Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with
Mr. Jerry Benson. It is the fifteenth of September year 2000 at approximately a quarter
after nine. We are in the Special Collections Library Interview room. All right, Mr.
Jerry Benson would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself.

Jerry Benson: Well my name is Jerry Benson. I was born in Houston, Texas; I
grew up in Houston. I went through high school and after high school days I went to
college, finished at Sam Houston State in May of 1967. I was categorized as 1-A in June
of that year and on December the 1st I was drafted into the United States Army. Before
the lottery type situation and so I entered the United States Army as a Private. I had the
opportunity in basic training to go to Officer Candidate School, which I turned down.

SM: Just out of curiosity, did that offer come with an extension of your service?

JB: Yes.

SM: When you were drafted it was for two years, correct?

JB: Yes. When I was drafted it was a two-year obligation and to go to Officer
Candidate School required a three-year obligation. At that time, in that time in history I
pretty well knew that everyone was going to Vietnam, so I made a choice not to become
an officer. It was a very depressing time in my life and not being a military type person
and having no military background in my family, from that stand point of not being that
gung ho, in other words I made a choice to tough it out my two years. You know, hope
for the best. So I went to basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, the infantry training
capitol of the United States at that time and I have the distinction of being a number one
draft choice. I tell people these days I was ‘number one draft choice!’ And people look
at me, especially young people, high school age kids, these days and they ask me, ‘What
sport?’ And I tell them, ‘I was in the military. That was my sport. So I signed as a free
agent,’ I’d tell them.

SM: Let me go ahead and ask you real quick. Before you were drafted, how
much were you keeping up with events in Vietnam and the Vietnam War? How aware
were you of what was going on in Vietnam?

JB: Not that much, to be honest with you, because my last semester at Sam
Houston State I was taking a fifteen-hour load, which was keeping me pretty busy.
Probably the only thing that I was keeping aware of is, just really, what was on the
national news stories at that time, scenes from Vietnam from week to week, the death
count, which was rising. I remember Walter Cronkite on CBS National news every
Thursday would give the death count and that was sort of…it was building at that time.
So other than the fact that really it wasn’t until about April of that year, of that semester,
that I became…it sort of hit me that I need to do something, you know. I went to the
reserve units in Houston, the Naval Reserve, the Marine Corps Reserve, the Army
Reserve, and maybe the Air Force Reserve, down there close to the Astrodome.
Inquiring as to availability to get into a reserves unit and, basically, I was laughed at,
especially, as there was a waiting list, a long waiting list! So when I graduated I knew
where my future was…where I was headed. I knew very well so I had no idea to the
extent of what I was getting ready to go into as far as the infantry. That really wasn’t
phasing in, at that point, as far as…I was hoping that maybe with a college degree in
business administration that maybe office type work was a necessity. Being able to type,
which was a rarity with young men in that day and age. So that’s sort of where I was
hoping to go.

SM: Just to clarify. What year is this when you graduated, then were drafted?

JB: This was May of 1967.

SM: And then drafted December of ’67?
JB: Actually, I was drafted December 1st. The only reason it took so long was because I was playing a lot of fast pitch softball during that time frame, in the church leagues in the city of Houston and I got hurt. I hurt my ankle pretty bad that summer. So when the draft board sent me my initial notice, I told them how seriously injured I was. So they sent me to an orthopedic specialist in Houston during that summer, which took a long time to do all this. The orthopedic specialist basically told me that I was in good shape. I didn’t break any bones, I just pulled some ligaments and it was a severe sprain, which I had experience about three or four times prior to that. So that’s the only reason it delayed my being inducted to December. So you know, from May to December basically you can’t find any full-time employment during that time frame no one wanted to hire anybody. So I had to take part-time type jobs. I was just waiting, I was just waiting to be drafted and I knew it. So that’s why it took until December 1st, I was drafted left out of Houston on a bus to go to Fort Polk on a Friday night, cold rainy night. Depressing weather and a depressing time. Headed to Fort Polk, Louisiana.

SM: Now just out of curiosity. During that period where you waiting to be drafted, did you ever consider enlisting, voluntarily? So that you would have more control over where you went and the service and what you might do in the service? In terms of you said you were hoping for perhaps a clerical type job since you had typing skills. Did you ever consider that as an option or you just wanted to see what would happen?

JB: No, I never did. Probably because I didn’t know what was available. Like I say, my father wasn’t in the military at World War II, I didn’t have any guidance from that standpoint. So, no I really, I really didn’t think too much about it. I didn’t really know what was going to happen to me at that point of time.

SM: What about…do you remember, you mentioned that you remembered the death counts and the casualty counts, statistics that were coming out in the news reports from Vietnam.

JB: Yes.

SM: Do you remember just prior to you getting drafted, General Westmoreland had come back to the United States and gone on a tour giving speeches and, in particular, appearing before Congress providing information on the progress of the war and it was in
November I think of ’67. He came out and said, ‘The light’s at the end of the tunnel, this war is almost over.’ And almost giving the perception that, you know, we might have the boys home by Christmas type of thing, mirroring Korea. Do you remember that at all?

JB: No.

SM: When Westmoreland came back and gave those glory reports of our progress?

JB: I do not remember that. No.

SM: What effect did the casualty reports have on you though?

JB: It was just something…it probably had more effect on my parents at that time more than anything else, just the waiting, more so than it did on me. Because, at that point in time, I really didn’t view myself as going in as an infantry soldier, a rifleman going to Vietnam to the jungles and rice paddies. I really didn’t see myself in that picture. For some reason I thought it was going to be the people that wanted to go, type situation, the high school type graduate. I thought I was maybe one level above that at that point in time. So.

SM: Well with a bachelor’s degree, you were.

JB: Yes! Yes!

SM: With at least the next level of education you would assume that you’d go in a place where you could use that education.

JB: I had a lot of office experience work in summer jobs and this type of thing, so that’s where I felt like I fit in. So no, I didn’t think too much about a lot of those things.

It became…it was really a shock to go from a college campus in May to a infantry type camp in December. That was a cultural shock for me!

SM: And you mentioned that your parents probably had a harder time listening to the casualty reports coming in from the nightly news. What happened to them when you received your draft notice? Did you talk much about it? How did it affect them?

JB: Probably no, we didn’t talk too much about it. My dad was not the talkative type. He probably worried more so than anything. At that point in time my brother had a son, who was seven months old in August of that summer that had brain surgery. They discovered he had a serious illness and he had his first brain surgery at seven months old, so that was happening in our family. So that was really the focal point of what was going
on in our family that summer in 1967, a seven-month-old grandson having brain surgery.
So that sort of steered a lot of the thinking process away from probably my situation at
that time.

SM: Alright. Well why don’t you go ahead and discuss basic training. When
you said it was a culture shock jumping from college to infantry, basic infantry, what…

JB: Very much a cultural shock for me.

SM: What were your first impressions upon arriving at Fort Polk?

JB: Gloom. Gloom and doom. There’s a sign there…we got off the bus at the
reception station is what they called it, which we stayed there about four or five days.

‘Welcome soldier to the United States Army. Stand Proud!’ I have a photograph in my
collection of that. It was you know, like I say, it was a depressing time in my life. I
really didn’t know what to do. I just said, well, my attitude was I’m just going to have to
make the best of what comes out. Basic training was very, very tough. Very, very tough!

Actually we didn’t really start basic training because this was December the 1st and by
December the fifteen I’d only been with my company about a week, seven days at that
point. I got two-week leave to come home for Christmas. So my impression of coming
home from Fort Polk, Louisiana was…Fort Polk is sort of rolling hills, piney woods
terrain, and we loaded up on cattle trucks. I can remember rows and rows, seemed like
miles and miles, of cattle trucks of guys going to the bus station or wherever to leave Fort
Polk for a two-week vacation for Christmas. I’d only been in the Army two weeks, so
really basic training didn’t start until January the second for us. January second was a
day that, physically, we all suffered. We started running and we ran and we ran and we
ran! I mean it was every day. Basic training is basically nine weeks. I was assigned to a
platoon, which was all draftees. There was another platoon of National Guard guys and
another platoon of somebody else. Basically my platoon in basic training was about the
only, all draftee, platoon from Texas. A lot of guys from South Texas, a lot of Hispanic
guys, who probably didn’t speak very well in English. So we were always last in doing
everything and it was not because…it was probably more of a communication gap
‘between an instruction of a left face’ by a drill sergeant and some of the guys didn’t do
anything because they probably didn’t know what was being said. So a lot of South
Texas Hispanics were in my platoon so I think there was a lot of communication problems there. My platoon was last for nine weeks in everything we did.

SM: My goodness.

JB: So every time you’re not first, you do an extra twenty push-ups or whatever the case may be. So it was a cultural shock, believe me. Basic training was…it rained, it was January and February in Louisiana, it’s very humid, very wet. We had our regular Army boots and we had galoshes, which are rubber boots, and for about four weeks we ran and trained all day long with these rubber boots to keep our feet dry. That just added weight, when that rubber gets wet, it’s just like twenty pounds of weights on each foot.

So finally, when the spring broke and the weather started drying up, we got rid of the rubber boots. I felt like I was running on air! It was that much of a difference. Basic training, I remember, I went in the Army about 195 pounds, I came out of basic training at about 195 pounds, but I probably lost about three or four inches in my waist, type situation.

SM: Wow!

JB: So it got us…a lot of rifle training things that…

SM: Which rifle?

JB: We trained with the M-14.

SM: Okay.

