ve got your VC main force, and then of course your NVA, North Vietnamese Army. Your guerillas which was our primary enemy were very low-level untrained, no communications. Your main force VC were about equivalent, maybe a little higher trained than our regional force companies. They were pretty good troops. I think they had the same problems that our Vietnamese troops had. Once they lose their
leader, they’re lost. This was a part of their culture. I never had any contact with the
NVA so I couldn’t address them. From what I saw and have heard since, they were good
troops.

RV: What would you say were their main strengths, the VC?

JW: I guess able to survive in the harsh environment. Survive as long as they
did. When I talk about a harsh environment, there’s no roads in this area. It’s wet and
cold during the rainy season and dry and hot during the dry season. They had no
electricity. They had plenty of rice. The low-level Vietnamese farmers in this area, they
didn’t know politics. They didn’t know the government of Vietnam versus the Vietcong.
The VC would come in and say, “We want so much of your rice. We’re taxing you.”
“Ok.” The government of Vietnam would come in and say, “We want so much of your
rice. We’re taxing you.” This is the farmer, “Leave me alone. Leave my children, my
family alone. Don’t take my son. Leave us alone and we’ll pay your taxes.” This was
kind of the peasant attitude. Of course they lost a lot of their sons because they would
take them. A lot, I can’t say that. I can say some didn’t know anymore what they were
doing than some of our popular force troops. Our popular force troops were told, you
man that outpost and anyone comes in shooting at you, you shoot back. That’s about it.
These guerillas that’s about the same thing they knew. When you see one of those guys,
you shoot him.

RV: Did you get the sense that the Vietnamese civilians and these popular forces
and the VC just wanted the Americans leave?

JW: No.

RV: They wanted that protection?

JW: The number of American forces that were there when I was there were so
insignificant, the low-level peasants didn’t know we existed except when we’d come out
and visit in their area with the Vietnamese officials. I’ve got to tell this. The Vietnamese
are a very humble people, but they carry a great deal of respect for their leaders, the
district chief. The district chief would be driving down the road and there’s a school over
here, school is out. Little children, first, second graders would run out and line the road.

As the district chief would drive by they would [dip their head in respect for the district
chief].
RV: They would bow.

JW: Just a little bow. When the district chief would approach the civilians when he was out they would give him that courtesy. Just amazed me.

RV: Respect for elders, respect for authority.

JW: Elders are greatly respected. The senior member of the family is number one. They didn’t call him, “number one.” The eldest son in the family is called “high.” High as you know is number two in Vietnamese. He’s number two. He’s never number one as long as that father’s alive. Major Tien told me this, that many people call him “high” because he was number two. He was his father’s eldest son.

RV: Interesting.

JW: This was their way of life.

RV: How did you feel about their way of life? Was it something that you could respect? Something that you could easily integrate yourself into while you were there or was it something that was really foreign to you?

JW: It was mostly foreign. I could respect it. I could integrate into it to a certain extent. We had been told that you do not eat uncooked food. Don’t eat it. Along toward the last part of my tour over there, I could not go into a civilian’s home and be offered food and turn it down. I would not offend him. I went way out of my way to not offend these people. I appreciated their way of life. I don’t think I could ever integrate into it, but that’s their way of life. I respected that and loved those people dearly. I came home with possibly a form of dysentery.

RV: Really?

JW: It was several weeks after I got back before I really got myself straightened out. I lost a lot of weight of course I’ve managed to find most of it.

RV: Did you even run into any Phahet Laos or Camir troops from Cambodia or Laos?

JW: No. We had a Cambodian in one of our outposts. You will see him in the slides. He’s a great big old one.

RV: Really?

JW: The Vietnamese are about like this and he’s right in front. One of the outposts. If I knew the story of how he got there, I’ve forgotten it. But they pointed him
out to me. He’s Cambodian. To the best of my knowledge and belief, that’s the only
Cambodian that I saw while I was there.

RV: Did you ever run into any of the other allied forces any Australian, New
Zealand troops, Korean troops?

JW: There was a Spanish medical team at province level. Had some contact with
them. Some of the slides, which I didn’t bring, which I will get to you are of some of the
other nations’ leaders that were over there. I don’t know whether they were sight seeing
or what they were doing there. I don’t know what the three pretty Vietnamese girls were
doing with them. I’ve got my opinion, but well then. My opinion is they were prostitutes
that they were carrying.