JB: Primarily. It wasn’t until we got to advance infantry training at Fort Polk that we started using the M-16. So I gave you a book, here at the collection, from my basic training days, and I have to look back at it to sort of remember what we did. But a lot of classroom training on how to assemble the rifle, clean the rifle, for example. Just a lot of running, you got up at four o’clock in the morning you were out there between four thirty and five doing exercises, pull-ups and…We had a sergeant that loved for us to do what we call the low crawl. The low crawl was getting down on all fours, on an army type mat, for about seemed like fifty yards, but it was probably about thirty or forty yards and you crawled on all fours up there and back. And he loved for us to do the low crawl and he would make sure that we had those mats, out there in the field, when we were out there during day doing those types of things. We all hated the low crawl and he was the
specialist on making sure that we had our opportunity to do the low crawl before our meals! You know, lunch or dinner.

SM: Well just out of curiosity, you mentioned some of the communication, miss or maybe cross communication, miss communications between the drill instructors and the Hispanic members of your platoon. I was curious if there were any problems between trainees? In particular between Anglo trainees and Hispanic trainees, if there was ever any kind racial tension or anything like that.

JB: No. I don’t remember that at basic training. I saw it later on when I got to Vietnam, but not in basic training. We were too busy! It was a full day every day…it was a full day every day.

SM: I didn’t know if maybe because it seems like your description as one of the reasons why your platoon didn’t do well was because there wasn’t a very good understanding of English among some of the members. I didn’t know if maybe if some of the English speaking Anglos kind of got upset that their platoon, your platoon was performing so poorly and was actually getting of course punished for it collectively, push-ups, and whatever because these members just couldn’t do things correctly.

JB: It never was the same person maybe.

SM: Okay.

JB: Type situation. I hadn’t really thought about it until later on. It really, like I say, the National Guard was a reserve unit basically. These guys were just in for their six months of training National Guard, so they were not going anywhere at that time. They did not have a two-year obligation so your educational level was higher in the National Guard platoon. So there was a significant difference in educational level. No, as I recall there was not a lot of racial type tension at that point.

SM: Okay. How about just conflicts between individuals, typical fights and things like that that young men tend to get into when they’re in close quarters and under stressful conditions.

JB: I don’t recall that in basic training or advance training. The only thing I remember in basic training is the sergeants getting guys to take a shower every day. You know normal hygiene! A lot of people come from a lot of different backgrounds…sergeants making them go in there and take a shower, clean up. I
remember that very well. But no, I really don’t remember. Like I say it was a fast paced nine weeks. You didn’t really mouth off or anything. I mean you were doing enough as it was. I think the training sergeants at that point in time…people knew sort of where we were going so there wasn’t a lot of that going on. I think there was a lot of respect for the drill sergeants. They had done a lot of training, they were very experienced type situation, so they were tough, they were very tough. Like I say Fort Polk was the infantry training capitol base camp in the United States at that time. So they didn’t put up with anything. So you didn’t talk back to them, you didn’t get in trouble, because it just added more things that you had to do, physical things and mental, maybe.

SM: Were there ever any incidences where a drill instructor had to go behind the barn so to speak to get somebody in line or was everything dealt with in a different fashion as far as disciplinary problems?

JB: It was probably handled away from most of the troops, if that was handled.

SM: Did you witness anything personally?

JB: No I don’t recall anything like that.

SM: Physical contact between the DI’s and trainees?

JB: No. No. We were too tired to do that. By the end of the day, by five or six o’clock when we finally ate, we were exhausted and we were not able to go to bed until about ten or eleven o’clock at night. I remember one sergeant telling us as young trainees in maybe our third or fourth week, he said, ‘You’re lucky to get four hours of sleep a night. When I was training we just got one hour of sleep a night.’ And we said, ‘Aw Sarg, that’s impossible!’ I mean he tried to portray how tough he was when he was training, which was maybe a different timeframe. We had to pull guard duty, you didn’t get four hours, five hours of straight sleep, you had to pull guard duty in the barracks. So your sleep was broken just about every night. So that was getting us ready for Vietnam, basically. In Vietnam I probably can’t count on one hand the number of nights in the field especially when I just got a full night’s sleep without waking up once or twice for guard duty. So, they were preparing us.

SM: Speaking of Vietnam at this stage and at this level. First, did your drill instructors have combat experience in Vietnam? Second, did they invoke, while you
were going through training, did they invoke their own experiences and lessons from
Vietnam, passing on that information to you? Do you remember that?
JB: Not so much at the drill sergeant level, more in the classroom level. Okay.
These classes that we would sit in on and someone would talk about their experiences at
Vietnam, but as I recall they were not combat type experiences in most cases. They were
maybe officers or high ranking sergeants that were maybe teachers over there or
whatever. So no, I don’t recall any drill sergeants talking about their experiences. I don’t
think a lot of them had gone to Vietnam at that point.
SM: Also you mentioned that you platoon was almost all draftee.
JB: It was all draftee.
SM: It was all draftees.
JB: Yes.
SM: Was there much talk when you did have an opportunity to sit around,
shining boots and cleaning up the barracks and that kind of stuff. Did you guys talk
much about the fact that you were draftees? Your different perspectives on the Vietnam
War? The fact that many of you probably would be sent over there? By this time we’re
looking at early ’68 so casualties are starting to mount.
JB: They were starting to mount.
SM: It’s not a real popular war. It’s getting less popular as ’68 goes on. In fact
while you were in basic training the Tet Offensive opened up.
JB: That’s right, in February ’68.
SM: Right so did you hear much about the Tet Offensive and was there much talk
about what was going on?
JB: No we didn’t have access to a lot of information. We did not have access to
the news that was going on. So no, we didn’t really talk about the current events because
we didn’t really know what the current events were. Only if someone maybe had a radio,
or snuck in radio because in basic training you are not even allowed to have a radio, you
didn’t have access to a television, either, at all. The only thing I remember during basic
training was Martin Luther King got assassinated and Otis Redding died. With the black
soldiers that I was around, the Otis Redding death had more of an impact on them than
the Martin Luther King assassination.
SM: Really?
JB: Yes, most definitely! Otis Redding’s death hit them hard.
SM: Wow!
JB: Yes.
SM: What did they say about Martin Luther King’s assassination?
JB: I don’t recall. I don’t recall…
SM: Were there many black members in your platoon?
JB: Yeah there were several. If you look in my book it was a mixture, a good mixture of everybody in my basic training and they were all my platoon. Like I say we did not have a lot of access to information. We didn’t really talk about it, to be honest with you. I think everyone knew what was happening, they just kept pretty silent. You thought about it more than you talked about it.
SM: And what about your draftee situation, much talk about that at all? The fact that you were all draftees and you really don’t want to be there.
JB: I think there was a lot of hope amongst some of the guys to get in some type of specialized work. There was a lot of anticipation, if they had a skill in a certain thing. Lets say it was a mechanic, you know, they maybe hope that they get into mechanic work type thing. Something like that, that was that type of anticipation. So we really didn’t know what was in store for us other than the fact that we were going Vietnam, which was eight thousands miles away, and that’s about the only thing we really knew. We didn’t know too much about, or at least I didn’t, about what was in store, what it was going to be like. So we just had to take every day at a time. To be honest with you, it was such a stressful day, every day. After about five weeks of basic training we finally got a Saturday to get off base, to go to a little town called Leesville, Louisiana. To get off the base and maybe drink a beer or two, and I went down to Leesville that afternoon, Saturday afternoon, and it was the most depressing town I had ever seen and I wanted to drink a beer. I think I went into one place and maybe drank one beer. It reminded me of a western town with nothing but cowboys coming in from the cattle drive. It was just nothing but GIs in uniform and civilian clothes and that’s what all the town was. For some reason it depressed me more than I would think. I maybe drank one beer, got a taxicab, went back to the barracks, and went to bed. That was after five weeks of training
with no leave, or anything, a few hours leave. Leesville was a very depressing town for me; I never went back to Leesville. (laughing) I never went back to Leesville. Sleep was very valuable at that point. After five weeks we were all physically tired and if we had a few extra hours and we could sleep, I took advantage of that.

SM: Okay. Just out of curiosity. One last question about some of the racial issues that might have been a part of the experience. Did people separate into their own little cliques based on race or did everybody kind of mingle together?

JB: Yeah. You sort of paired off in your racial situations.

SM: So it’s Hispanic clique, a black clique, a white clique.

JB: Oh yeah, most definitely. And that was true wherever I went in the Army.

SM: In training or in Vietnam? The same thing happen in Vietnam?

JB: Yes, yes. Most definitely.

SM: Anything else from basic? What was the most challenging thing for you in basic? Was it the physical aspects, of sleep deprivation or…what was the most?

JB: Well, I was more concerned about my ankles to be honest with you. How I would hold up, because I had sprained my ankle that summer and I knew that if I couldn’t complete the nine weeks of basic training, I would have to start the cycle over again. So my concern really physically was holding up to all the running and everything and probably, the Army boots and rubber boots and everything, gave me a lot of support, which I did not have when I was playing ball. Back in those days you didn’t have those high top athletic shoes that they have now to wear. So I was just hoping to make it through the nine weeks and not sprain an ankle where I’d have to start the cycle over again. I just wanted to get it over with. It was pretty awesome, it was pretty awesome. You didn’t want to go through another nine weeks of all that. If I didn’t make it…

SM: When did you learn you were going to be infantry?

JB: I guess in the last few days. As I recall just about everybody in my company went straight to advanced infantry training there.

SM: Did you stay together as a group going into advanced infantry training?

JB: No, I don’t think so, I don’t recall that. Maybe…during this time there were 40,000 guys a month being drafted. So no, it was maybe some of the same guys, but it was not…we would not stay together as a company. We sort of split up as I recall.
SM: Okay.

JB: I don’t really recall too much about advanced infantry training as far as the guys and everything. It’s been too long ago.

SM: Well what was the transition like? What were the major differences besides, of course, you’re getting advanced infantry training about maybe how you were treated?

JB: It was much better. It was more of a classroom type setting. We had a lot of classes out in the field, going to the rifle ranges, learning how to throw a hand grenade, which was a pretty awesome thing to finally throw one live and hear that thing go off, learning to fire the machine gun, the grenade launcher, basically to learn how to do a lot of things that we were getting ready to go to Vietnam with. I remember one Sunday afternoon late in advanced training we were going to the field, basically, for probably that next week, and we loaded down with full combat gear on Sunday and we walked thirteen miles to our campsite. It was hot, it was a long day with full combat gear. So we were just started getting ready for what was in store for us. But a lot of classroom training, a lot of repetitious stuff…cleaning the rifle, learning how to take care of that, things of this nature. More of a, I wouldn’t say eight to five, but probably by six o’clock we were pretty much through with the…I remember, I think, this was in advanced training, it snowed on us. We were out there in the field. We were assigned three guys to a tent, that slept two, so you were assigned to guard duty. It was about 35 degrees and it was raining hard, it was miserable. It was miserable! And we were out on the rifle range or something that day, that night and we had to go back to these little tents and pull guard duty, we were assigned pulling guard duty during the night. Well it was so cold and miserable and wet, we all fell asleep, practically everybody out there. It snowed during the night, we woke up at six o’clock, the sergeant had to wake everybody up because everybody fell asleep and actually the snow made it warmer. The ground was not as muddy and everything when the snow hit so…I remember a guy from Wisconsin being in this advanced training and he said, ‘I’m from Wisconsin. I’ve never been so cold in all my life!’ In Louisiana when that humidity is 100 percent and 35 degrees and pouring down rain, that’s miserable, wet cold. That comment from the guy from Wisconsin stuck out in my mind because I’ve never been up to the north, Louisiana not being nearly as
cold as Wisconsin. Everybody was asleep, everybody got in trouble. I forget exactly what happened to all of us, but it was just a miserable night, very miserable.

SM: You said earlier that you did receive M-16 training in the advanced infantry training at Fort Polk.

JB: Yes.

SM: What did you think about the M-16 compared with your previous training with the M-14? How did you compare those two weapons?

JB: It was just lighter weight, number one. It was much lighter to carry. The M-14 was a very heavy rifle so…

SM: Which did you like better?

JB: I’m going to say the M-16. It had the reputation of jamming more than the M-14, but I guess I wasn’t too concerned with that. I was more concerned with all the weight that we were carrying at all times. Once we got to Vietnam just about everyone carried an M-16. I remember one Hispanic guy carrying a M-14 by his…that’s what he wanted. The M-16 was a much easier rifle to disassemble and clean number one. The M-14 had some more detail parts to it. So it was easier to clean if you were out in the field, I remember that.

SM: In advanced infantry training, did your instructors in the classroom environment in particular but also when you go out and train in the field, would they invoke, again, lessons from Vietnam? Had many of them been over to Vietnam?

JB: Yes. I remember very well a situation where we were doing night patrol and we were training to be ambushed at night, patrolling a trail or whatever. We were trained that once we made contact out there in training we would open up, we would take our M-16 and we would basically get in a line and fire weapons and charge that position! Well, a lot of them had more sense to know that we were not going to do that in the real world. But that’s how they trained us, to assault a position that you were being ambushed. My first patrol in Vietnam was a night patrol in Vietnam when I joined my company. So we’ll get to that later on. A lot of us, we said, ‘I don’t think we’re going to be doing that in the real world once we get over there in Vietnam. I think we’re going to get down and find out what’s going on.’ That was the difference between my company philosophy in Vietnam and how we…the reason we probably didn’t lose as many men as maybe other
companies. So I’m sure a lot of companies in Vietnam assaulted you know, if you were
ambushed out there, day or night, you attacked and when you do that in the real world
you start losing a lot of people, very quickly. I remember that very distinctly.

SM: With the patrolling techniques that you were trained in at advanced infantry
training at Fort Polk I would assume that the nighttime patrolling techniques were single
file, ranger file as they call it today.

JB: Yeah.

SM: What about daytime patrolling techniques? Wedge formations, things like
that or was it still just basic single file?

JB: Basically you learned how to spread out and not bunch up type situation. I
don’t know if you were maybe supposed to be three to five yards apart, but you didn’t
bunch up.

SM: And this is just again single file for daytime patrolling?

JB: Yeah. If it was single file daytime patrolling you didn’t bunch up where you
were a target you know for something, an attack. You spread out, you stay spread. You
stayed in contact with the person in front of you especially if it was night patrol to stay
fairly close so you don’t lose contact with them. You spread out as I recall. I don’t
remember if they emphasized that a whole lot, but it was more so classroom training and
if they did it it was more in the classroom than maybe out there in the field type scenario.

SM: Okay. Anything else you remember from your advanced infantry training?

JB: The only thing I remember…when we graduated and we got our orders I
think there was one guy in advanced infantry training that was going to Germany for
some type of special work and the rest of us were all going to Vietnam. So we felt like
having one person make it…he was pretty lucky! Once I got to Vietnam and started
hearing some talk about guys, what they had to do in Germany, a lot of guys in Germany
volunteer to come to Vietnam because of all the harassment that they…the military
harassment that they had to put up with in Germany. Things were pretty relaxed back in
Vietnam once you got to a company in the field and this type of scenario. A lot of the
military B.S. was eliminated. Being in the field at Vietnam after a few months, we
couldn’t understand why someone would volunteer to come over here, but a lot of people
did…not a lot, you know, you heard stories about that.
SM: How many weapon systems did you receive training on? You mentioned grenades, M-14, M-16…What other weapon systems did you receive training on in basic and advanced infantry? That you remember.

JB: Well. Oh, the 45 pistol because some guys carried a 45…the rifle, the machine gun, grenade launcher, the Claymore mine which is something that we had to carry, the hand grenade training, maybe the radios that we had to carry in the field. So we were basically trained with everything that we had the potential of carrying as an infantry soldier over there.

SM: Was there anybody injured or killed during any of your training?

JB: No one was killed. We heard stories about other companies where someone was shot on the rifle range, for example, but no one within my company. I mean, yeah we heard stories…I think there was maybe a guy that was shot. The security out in there, the safety on the rifle range was very, very well done. I mean we would have an instructor maybe in a tower giving everybody instructions and we did everything together, we cleared our weapons, we put up our magazines, everything was done by the book on the rifle ranges. So it was very good…we were well trained. We were well trained, I will say that.

SM: Any accidents at all of injuries at basic or advanced infantry for your platoon that you recall?

JB: No. Other then the fact that guys in the running process in the early days were just passing out right and left. I mean…my parents came over in basic training and we were there around our area where we stayed and there was a company going by there, and one guy was passed out and the guys were trying to keep him…he basically passed out. My mother really, that shook my mother up very much to see someone like that and how they just continued. You know they didn’t stop or anything. Other than that, no I don’t recall anything.

SM: Okay. So you finish your advanced infantry training at Fort Polk, you got your orders your going to Vietnam. Did you know what unit yet or what did you know in terms of when you were getting ready to leave to go to Vietnam? What did you know about where you were going and what you were doing?
JB: I didn’t know. I guess the way we got our orders, we went to San Francisco. We flew out of San Francisco; we made three stops going over. I could tell people I’ve been to Hawaii because we had about an hour refueling stop in Hawaii during the night…saw some palm trees around the airport. We stopped on a little island called Wake Island and refueled and we stopped in the Philippines. And we got to Vietnam on a Saturday morning about sunrise, about seven o’clock. Got off the air-conditioned plane, it was a commercial flight with a stewardess and everything. That’s how we went over. The heat just about knocked everyone over.

SM: What month was this now that you were arriving in Vietnam?

JB: This was May 15, 1968 about seven o’clock in the morning.

SM: What were you, besides the heat, do you remember anything else as your first impression once those doors opened and you started getting of the aircraft?

JB: Yeah. I saw some mosquitoes that looked like seagulls! (laughing) But the heat, the heat just about knocked everyone over it was…of course we were coming from an air-conditioned airplane so…

SM: And this is Tan Son Nhut Airbase or Bien Hoa? Where did you come in?

JB: I think it was…let's see, Tan Son Nhut, the one that was close to Saigon.

SM: Tan Son Nhut.

JB: Is that Tan Son Nhut? Okay.

SM: What happened when you arrived? You got off the plane, then what? Do you remember?