RV: That’s something I wanted to ask you about. Were they prevalent? Was
that available to your men and to the Vietnamese men?

JW: Not this time. The bigger the city, the more of that there was. There was
little to none. Major Tien wouldn’t have it. He ran his district with an iron fist. I’ll tell
you about his discipline in a minute. He wouldn’t have it. There was none of that in
Vinh Binh City. As a matter of fact, one of my sergeants brought a girl in. I don’t know
whether she was a prostitute or not.

RV: Vietnamese girl?

JW: Yes, Vietnamese girl. District chief just ate me up. He said, “No, don’t do
that. Don’t allow him to do that.” Now, he wasn’t really angry with me. He was angry
with the sergeant. The girl was there before I even knew she was coming. I put a stop to
that. They were readily prevalent in Go Cong City. The first province chief that was
there and he left right after Tet, they put in a new province chief. The old province chief
was sorry. He was sorry. Like my acting district when Major Tien got wounded. The
bigger the city, the more prostitutes. In Saigon they were very prevalent.

RV: Tell me about Major Tien’s discipline.

JW: Major Tien was a very stern disciplinarian. On one of the operations we
were going up this road here up to Dong Toi, which is this little town here on this river.
We had passed an outpost right in this area. We were up in here. This is the north south
route, 21 I believe. Major Tien didn’t carry a rifle. He had a little sub nosed .38 that he
carried. He wanted to signal this outpost. Now he had his 10 bodyguards with him. So
he got a rifle from one of his bodyguards and put it on semi-automatic and fired a round.

It fired but it failed to eject. No, it ejected but it failed to feed. You follow what I’m saying? It wouldn’t feed another round in. He fiddled with it and finally got another round in there and fired it again and it did the same thing. It wouldn’t feed. His next move was like that. He hit that troop right in the chest with the butt of that weapon. He hit him with the weapon. He kicked him, he slapped him and threw his weapon at him and got another one. It did the same thing. He worked him [their soldier] over the same way. He had told those men they had a .20 round magazine on them. Unless you’re in contact everyday, you never fill that magazine completely full. Because it completely compresses the follower spring and it loses its tension. It won’t feed properly. He had told them not to do that. Never put more that 18 rounds in a 20 round magazine. They had them stuffed full. He told them they’re way up here in the contested territory and here were are several kilometers down. “You all walk back. You’re not going back with me. You can’t do any good.” So we drove back to the district headquarters. When they got in he took those guys, to his house over here, district headquarters here and he had a garden over here. Not a vegetable garden. He had a roof of sorts over it. We had meals in his garden. He put those troops on the hard rocky ground over there, made them roll their sleeves up and do the low crawl for about 50 yards across and back. With his subordinate officers out there throwing rocks at them.

RV: Oh my gosh.

JW: He did not allow drinking or gambling. He had a rubber club, hard rubber, about this long.

RV: About two feet.

JW: No, about 18 inches. It was about two inches wide and about an inch thick. He caught someone breaking his drinking or gambling rule and he would bring him in his office and literally beat them with that club. I don’t mean just tap them, I mean beat them. Then for the drinker, he would take them out behind district headquarters and there was a post in the ground and he would tie them up to that post, have them tied up. With their hands behind them and hand a picture of a big bottle of booze around their neck. They would stand there in the hot sun all day long. The gamblers and this Vietnamese sergeant that I mentioned several times he got caught in that and the district
chief whipped him pretty good with that club. He’s one of the top sergeants in the
district, but they expected this. The people expected this, that when they screwed up and
got caught they knew they were going to be punished. If they weren’t punished they
would lose respect for him. Let me tell you something friend, you don’t make a false
move toward that district chief when his troops around. They’d be on you like stink on
puke, pardon me French. They had that much respect for the man. He was their god if
you will.

RV: The guy who came in after him was nothing like this?

JW: The acting district chief. The next district chief, at least the time I had with
him, although I liked him a lot, he wasn’t the strong disciplinarian like Major Tien was. I
think he was just feeling his way through. Then within two or three months after he got
there, I rotated out.

RV: Tell me about Tet. What was Tet like for you?