SM: Yeah we got on a truck or something and went to a basically a processing station, which was nothing more than just a bunch of Army barracks like Fort Polk looked like somewhere in where ever that was…Tan Son Nhut Airbase or whatever. It was a processing station for two or three days. This was a Saturday morning. One of the first things that we had to do in the first hour or two was…we didn’t have toilets in Vietnam okay? A bunch of us were assigned to burn the human waste in these BFI containers. We had to pull out these 55 gallon barrel drums and pour gasoline or whatever and light it to burn off the human waste for the day, which was done everyday over there. That stood out in my mind very well! Later on that night we were talking to a sergeant, a twenty year man probably, and I made a comment to him because like I say
I was looking at nothing but a bunch of Army barracks and everything, and I made a comment to him. I said, ‘This place looks a little safe to me.’ He says, ‘Oh yeah it’s pretty safe, you know. Not too much happens. Last Tuesday night we got rocketed,’ and he point this direction. And he says, ‘It just killed one.’ He was talking about a rocket, an incoming rocket at night hitting a target and killing one or two GIs, I guess. That comment told me that there’s not going to be a safe place in Vietnam where ever you’re going to be. Even though it may appear to be safe physically…it was going to be a long year. His comment was like this was an ordinary thing, but to me that wasn’t ordinary, if someone got killed that wasn’t ordinary. So we stayed there for a few days and we finally got assigned to our company. I was assigned to a base camp in the first infantry division, which is between Tan Son Nhut and Saigon about seventeen miles northeast of Saigon in a little base camp called Di An, spelled D-i A-n. That’s where I was assigned and that’s where I went. Myself and a guy by the name of Dave Hellenbrand reported on the same day.

SM: Do you remember the platoon and company battalion that you were in?

JB: Company B, the 1st Battalion, the 18th Brigade, 1st Infantry Division.

SM: Now from the time that you went into the service to the time that you go to Vietnam, okay, you said before that you really didn’t keep up all that much with what was going on in Southeast Asia. Did that time period afford you with any additional opportunities to learn more about what was happening or did you receive at least some information from your trainers? More information from your trainers and from the Army as far as briefings that this is what’s going on in Vietnam; this is what we’re trying to accomplish? When you arrived at Vietnam what exactly did you think the United States was trying to do there?

JB: I probably wasn’t thinking along those lines.

SM: Okay.

JB: I and probably everybody else certainly didn’t have the attitude that we were going to go over there and end this war type of scenario. That I’m going to make a difference. The only thing that we were really focused on was we had 365 days of an obligation and that’s sort of what my mentality was. I had no desire to win the war or lose the war. I just knew I had to do something, I had an obligation to do and I was going
to have to make the best with what I was faced with. I was still not convinced what I was
going ready to face; going to the field you know and that type of environment. I guess
in the back of the mind I did, but I really didn’t know what to expect. I didn’t know the
terrain of the country that well…I just was…I remember very well my mother… My
brother was stationed in San Diego, so my mother and I went to San Diego and stayed a
few days with my brother before I went to San Francisco. When I said goodbye at the
airport, I thought maybe that’d be the last time maybe I’d see my parents type situation.
It was you know…those thoughts were in everybody’s mind, I think. So…

SM: Absolutely.

JB: So I didn’t know if I was going to come home or not. That was sort of my
thought.

SM: So you recall when LBJ made the decision not to run for reelection?

JB: Yes! I remember that very well. I was in basic training or advanced training.

My parent and I had come to Houston that weekend and we were going back to Fort Polk
that Sunday afternoon and it was on the radio. I heard it on the radio going back. I guess
it didn’t really mean that much to me at that point, you know, as far as…I guess I was
hoping maybe something would change overnight type scenario. Yes, I remember that
very well. I don’t remember when it was, what month it was. Do you have any idea
when that was?

SM: I believe it was either March or May of ’68.

JB: Okay.

SM: Actually, I’m pretty sure it was March.

JB: Okay.

SM: And if you had heard it on a radio during your advanced training it must
have been March.

JB: Yeah.

SM: But I’m curious…Here’s the President of the United States, the one who’s
really pushed American involvement in the war. The escalation of American
involvement had been progressive since the 1950s, but in terms of conventional military
build-up it’s LBJ’s war. Did the realization that here’s the guy that got us into this and
now he’s quitting. Did that ever enter your mind or have an affect on you?
JB: I probably wasn’t that knowledgeable at that point in time as to who was responsible, you know. I was twenty-two years old, those thoughts were just not…I wasn’t focused on that. Maybe my parents were, because I think my mother and dad were in the car at that time, but I don’t recall. I just know that he wasn’t going to run and maybe the significance of the statement didn’t impact me at that time. I was more focused on what I was…

SM: Right. What you were faced.

JB: What I was faced with you know, from a personal standpoint.

SM: When you arrived to your unit, when you arrived at Company B, 1st Battalion, 18th Brigade, 1st ID. What kind of briefing, what kind of information did you receive from your unit? With regard to what you’d be doing, these are the things you should do…well these are the things you need to do, these things you need not to do to make sure you stay alive, to make sure you protect your buddies. What kind of training in-country did you receive to make you a better infantrymen and hopefully save your life and help save the lives of your buddies?

JB: Basically we were issued all of our equipment at that point in time, which took a couple two or three days, as I recall. One thing I remember them teaching us what to do was the hand grenades that we were issued we were taught to put tape around them, which is what we did once we got the grenades. The reason for that was because if you’re out in the field and the pin is ever pulled, you know, that grenade’s going to go off in what eight seconds or whatever. That was one thing specifically that we were taught in-country is how to get your hand grenades and tape them to where the pin would not…if the pin ever came out it would snap where it would detonate in eight seconds. That was one thing specifically. We were assigned all of our equipment. I remember I was assigned a brand new canteen in a velcro pack and it was a larger canteen. I guess it was a quart, a canteen is…I don’t know what size a regular canteen is, but it was much larger then the regular size canteen. Brand new! My first patrol I lost it at night patrol because it was in velcro and it wasn’t snapped on. Basically I spent a few nights in the barracks there and I guess I was put on guard duty one of those first nights, which is around our big base camp. When I talk about the base camp being large, it was probably the size of Texas Tech campus or even larger, okay.
SM: Wow!

JB: So it’s a big facility. Of course around the wires is barbwire and there was a lot of bunkers out there and you pulled night guard duty around the perimeter of this dark base camp. I guess I pulled guard duty one of the first few nights and all my equipment was in this barracks building where we were assigned. That one particular night when I was not there, one of the GIs that was from my company that I didn’t even know who he was…He sort of went on a little rampage of just opening up in the building with his M-16! You know, didn’t shoot anybody, but he sort of went crazy for a night or for a moment and just opened up…just sprayed his M-16 against the wall or something. Didn’t hit anybody or anything, but that was somebody that’d just come from the field, that was probably in need to get out of the field type scenario. Luckily I wasn’t in there type situation. So I heard that story maybe the next day or so…that sort of shook me up a little bit. Something I wasn’t prepared…I wasn’t…my focus or our training was focused on the enemy, but the more I was in-country, I learned that I should fear more of our own GIs, our own soldiers, for a lot of different reasons. When we finally…our company…I guess our company was out on a mission or a few day operation and they finally came back in and they came in on the same day and we were assigned that night patrol that same day. So the guys didn’t have a whole lot of time to clean up or whatever. My first patrol was out of the wire of our big base camp at ten thirty that night…a night patrol!

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss that briefly or in as much detail as you want in terms of what kind of information you received prior to going out on the patrol. Where you were in the patrol in terms of your location, your placement. Anything that happened on the patrol…

JB: I’ll tell you exactly what happened! It was a very eventful night. Of course we were assigned to a platoon or whatever so I met whoever was in charge of us, the sergeant for our platoon. That’s probably who gave me the most of instruction is the sergeant for the platoon. Each platoon had a lieutenant in charge; you had a sergeant under that lieutenant; then you had maybe about four different squads and you had a squad leader.

SM: Did you have team leaders too, in the squads?

JB: We called them squad leaders.
SM: But within the squads, did they break the squads down into teams at that point or was that later?

JB: No. No.

SM: So you just had a squad leader?