JW: We had gotten information at Tet of 1968 that there was going to be the big
nationwide push. As Tet approached, Major Tien’s intelligence network in here had
elements of three main force, VC main force battalions surrounding our little town here.
We were bottled up. We knew we couldn’t get out. We heard later after it was all over
that a part of the big plan in Saigon was to capture the civilian radio station in tact. They
would broadcast over that station, “We’re in command. We’re in control. Throw down
your arms.” Our people all had their little transistor radios. That would just blow their
mind completely. Also, in this main force battalion, that was basically the main
communication that they had. They were waiting on that broadcast. Then they would
attack. That broadcast never came because just before the radio station fell into the hands
of the NVA they managed to destroy the transmitters. So, that broadcast never came.
When the broadcast never came they withdrew. The only real action in the province that
night was the VC got into Go Cong City and attacked the jail and released all the
prisoners out of the province jail and withdrew.

RV: So relatively uneventful?

JW: Very tense, but uneventful. That was one of those times when I call it
tension. It might have been stress. It might have been both. It was pretty thick.

RV: You knew you were surrounded.
JW: When Major Tien said we were surrounded I had no doubts that we were surrounded. I knew we were surrounded.

RV: You guys were prepared to fight?

JW: That’s right. We’ll just fight.

RV: The next day in the morning.

JW: It was still pretty tense, we didn’t know what all was going on. We didn’t know who was where or what. Then we just kind of sit fast and maintained our heightened alert status. Never did get hit. That was my experiences during Tet. Tet is more meaningful to these people than Christmas is. My assistant and I went around the town that night. We went to our houseboy’s house. We knew where he lived. By the way he was a PF soldier. His only job was to take care of the advisors. We went to his house and he seemed so pleased that we cared enough to come and visit him on Tet.

RV: That’s nice.

JW: We just visited and looked around town. There was weapons shooting. Fireworks and district chief allowed that one time. See, Tet goes on for several days.

RV: What did you guys do for entertainment?

JW: Watched television, played dominoes with the Vietnamese. That was it primarily.

RV: How about alcohol or drug use?

JW: Drugs no. I had some beer. I wished I’d drank beer because they sure did seem to like it, but I never did like beer.

RV: You never did like it?

JW: Never did. We could get beer at the commissary when they had it. We’d bring it in and cool it down. Most of my team would drink a beer. There was some hard liquor around. The Vietnamese loved to do this here. I’m a brand new district senior advisor. We’re going out on operation tomorrow morning, but they wanted to have a party for the new Americans, Co Van Mi. You know that term, that’s American advisor. So, my assistant and I went to this party. I don’t know whether it was scotch or regular whiskey or whatever. Anyway they wanted to toast to the senior advisor. One guy would toast, ok. I would take a little sip. Well, then this guy would want to toast. Then
this guy. I finally said, “No, no more.” Not on this particular occasion. There was
another occasion; my assistant came home about three sheets to the wind.

RV: Were their any tensions against the Americans in your compound?

JW: Yes. The radio operator that was there when I got there was a whiner, bellyacher. He did not like our medic who was a sergeant, staff sergeant E-6. Almost called his name. The sergeant was Sergeant Hedrick. Anyway he had conflicts with Hedrick all the time. I talked to him and I said, “We’ve go to get along here. If you don’t do your part then I’m going to have to run you off.” Ok, well for a day or two it’d be all right. Then he’d go right back to his old sullen self. I just took him up to Go Cong. I told my boss, who I never did like, “I don’t want him. I’d rather do without him.” “Well you might not get another one for a while.” I said, “Ok. I'll work without him. I don’t want this guy. He’s causing problems within the team.” I just left him there. It wasn’t too long before I got another E-1. Generally we got along real well. Like I said I was the boss, they knew I was the boss. They knew that Captain Barrera was the assistant. I didn’t have to stand up and say, “I’m the major; we do it this way.” We got a long great.

RV: How about between you and your immediate boss. You said you guys did not get along. Tell me about that.

JW: This individual and I won’t call his name. He was a lieutenant colonel. He was a member of the corps of engineers. I don’t know why. It seemed like if I ever went to him with a problem or situation he put me down. “You can’t do that.” “Ok colonel, fine.” If I could get into the civilian and I had two different civilian senior advisors, if I could get in to him, we could talk. It might wind up being the same thing that the answer is “No you can’t do that,” but the civilian had the tact to discuss it with me and not put me down, not try to make me feel like a fool. Where the colonel that’s what seemed like his primary interest was to make me feel like a fool. I just got to where I wouldn’t have anything to do with it. When I got to Go Cong I wouldn’t even go to see him unless I had to.