JB: Just a squad leader and maybe three or four guys in the squad. You had a squad leader and a radioman and maybe three or four guys in the squad. Okay. So that’s how the chain of command was. I remember very well going out on the wire that night at ten thirty. I didn’t know what our mission was, we were never told things like this, but our mission was to go about a thousands clicks or meters or whatever…we called them clicks…to surround a small village that had been on May the 1st 250 Vietnamese soldiers were killed in that village in what they call the May Offensive. Tet was in February, May 1st there was another offensive and there was 250 North Vietnamese soldiers killed in that village by whatever company, wasn’t our company, I don’t think. Our mission was to go out there, setup an ambush around that village early in the night for possible movement that night. We get out there and we are…our mortar platoon went on that patrol so we were carrying extra equipment. Every guy either carried a mortar round, which was not normal to carry. A mortar round is about, I’d say, about a thirty pound canister about yea long and we also carried extra machine gun ammunition. So I look like Poncho Villa, a lot of us looked like Poncho Villa with machine gun ammunition strapped over our shoulders in a V and all of our regular combat gear. So we were heavily weighted down with combat gear. We get out there and we have new platoon leaders and we start getting lost. We didn’t know at the time, but we were lost. They were not reading their compasses right and the patrol got longer and longer and longer and it was hot. I didn’t know how to prepare for the heat and I wore glasses at the time and my glasses started fogging up from just normal perspirations and it was very, very humid. So we get out there, I guess it gets to be twelve thirty and we’re still walking. The only time I could see the guy in front of me, because of my glasses fogging up, was when we would shoot a flare up to give us a little light, you could see the shadow of the guy in front of you. You couldn’t tell where you were stepping, I do remember during the night stepping on a dead body, on the chest of a dead body. Didn’t see it though because it’s too dark. Finally about two thirty with all the angles of the terrain and everything, I fall and turn my ankle,
sprain my ankle out there with all this weight. The patrol stops. There’s about at least
two or three companies of us on this patrol. It was a large patrol; it was not just one
company. So you know, there’s 200 guys out there. The patrol has to stop. They find
out what happened to me…luckily when I fell nothing exploded, you know the hand
grenade because I had just gotten that equipment…so nothing happened like that,
fortunately. But I sprained my ankle pretty good. I came down on the side of my ankle
with all of that heavy weight so I turned it pretty good…the ankle that I had hurt that
summer prior. So the patrol stops, we’re still lost…I was able to get some of the combat
gear off of me because I can’t walk with all of that heavy stuff. So I have to distribute
my gear to some of the other guys. I lost my canteen during the night probably when I
fell then. So I was out of water…and this is about two thirty in the morning. Well the
bottom line is we set up at seven o’clock the next morning! From ten thirty to seven
o’clock we’re out there walking and I’m walking from two thirty to seven on a sprained
ankle using my rifle really as a crutch. So the mission of setting up an early ambush was
a failure. I finally…I have to walk a long ways just to get to a vehicle the next morning
and we go back into the base camp. I didn’t realize how long it took me for my ankle to
heal, but my letter said that it was about a three-week process before I could get
physically able to go back and join my company again. So I was on crutches for most of
that time and wherever I went, on the base camp, was on crutches, which was probably
harder then carrying combat gear. You know a lot of the heat under your arms and
everything…the heat it was…this is during the rainy season. The rainy season had just
hit, started. Vietnam has a six-month rainy season, and a six-month dry season. Well I
was fortunate at that fact that most of my six months was the rainy season because as
much as I sweated and everything, I would have never made it in the dry season. I know
that. I would have never made it. As much as I sweat and as much water as I would need
from day to day. The rainy season you could just about predict when the rainstorms
would hit. It seemed like they hit at four o’clock every afternoon from four to five,
maybe longer, but it was pretty predictable. You could predict the weather…but you almost
became a weather expert. So that was I guess in late May, late May or early June. I
guess it was between May 15th when I went over there…this was probably May 25th or
26th sometime in that time frame. So I’m out of commission physically with a severe
sprained ankle. Here again I never did break a bone, never did put a cast on it...same scenario as I had the three or four other times I sprained my ankle playing ball. My duties were to, during the day, was to pull daytime guard duty on the perimeter of our big base camp. So I get out there during the day from seven o’clock in the morning until five o’clock or six o’clock in the evening...you know, what do you do? Well I decided to get some things and start reading and low and behold I had a Bible with me. So I decided, well it’s about time to maybe start reading the ‘Good book!’ (laughing) So during the day, you know, in the heat, I’m out there one day, had the book open reading, an officer came out asked me what I was doing. I said, ‘Well I’m pulling guard duty...reading.’ Well he took my Bible away from me. He took all reading material away from me. Told me basically I was out here to pull guard duty. So that left an impression.

SM: Obviously not a favorable one.

JB: No. No. Now you could run into a lot of officers in the military that were jerks. That were trying to play ‘I’m in charge’ scenario...I’m in charge and you’re the private. At that time I was still a private, Private First Class.

SM: Did you correspond a lot with your family during the early months or throughout your times in Vietnam?

JB: Yes. Yes I did. I did a lot of letter writing during that time frame. As reflective in the letters I’ve presented to the Archive here.

SM: Did you receive many letters in return from your family?

JB: Yes, yes. My mother wrote just about every other day or whatever once she got the address. I did not realize until...I read my letters here about two years ago, which was a thirty-year span, of how many other people did write me that I had forgotten about. She would make sure that friends and a lot of different people would write me and they would write me. So people would write me more often than others on a fairly regular basis. I did a lot of letter writing which I’m grateful now that I did and I dated my letters...pretty much looking back I was sort of giving them a true feel of what I was going through and I probably shouldn’t have. Maybe later on to let them know exactly what I was going through, but I tried to be up front with them. I know my parents, especially my dad, he was a very heavy smoker, but I think his smoking was multiplied during my tour...especially watching the news. They would watch the ten o’clock news
at night. My mother would tell me later on in years that they didn’t say too much, they just watched the news and sort of went to bed. So they didn’t communicated too much as to what they were feeling, my dad especially.

SM: Did they communicate much about what they were learning about Vietnam in the news to you in your letters? Did they talk much about Vietnam in terms of what they would hear on the home front?

JB: Maybe a little bit, not a whole lot, maybe not a whole lot. Probably my brother who was in the Navy was probably more focused on keeping up with that. He was out in San Diego at the time. He was married with a young son that was sick so… So here again we had a sick grandchild so that was a very strong focus. So my dad had two major worries in his life, which eventually took his life in a couple of years after that. Here again the letters from home were just basically what was going on, you know, the normal routine things. To get a letter in Vietnam, from whoever you were, it meant a lot, especially if you were out in the field. To get mail call, to hear your name out in the field… ‘Benson or Jones or Smith…’ you know, whatever it was. It didn’t have to be anything. Just a few lines! That was a very important part of being in the field especially. Even if you were back in the office, which is what happened to me later on, but especially in the field. That was the highlight of your day, the highlight of your day! You would not think that, but oh yeah. In the field your letters maybe didn’t get to you until maybe a three or four day period because just depending on where you were and what was going on. So mail calls were very important. They tried to get the mail to you as quickly as possibly in the infantry companies and they did a pretty good job of it. They did a pretty good job of it.

SM: What about rules of engagement? Did you receive any kind of instruction or any kind of briefings early on in the 1st I.D. that explained to you what the rules where with regards of engaging the enemy? That you remember.

JB: No. I don’t recall that.

SM: Were there any restrictions that you recall later as your experiences progressed that you were told you can’t do this, you can’t do that, that type of thing?

JB: No. I don’t recall that. Basically the only thing I do know is when contact was made things really got different. The field was completely different you know. If you were making contact with the enemy, if we were being ambushed, if things like
that…guys reacted completely different than you would in training. I don’t recall being restricted as to what we could and could not do. The main focus was to do what you were supposed to be doing from day to day. For example the nights when we were setting up our ambushes, making sure that the set up was correct for example. But no, to be honest with you I don’t recall any rules or regulations as to what we could not do. But we were…I guess the focus was really, you were going to be told what to do hopefully if you had time to get instructions, if contact was made. The instruction down to my level was very minimal as far as the focus of this operation or that operation.

SM: Did that bother you? Here you are you’re going out of the compound on a patrol and you really don’t even know why you’re doing this or what potential engagement may be. Did that bother you at all?

JB: I don’t think it did. I think you’re were just trying to do…I guess I never focused on that as to what…I think I would have reacted hopefully in the right way at the right time just by natural instincts type situation. No. I think they…the turnover was pretty tremendous from the stand point of guys getting wounded, killed, going on R and R’s, going on sick call, you know…a lot of guys going on sick call is just knowing that they didn’t want to be on that particular operation. We didn’t have a lot of that because we had some good leadership and they could control those situations. I think that was pretty predominate in the field in the infantry companies. If you knew you were getting ready to go on a two or three day operation, the Iron Triangle, for example, and if you’ve been there before, you got sick, somehow, in those types of scenarios. The Army at that time didn’t deny you of going on sick call, but I think, if you did, and you were faking it, they made sure you got back out there pretty quickly to where you needed to be. But we didn’t have a lot of guys like that. Lieutenant Webster wrote me a letter here probably with in the last year and…

SM: This is your platoon leader?

JB: My platoon leader from Louisiana, Cameron Webster. He still has thoughts about how he handled the situations as a lieutenant thirty years plus after the war and what peoples’ impressions were as to what they thought about him. I never have really thought about that, but he was the person in charge, you know, am I doing, what do the guys think about me as a leader thirty years plus later and what we did out there from day
to day…a lot of decisions were made. I learned real quick in the field that…I knew one
thing if you were walking ‘point’ or if you were walking ‘plank,’ which is to the side of
the patrol, you had a greater potential of not surviving. I didn’t really want to be a squad
leader. I don’t know why, but one thing I did volunteer for is to carry the radio within
my squad. The only reason I wanted to carry that forty-pound radio was because I knew
out there on the patrol it would keep me inside with the main troops. I never did walk
point because of that…I carried the radio most of the time. So by carrying the radio I
kept in contact, I could here the conversations within our company, know sort of what
was going on. That’s where I focused in the field, what I wanted to carry…a lot of the
guys didn’t want to carry the radio because the radio was very heavy…between the radio
itself and each day you put a new battery in there. A battery was about the size of a brick
and about the weight of a brick, which is about four or five pounds. So you put a new
battery in everyday so when you started a new cycle you had a fresh battery in your radio
and two tied on. So you had three batteries on day one, day two you were down to two,
day one you were down to one battery and then the cycle…It was probably about forty
pounds to start on the first day and a lot of guys didn’t want to carry a radio because of
that. That was a heavy thing. I felt like that was well worth the carry and it proved to be
the case later on in the field. So that radio saved my life one day as a matter of fact.

SM: How?
JB: We were in the Iron Triangle.
SM: What month and year was this?
JB: This was in October. We were in what I now know as the Iron Triangle,
which I thought was called Hobo Woods. It was a four-day and three-night operation.
The only time that we ever went into a landing zone that we were being hit on, a hot LZ
is what we called it. Where the choppers could not come down and not touch ground
because of the land mines situation, booby traps. We had to jump off the chopper about
three or four feet with all of that heavy combat gear. I lost my glasses and had to get to
the brush line as soon as possible so that was the first day. I think the next day things
happen and the second day was the day that my radio was acting up. This was a three
company operation, 250 men on this operation, a lot of people. On that particular day we
were going to be the trail squad and my radio was acting up. Every time you’d press the
button to talk it would squeal and that squeal sound in the Iron Triangle was too much.
So they didn’t want me talking to the squad leaders, so on that particular day I was put in
the middle of the patrol and I did not use my radio all day, but I could hear things going
on. On that particular day, the point man, there were a lot of bunkers out there and the
other company lost a point man by checking out a bunker. He got killed. Well the one
guy was killed and so that took a long time to get him back through the line. So my
squad was the last four or five guys on the patrol. Their job was to go out and clear a
brush for the choppers to come in to evacuate the dead, which my squad leader did on
that particular day. As they were going back to clear an area, they got ambushed by
another bunker. There were bunkers everywhere out there in that environment. So they
got ambushed. My squad leader gets hit; he gets hit in the leg. The next guy, which
would have been me, gets hit and the third guy gets hit. So I should have been the second
guy in that environment. So I should have been hit that day, but because my radio was
not working I was not back there with my squad. So here I am today, you know, a guy
that’s not wounded in Vietnam.
SM: None of them were killed? They were just wounded.
JB: They were not killed. My squad leader got a bullet in his leg and he’s
immediately, as soon as he got hit, his first reaction was to call ‘Mike 6,’ which is my
platoon leader’s code. His radio code is Mike 6. So he’s immediately coming back to
the company area yelling ‘Mike 6!’ The other guy gets hit somewhere, I can’t remember
where. The third guy got grazed, the bullet grazes his eye and he loses his eye
eventually. But they all three get evacuated that day and I’ve never seen them again. My
squad leader’s a kid from Detroit, he’d only been in the country about two months, a
month and a half maybe, and to this day he feels like he was not a part of our company
because he was only in the company a short period of time, which is not the case. But I
should have been in that group, of clearing that area, but with my radio…I should have
been hit that day. I may not be here today if you know…but they got hit by a guy in a
bunker, a North Vietnamese soldier. It was an area that was heavily infiltrated with
North Vietnamese soldiers and, you know, companies of NVA.
SM: What was the unit response? In terms of here you’ve got a squad leader and
a couple men injured, wounded by a soldier in a bunker. Did the platoon leader or the
company commander then go ahead and bring to bear the firepower of the platoon or company on that to take that out or did you guys just move on?

JB: I don’t recall. As I recall we eventually had to get the dead out, okay, and continue the patrol because we were moving the opposite direction of that contact. We’d already been through that area, we just didn’t apparently make...we probably didn’t come on that particular bunker. So I don’t recall.

SM: But you didn’t...you don’t remember them going back?

JB: No. No. Our focus was going forward in this operation so we didn’t go back, no.

SM: This was a daytime operation?

JB: This is a daytime operation. This is probably one or two o’clock in the afternoon maybe. As a matter of fact the guy who got killed up here they were dragging his body back and we’re all sitting there and they’re actually dragging him...I thought the guy was wounded. The only thing that told me ‘no he’s not wounded, he’s dead’ was the lieutenant was crying and a couple of guys were crying. I looked at him again and he got hit in the stomach and he died with his eyes open. That left definitely left an impression on me. But then I knew they got him, you know, he’s dead. So we eventually get that dead person, the three wounded from my squad out and the operation continued. And I can’t remember if it was that night or what night, it was the scariest I ever was in Vietnam, was on this operation. We had an ambush. Of course we setup an ambush every night and this must have been the second night of the operation, which was maybe that night as I recall now. We ambushed a fairly large sized trail. Of course our ambush is in a circular form. I remember pulling guard duty early that night, which was maybe the ten o’clock- eleven thirty shift, let’s say. So I didn’t get to bed until maybe midnight on that night. About two thirty the NVA brought out about two guys down the trail, because they knew we were out there, but they didn’t know exactly where we were and we blew an ambush with a Claymore mines and we killed their two guys. So the sound of the Claymore mines going off, gave them our position. This was two thirty in the morning and I had gone to bed maybe about twelve...I didn’t even hear that, okay, because I’m sound asleep, I’m in my dead sleep. But at four thirty I definitely hear this...the sound of their mortars dropping into their canisters, which is nothing but a
metal on metal sound, and that sound, in my direction, several hundred yards out. In the jungle it’s probably further than that, but it sounds like it was very, very close. Well they started mortaring us in our direction and here we are just pulling a regular ambush with no bunkers, no protection, or anything and the mortars…the first one hit in front of me, maybe fifty to seventy five yards. The explosion went off, the mortar…the shrapnel went everywhere in the jungle so you could hear all that, I could hear all that. So they started coming in, right after another and I thought it was over for all of us! The only thing I could think about was a direct hit on myself, and Jimmy Walker, from California, is in the next area over there…and I did not see this, but they were talking about it the next day…Jimmy Walker stands up after knowing what was going on, everybody started waking up, he’s standing up with his hands over his head and says, ‘God I don’t want to die! Please God I don’t want to die!’ And everybody’s trying to get him down, you know, because of all the shrapnel and everything. But I remember curling up in a round ball and every nerve in my body working. I was, probably, about like a basketball bouncing off the ground; it was that awesome of a feeling. All I could think about was a direct hit. I just felt like it was over for me. I thought I was going to be killed that night. So they brought in about thirty to forty rounds, approximately, but they were all short, okay. But as they were hitting you didn’t know where they were hitting. The sound was just awesome! The sound was just awesome! So then there was a silence for a couple of minutes and then they started back again. I could hear the rounds whistling over our area. Well they started going long, eventually another thirty or forty rounds of mortars. So we had about seventy-five to eighty rounds of mortars that night…four thirty in the morning, five o’clock. The first rounds were short; the next one’s were long. It was starting to get daybreak and we’d find out, if anyone hit or whatever. Come to find out no one was hit! I mean, not a scratch!

SM: Wow!

JB: Yeah it was awesome! It was an incredible experience!

SM: What time had you laid in that ambush? Do you recall?

JB: Just the normal time. You start setting up your ambushes about two to two and a half hours before dark…to setup, get everything setup, to eat, get your assignments, so probably between five and six we would setup…normal time, normal time. So you
know it gets dark about between eight to nine o’clock. Your guard duties are assigned. It
was a pretty awesome night!

SM: Let’s take a step backwards real quick.

JB: Okay.

SM: You mentioned that your first contact or your first experience in the field
where encountered enemy fire or an enemy booby trap in this instance, that must have
occurred early because that was also your first brush with or first dealing with someone
who died in the field. Why don’t you go ahead and discuss that first operation where you
went on when someone was injured or was killed.

JB: Well this was after my sprained ankle healed and I rejoined the company. It
was probably within the first week after that. We were just on a regular afternoon patrol.
It was sort of a hilly area. I remember being at the top of the hill; the point man was
down in the valley area let’s say. So I’m sort of looking down in that direction and then
all of a sudden I see this mushroom. This explosion and a mushroom going straight up in
the air maybe 200 feet…A perfect mushroom! So everybody gets down you know, the
excitement you know of everybody saying, ‘Get down!’ You hear all of these voices
from all different directions. The platoon leaders are starting to give orders or whatever.
So everybody gets down. No one knows what’s going on. They then finally discover
what had happened…our point man was not the one who got hit, the second man I think
was not the one, the third man in the patrol tripped a wire, which was a hand grenade
booby trap and it hit his Claymore mine, which is what caused the explosion. They
carried him off in about five different pieces, from what I was told. He was a guy that
was married, that had five kids, is what I was told. I didn’t remember his name… but the
most incredible thing about all that was he was the only one affected by the explosion
because he took the brunt of it. The Claymore mine is what caused the mushroom
explosion. The guy who was the second man, he was not the point man, his name was
Tom Carroll or name is Tom Carroll. He got a piece of shrapnel in his eye or close to his
eye. He got evacuated out, but he never had to leave the country because it was not really
a major wound, but he became our company clerk after that. Tom Carroll was a college
graduate, I’m not sure where he went to school, but he was like myself, a college
graduate, in an infantry company as a private. Good guy…matter of fact I replaced him
later on in the office as a company clerk. But that was the most incredible thing. To see what I saw you would have thought a lot of injury, a lot of things could have happened to a lot of guys because we were so close together. But it was just the one guy that was killed.

SM: That’s lucky.

JB: Very lucky. Very lucky.

SM: What about interaction or your first contact personally with enemy soldiers? Or did that happen? We were talking early before the interview and you mentioned that by luck of timing or whatever your unit didn’t make a whole lot of contact in your platoon.

JB: Right.

SM: Was there ever a time where you found yourself in a combat situation where you were firing at somebody?