RV: Did that effect your actions in the field at all?

JW: No, not at all. I ran into a situation there that I’d run into once before. This Colonel Ruth that I was talking about, he was the operations officer as a major at Go Cong headquarters. When the engineer colonel left; he [Ruth] was promoted to
lieutenant colonel, and he because the senior advisor. He and I crossed horns once. We had some pretty good intelligence there were some bad guys down there in the Coconut Grove. So I called Go Cong and talked to, he was still a major then, Major Ruth. “Can we get any armed helicopters come in and put a strike in down here.” “No we’re not going to put in any strike down there. That intelligence is not any good. There’s not even one down there.” Just on and on and on. I’m sorry if I’m talking too loud. Oh, that made me mad. Major Tien was still there. I went to him and he could see I was mad. I said, “Is there any way I could get into Go Cong? This guy is running over me and he doesn’t have any right to do that. He’s not in the chain of the command.” Major Tien said, “Well then there hasn’t been a road clearing operation today. The road is not really open.” He said, “I know it’s clear, you can go.” Man I went in and I almost jumped on the engineer colonel’s desk that was still there and I just blew my stack. “Who is the district senior man? Who is the district senior advisor down there is it me or is it him? If it’s him put him down there and put me somewhere else. He has no right.” “Now Major Wright calm down. I’ll take care of that.” That was the only time that I ever got a satisfactory answer from that colonel. He left and Major Ruth got promoted and became my boss.

RV: So it didn’t work out too well for you?
JW: I had a similar situation in Germany. The battalion executive officer and I’m a company commander and he’s trying to tell me how to run my company. I said, “No, sir. It’s not going to be that way. It’s going to be this way.” Well, the battalion commander left and he became the battalion commander.

RV: Tell me about Major Tien, this guy seemed to have some really good inside information. Was he connected at all with the VC?
JW: Not at all.

RV: How did he know all this information?
JW: He had developed his intelligence network over the years when he was there. He spent a lot of time with the families of his people. His people’s families knew that if something happened to their husband or son that Major Tien would take care of them. You’ll see in the slide there’s pictures of big Christmas parties in the district headquarters where the chief brought in all his families. He’d give the kids presents. He had his
civilian staff that worked in the district headquarters giving out gifts and presents. He
would take care of them. They knew he would take care of them. He had developed this
rapport with them over the year. They worshipped the ground he walked on. It was a
process of over the years that he had worked with and developed.
RV: Did you ever experience any racial issues?
JW: None, not at all.
RV: Between the American troops and then also American troops and
Vietnamese civilians?
JW: No. My assistant was Captain Barrera, a Mexican American. He was raised
down on the river.
RV: Rio Gande.
JW: Rio Grande. I had a Mexican American sergeant. He’s the one that brought
the girl in. Had a black sergeant, we were brothers. We were family. We literally loved
each other. You see, I wasn’t with any high density Americans. Five Americans was the
most that was ever there at any one time.
RV: Tell me about these relationships that you formed with these men?
JW: That’s strange. As I think about that, it was very close there. But when you
rotated out, your life went somewhere else, their life was still there. You had basically no
contact with them. I have not had any contact with any of the people on my team since I
left Vietnam.
RV: Really?
JW: None. It’s a big Army. It’s a big world. There was only four other people
then me.
RV: So you don’t even know if they survived or not.
JW: To the best of my knowledge and belief, all of the Americans that I was real
close to survived. At least one of my real close Vietnamese friends, a young second
lieutenant that spoke real good English was killed. He spent a lot of time in my house.
In fact, the night after the mortar attack in the town that took out the district chief. He
brought his wife over to visit with us too. I was teaching her English. She couldn’t get
out. They had closed down the compound so she spent the night in my house. He spent a
lot of nights in my house. He would just fall out there on our couch and go to sleep.
We’d go to our beds. She spent the night in our house. He, shortly after I left, my replacement wrote me a letter and said that, his name Minh. Lieutenant Minh went on an operation as the PF company commander. See we brought in an old PF company commander. We brought in three of our PF platoons, to make a PF company. He was the commander. Minh was a cocky little guy. He was young then and he was cocky. Careless and he got into a booby-trap and killed him. That hurt, that hurt. I would loved to know what happened to the sergeant, the first lieutenant, the number two man in the district, Major Tien, Major Shaun. I’d love to know what happened to them. When I went back the second tour I asked. I did some research to see if what was going on down here may have done away with the advisory team in the district. There was a small advisory team still in Go Cong. So I didn’t even attempt to go down there. If there had still been an advisory team down there I was going to try to get down there and spend a day or two down there just to see what was going on. To see if there was any of the Vietnamese still around there.