JB: No. That’s probably the reason I’m here today is because we were lucky in the standpoint, that we did not make a whole lot of contact, but I personally never fired my rifle, which was the case with a lot of guys in our company. The combination of philosophy and also luck in the fact that no…if we ever made a contact, our instructions were really not to fire on it unless the situation was perfect. We did have a situation on a day where we were on Highway One, which is a major supply route. We were in the rubber trees during the daytime. We were basically securing the road highway all day long and we were set up in a little bunker area and it was just our company, I guess, that was out there that day. We were getting ready to put our gear on and leave that location and, all of a sudden, Billy Rambo from Dallas Texas, a black guy, saw in the distance, in the rubber trees, a couple of guys walking on the trail, which were North Vietnamese soldiers coming toward the highway. So he sees them, he’s the only one that saw them and it’s in the distance there, but between the rubber trees he saw that movement. So we all get down and here I am listening on the radio, Lieutenant Webster giving orders. He says…and they’re saying, ‘We see two of them coming this direction. They’re coming. They maybe 50-100 yards away.’ And Lieutenant Webster’s trying to give the guys, on that part of the area, instructions just to, ‘Wait, wait, wait! Wait until they get closer! Wait until they get closer!’ He was trying to convey that, you know. Just ‘Wait! Wait!
Wait!’ Well the guys couldn’t wait. They finally opened up with their machine guns or whatever and they were at a pretty good distance so...we opened up...it was not me you know, I was on the other end of the scenario so...it was just about four or five of them that opened up on those two guys. They pop back with their AK-47s and we did not get them and they did not hit us and so, again, a lot of excitement going on, a lot of yelling and everything, ‘Anybody hit?’ and everything. So the firing ceases and everything and so we make radio contact of what’s going on. So we finally start getting our gear together to get out of there pretty quickly and we do. We go to the highway, they picked us up in trucks, we go to another location and we get off the trucks and the first thing that Lieutenant Webster does is make sure that everyone’s there. Every squad you know checked their men...there’s one guy missing, one not there. ‘Who is it?’ ‘It’s Rios,’ the guy from Puerto Rico. ‘Well did anybody see him leave?’ ‘Nah.’ You know, no one knew. So Lieutenant Webster makes the decision, ‘we’re going back! We’ll go back there and find him!’ You know, he may have been hit and no one knew it there in that location. Well we get back in the truck, go back to the location, get out of the trucks, go back to where we were in that little bunker area there over the valley, that little creek area and there’s Rios! He froze! He never moved. He was okay! The guy froze. And so one of the guys talked to him in Spanish and being from Puerto Rico he didn’t speak a lot of good English and he basically didn’t know what to do. Here again the communication of not being an English speaking person...so we gave him a cigarette...his eyes were about as wide as you can get them and he was okay. But that’s combat, the way I experienced it. Every time something like that happened you never knew how guys were going to react. It was awesome to experience that. But man I have the greatest admiration for Lieutenant Webster’s leadership, in that particular moment, to know that you count your men. I’m sure that’s what he learned in Officer Candidate School and that’s exactly what he did. The first thing he did, making sure that everyone was there and everyone was okay and that was not the case. Luckily, he was okay and so we got him out of there and pulled back. The guys who opened up, I think it was Raymond Castillo from Angleton Texas. He was on the machine gun on that end and Raymond was the type of guy that he would have loved to have killed a soldier. That’s why he opened up so early, that’s why he opened up so early. He had that opportunity and even though he was so far
away…That was like I say… a lot of the guys in our company we were trained not to
open up. We were trained if we had situations we wanted to rely on air support, the
artillery and air support. Our focus was not to make the contact and be the heroes. Our
focus was to go about in the best possible way where you’re not going to lose any men.
So that’s the reason a lot of us never used our weapons in combat and the reason a lot of
us came home.

SM: Okay. Let’s go ahead and stop here. This ends the first interview with Mr.
Jerry Benson.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Jerry Benson on the
20th of September 2002 at approximately 9:40 Lubbock time. We are in the Special
Collections Library in the interview room. We are accompanied by Richard Verrone,
new oral historian. Today we are going to pick up sir with a couple of additional
questions with regard to your service in Vietnam. If you would describe some of the
other operations in particular, mine sweeping operations that you participated in on
Highway 1 in August of 1968.

JB: We went into that night defensive position and took over for another
company. It was sort of a permanent night defensive position right there in Highway 1.
Our operation was basically to every morning, go out with a mine sweeping team for a
fairly long distance to clear the roads. There would be a mine sweeping person on each
side of the road. We would follow behind that person as sort of a patrol. Maybe there’d
be five or six of us to protect those teams to clear the roads. This took probably about an
hour every morning. Once the roads were cleared then the trucks, the supply trucks and
any military or civilian vehicles would be able to go up and down Highway 1. We were
there approximately three to four weeks as I recall. At night we would go out on small
ambushes. When I say small, I remember going out on a seven man ambush going down
the road, maybe 1,000 meters and setting up an ambush site with one radio. There were
seven of us. Basically we pulled guard duty, two maybe three times during the night
because there were so few of us. I remember one night in particular it was dark, and it
was sort of a hilly terrain. It was maybe 10:00, 10:30, 11:00 at night. All of a sudden I
hear a motor, like a tractor from a construction site that we see here in the States. I hear
this motor and all of a sudden I see two headlights in the distance. My heart started
pounding, like it almost came out of my chest. This was a long ways away, but I had
never experienced anything like that on an ambush. I wasn’t prepared for a motorized
vehicle, first of all. I saw the lights, it was coming my direction, but it was a long ways
away. I didn’t do anything because it wasn’t that close. I started thinking what’s going
to happen here? What is this? All of a sudden the motor, the truck takes a right turn and
the lights go off and the motor goes off. Who this was, I have no idea. All I could think
of was what do I do? There’s only seven of us out here. We have one radio. We
supposedly have support for mortars or whatever. What do we do? It was a frightening
experience for me, personally. Nothing happened that night, thank God. The next
morning we go back in and go about our business. It was something, I don’t know if I
brought it up to an officer or the guys, but I don’t recall. It was sort of an interesting area
that nothing really happened until we moved out. I think maybe the next night, or two
nights later, after our company moved out, there was some fighting that happened at that
night defensive position. We were close to the Cambodian border at that spot. At night I
could be sitting there and feeling the ground tremble from the B-52 bombs. It would be
so far away that the ground would start trembling and you would start trembling type of
thing. Living conditions were not the best out there. We did have sleeping areas,
covered sleeping areas. I remember in the area where I was sleeping there and I had my
blanket cover and all of a sudden I feel something crawling up my leg, which was a small
mouse. Once that happened I couldn’t sleep the rest of the night. That was a pretty
difficult thing to do was not sleep. But to have a little animal control your sleeping habits
in that type of a country environment was sort of overwhelming. We eventually tore
down that bunker. We killed 13 mice in that one bunker. That was also the bunker
where Captain Geiger, the West Point captain, at that time, a man who I really have a lot
of respect for came around one night. We had slots there for rifles in case we ever got
attacked. It was a position to fight out of. He came around and like I say nothing had
happened for weeks. Captain Geiger himself came around instead of having one of the
sergeants come around. He called me by my last name Benson, he says, ‘if we ever come
under attack, this bunker right here, you’re not going to be able to fire out this direction
or this direction. Let’s clean up this area. Let’s be prepared’. Of course the next
morning, soldiers asked, did Geiger come around to your bunker last night? Yeah. What
did he do. He told us about. Well, at that time we didn’t really understand what he was
doing because you became relaxed when nothing happened for days in and days out.
When you get into that type of a mode you sort of think that everything is fine, but really
it never was. Maybe it was good that you could minimally relax for a few days. I have
the highest respect for what he did that day, that night.

SM: A couple quick questions about the mine sweeping activity on Highway 1.
How long was the stretch of road that you covered, approximately?

JB: Gosh, I mean once you walked for an hour; I would think maybe three, to
four to five miles until you go to a certain point where the other team came in. You know
it’s a dirt road. It wasn’t even asphalt or anything. It’s a dirt road.

SM: You call it Highway 1, but it really wasn’t a highway in that sense.
JB: We called it Highway 1, it was a main supply route up and down the country.
In Texas, you would just call it a dirt road.

SM: What size elements were you working in? You said teams. Were these
literally five to eight man teams or were they squads?

JB: Probably a squad went out. You sort of rotated. You didn’t go out every
morning. You didn’t go out on ambush every night. You would rotate. Maybe every
second or third night you would pull a squad size ambush. Not every ambush was a
squad size. Probably more of them were platoon size. That one particular night, seven
guys is just not a good feeling at all.

SM: The vehicle that had been coming down the road and turned off, were there
any mechanized units, American units or perhaps ARVN units working in the area? Of
course it may have been a track from one of those units.

JB: It could have been. Bu typically after the sun went down, nothing was out
there, especially with headlights. Especially with headlights. Even back in our base
camp at Di An if you drove a jeep after dark, you did not have your lights on. You didn’t
smoke a cigarette out there in your base camp. So it was not a friendly truck. I
remember the headlights were so close together. It’s not like a regular car where they’re
on each end. They were right together. To this day, when I go by a construction site,
maybe on the highway and I see one of these vehicles with those lights on, or just light I
think about that night. I think about that night a lot. It just reminds me of that moment in
time for me.

SM: What kind of enemy units were operating in that area, do you know? Were they NVA, VC a combination?

JB: This would be probably more of an NVA unit area. It was closer to the Cambodian border probably than I think I had ever been type of thing. Especially with the B-52 bombs in the background I had never heard that before. So, I would think they would be large units. I think as I recall they got attacked by an NVA company. It was not skirmishes. It wasn’t the VC out there in this area. It was pretty much out in the open area.

SM: This mine activity, did your unit recover mines as you were sweeping through that area, Highway1?

JB: No, as far as I recall we never did run across anything where the minesweeping team had to stop to do anything. I don’t recall anything of that nature. It was done everyday type of thing. Nothing developed while we were out there. It was probably something done probably as long as we were in the country. So, nothing ever happened.

SM: While you were there in that area there were no incidents involving mines, where vehicles tripped them?

JB: Not to my knowledge.

SM: What about Vietnamese civilians? You mentioned that the road was of course used by the military for convoys, for supplies and things like that. Was there very much Vietnamese civilian traffic over the road?

JB: No, I don’t recall any civilian traffic. I don’t recall seeing anything. I don’t recall any traffic on that road other than probably military vehicles in our area. It was not an area, like other areas, where you would go on patrol, where civilians would be living in the area. You would go practically through their houses type of thing. That was other areas. Maybe closer to the Saigon area, maybe.