RV: But you didn’t.

JW: Never did get down there.

RV: Were you able to take any R&Rs while you were in country?

JW: First tour I went to Hawaii and met Gayle in Hawaii. That was lovely, needless to say. Second tour and the only time with five children that I run off and left my wife pregnant. ’71, ’72 our fifth child was born January 13th 1972, but I came home for Christmas. I took a 30-day leave and came home for Christmas. I was hoping the baby would be born early to mid December, but he decided to wait until mid January.

RV: So you missed that? You were back in Country?

JW: Yes, I was back in country when the fifth child came. I thought that was pretty amazing. Actually only had four children in the military. [Our oldest son was born before we entered military service].

RV: That is amazing. How about USO shows, were you able to attend?

JW: Not this tour. I heard about some in the second tour. I believe it was Jack Benny but I just didn’t feel like I wanted to fight the crowd.

RV: Was it in Saigon?
JW: See I wasn’t in Saigon per say. See, there’s Long Binh post, and I can’t even tell you how close it was. It wasn’t far from Saigon, but it wasn’t in Saigon proper. That’s where USARV, United States Army Vietnam headquarters was located. Second largest headquarters in country. We got the information that this USO show was coming and I just didn’t feel like fighting the crowd so I didn’t go. That’s the only one that I know of. Closest thing to a USO show in ’67-’68 was Christmas of ’67 a chaplain and two I believe they were Red Cross came down to visit us on Christmas Day.

RV: The Donut Dollies?

JW: No. They weren’t the Donut Dollies. They were with Red Cross I’m sure. Anyway they just came down to visit and they brought Red Cross type gifts so the team would have some Christmas gifts. The chaplain had a little devotional and we prayed together. I won’t say anymore because I get a little misty over that. It was neat. It was neat. We had a grand Christmas that year.

RV: Do you want to talk about it?

JW: I can. Other than this, this was good. We talked about it and we wanted to have something special this Christmas. So we got some commodities, I don’t remember, 50 pound bags of bulgur wheat and cooking oil and some other things and we coordinate this with Major Tien the district chief, and we went out to an area and people came in. We would give them these things as our Christmas to them. They didn’t know what Christmas was. Captain Barrera my assistant had a Polaroid camera. He would take a picture when we were giving it to them. Then we’d give them the picture.

RV: Oh, how neat.

JW: Oh, they loved that. He had just about run out of film. I think he had two snaps left. One old gentleman, one of the older gentlemen that we had given the stuff to we didn’t take his picture. He went to the district chief. So we took his picture with the district chief. No, we took his picture with the gifts and then the district chief was handing him the picture and we took that picture.

RV: So he got two pictures?

JW: Yes, he was just happy as a pig in slop. I mean that old man was so funny. That was so meaningful to us because we were doing something without any
reciprocation. We didn’t expect any. We wanted to give. So we gave them what meager little things that we had. We had a great Christmas.

RV: Were you able to ever make any MARS calls back to Gayle?

JW: Not this time. That wasn’t available to us. I don’t even know that MARS was up in ’67-’68. Now I talked to her several times second tour. I made a long distance call. I called through the Saigon operator to the west coast to, she was in Killeen, Texas at that time. It was pretty expensive for those times. I don’t remember what it cost. Probably in some of those letters I know in one of them I asked her what it cost. I don’t remember. MARS and those calls and I can’t remember what the other system was called. I talked to her several times the second tour. First tour was absolutely no contact with them except for letters and Hawaii.

RV: How often would you get these letters back from her? Was the mail service pretty reliable?

JW: As a matter of fact, no. Because of the tactical situation, we couldn’t get to Go Cong that often. Our mail came through My Tho, which was somewhere over in this area. It would get hung up there for several days. The best I ever got was a four-day turn around. I say four day. Her dated letter got to me four days later. I don’t know what was the shortest time she got. It would go anywhere from four days to 10 days.

RV: Would you like to take a lunch break?

JW: I guess.

RV: Ok, we’ll end it right here.