SM: You didn’t encounter Vietnamese civilians in this area of operations at all?

JB: No, one other thing I do remember, seemed like I said this was August. As I recall this was where I got my ballot for the presidential election for some reason.
SM: I was going to ask you about that.

JB: That was the first time I was able to vote. I don’t recall the time frame. I do remember I got my ballot to vote a week after the election. To vote for my first presidential election.

SM: Oh, that’s too much. What did you do with it? Did you throw it away or did you cast it?

JB: I don’t remember.

SM: Keep it?

JB: No, I wasn’t in the mode of keeping anything. Out in the field the fewer things you had to keep up with other than the necessary things, like I said I never carried a camera because a camera, just a little portable camera was one little bit of extra weight. So, I didn’t even carry a camera.

SM: When you were doing the mine sweeping operations, did you have special equipment for that, as far as metal detectors, things of that nature?

JB: We did not. We did not carry the metal detectors. There was specialists that did that. They would have earphones on as though they were listening to a rock concert. I mean big earphones. They would sweep, they would sweep back and forth with their hands. It was just a continual motion. Probably anything of metal nature they would pick up. If they stopped and, maybe that happened, it would just be to make sure it was something that wasn’t dangerous.

SM: The ambushes that you set up, especially the one where the vehicle was coming down the road, what was the heaviest weapon you had with you?

JB: M-16.

SM: Just personal weapons.

JB: The M-16 and probably a machine gunner was with us.

SM: Ok, an M-60.

JB: An M-60 machine gun. Maybe a grenade launcher. Nothing more than what a squad would carry.

SM: You mean nothing to take out a vehicle? Really.

JB: We had our claymore mines out of course. OK, we had those out. I was on the side that would face the highway. The other person was on the other side facing the
wood line as I recall that night. Of course it was dark. I didn’t have a chance to even
communicate verbally with that other person if they were awake. Hopefully that was the
case. Your mind just started rambling on and on and on as to what could have been.

SM: During that again that period where you were mine sweeping and
conducting ambushes along the highway, were there any other incidents where perhaps
your squad encountered enemy activity along the road at night, but other elements within
your unit? Did they actually encounter and have to trip ambushes and perhaps prevent
some mining activity along the road.

JB: I don’t recall during that period, but I do recall pulling another ambush
somewhere in an area, which is probably closer to a living area where there probably
would have been a lot of civilians. I don’t remember the time frame of this ambush. It
was probably either a company sized ambush that night or a platoon size ambush. It was
pretty good sized. We were basically ambushing a walking trail. Five or six people
walked by our ambush during the night. Nothing happened because the person in charge
of that particular part of the ambush was asleep. Of course, if you’re on the other side of
the ambush and you may not even have known it but someone knew that there were five
or six, probably VC that walked by our ambush site. Nothing happened. The most
frightening thing about it is, many of the guys that would snore there would have to be
some type of noise out there. It’s amazing how noise carries at night in a war zone. It’s
amazing. I personally was probably asleep during that phase of the ambush. We did not
hear about it until the next morning. I don’t know who was responsible for it, but God
was with us that night.

SM: You were lucky.

JB: We were lucky.

SM: What did you do if anything to enhance your abilities to stay awake during
those types of operations? Was there anything? Did the medics have anything they
could give you? Were you ever offered anything by the medics to help you stay awake at
night?

JB: Me personally I didn’t take anything. I wasn’t even a marijuana smoker. But
I don’t know what the other guys maybe did. The only thing that I do remember is that I
had no problems waking up to pull my next guard duty. All a guy had to do was maybe
just touch me on the shoulder with his fingertips and I was wide-awake. He didn’t have
to say anything or shake me or anything. I had to do that with other guys sometimes.
Once you go into a deep sleep and you’ve been patrolling all day that day in 95-degree
weather and humidity at 100% seemed like all the time, you were exhausted. Once you
laid your head down to relax and typically you sort of chose when you wanted to pull
ambush amongst your group. Maybe there was three of you that had to rotate. If you
were really tired and maybe you wanted to sleep first and pull the last ambush, last guard
duty type of thing. We sort of worked it out amongst ourselves pretty much. Most of the
time, because you were never mentally relaxed, never. There was only two times in my
tour that I relaxed. One was Christmas Eve when we went to the chapel. I went to the
chapels service, probably about 7:00 that night. That was the only time as I recall that I
had the opportunity to even go to a service because it was at night. Not Sunday morning.
Even as accompany clerk you were working seven days a week. I recall we didn’t have
any musical instruments in that chapel that night. The chaplain had a service or
whatever, but we sang a couple songs. I remember singing Amazing Grace with the
guys. I remember how beautiful it sounded. It really relaxed me for just about three or
four minutes.

SM: Was their a chaplain consistently available to you in the unit? Especially in
the base camp because you were company clerk, did you see a lot of chaplain activity?
JB: No, I did not.
SM: Were they principally at the battalion level?
JB: I guess, I don’t know. I do remember being out in our NDP in September,
which overlooked the Air Base. A chaplain came out and conducted a chapel service
there for the unit. This was a pretty large NDP, probably a couple hundred guys there.
He came out there, some one announced there was going to be a chapel service at 4:00
over here at this bunker. You know, this little area. I remember 20, 25 of us went over
there and had a service. Those are the only two services I remember having.
SM: Were these non-denomination services? Or were they specifically the
Baptists?
JB: I guess non-denominational. Dave Hellenbrand went. He was a Catholic. I
was raised in the Baptist church.
SM: Everyone was welcome.

JB: Everybody was welcome. It was sort of interesting. There was a minister in my Methodist church who was there probably 10 years ago. He volunteered for Vietnam. He had some interesting stories to tell me. He literally patrolled with his company or his battalion everyday as a Chaplin. It was something that he wanted to do. I remember him telling the story that they were getting ready to have a large confrontation and they brought in a helicopter and took him out and most of his company was wiped out that particular day within hours after he left. I don’t recall any chaplain being in the field that I knew of. We had three to four different captains or commanding officers during my six months tour in the field. Nothing was really consistent. A month and a half, this captain would be gone and someone else would come in. So, you didn’t have a lot of consistency. Seemed like a lot of turnover.

SM: How about memorial services? Were there any memorial services held while you were there for men you served with that were killed?

JB: No, there were not. Lieutenant Webster, he probably was the closest person to do something like that than anybody that I remember. He was just that type of a person, leader. No. I remember Lieutenant Webster coming in the office one day. This was maybe in March, April toward the end of our tour. Boy he was mad. I’d never seen him so mad in all my life. He wasn’t that type of personality. He just came from a meeting. The emphasis was that our battalion was not getting a large enough headcount in the field. Headcount was the emphasis of that meeting. That just irritated the heck out of him.

SM: By head count, you mean body count?

JB: Body count for the enemy. Those were the numbers that the higher ups were looking for their promotions. That just wasn’t his focus at all. His focus was on making sure his men were ok.

SM: Did he change anything as a result of that meeting? Did he change anything in terms of tempo of operations or instructions he gave to a subordinate?

JB: I don’t know if he changed anything, but I guarantee you one thing he made his feelings known in the meeting. Which is what he used to do in the field on the radio because I used to carry the radio. Whenever someone would suggest doing this, Mike-6
was his code name he would get on the radio and suggest something. A lot of time those
suggestions were taken because he had such a good knowledge of fieldwork. Being a
fisherman and a hunter and everything was his background growing up. He just had a lot
of common sense about him. He was not bashful.

SM: In terms of other operations were there any other missions, combat
operations, patrols ambushes or anything like that you wanted to discuss that you can
remember?

JB: Let me think for a second. I hadn’t thought about that. Of course the Iron
Triangle was the four-day operation that really stands out in everybody’s mind. I think
we discussed the major ones as I recall.

SM: While you were working in the field, did you have any other country forces
working in proximity with you? Joint operation; were they ARVN or Republic of Korea?

JB: Yes we did. That’s something I can talk about. We did have some ARVN
troops at one time in the field. I remember we had a German Shepard dog, you know
United States military person with a German Shepard. We had these ARVN troops they
were very young looking, very young acting. We had a guy from New York and I don’t
remember his name. The ARVN troops were so young and inexperienced apparently that
they would be like little kids with a rifle. They would sling their rifles around maybe to
each other, you know like they’re going to shoot somebody. Well, one of these guys
pulled the trigger and shot one of our guys in the leg. I mean out of nowhere on a patrol
we hear one gun shot. Of course, everybody gets down immediately. You don’t know
what’s going on. You hear all this screaming and yelling of the officers in charge out
there in the jungle and the woods. This guy got shot in the leg, right above his knee.
When it was all said and done, he was ok. He was lucky, he was very lucky that
particular day. That was something that never should have happened. I was standing
there, I could hear the conversation I was that close to when they finally brought in the
helicopter to get him out. One of the guys finally said, your tour is over. He sort of
thought about it for a second, he lit a cigarette, with his New York Yankee accent he said,
‘I’ll see you guys later’. It was sort of a funny little situation there. He was so scared for
10 or 15 minutes that one of the guys sort of relaxed him. He said, ‘you’re out of here.
You’re going back to the States on the Freedom Bird’. When he thought about that he put a smile on his face.

SM: Was that true? Was that what took him home, that wound?

JB: Sure. It was pretty good. It went right through. Probably broke the bone in his leg. It was a pretty solid hit as I recall. The medics did a good job. They got him fixed up pretty quickly.

SM: They took him home.

JB: They took him home.

SM: Were there any other friendly fire incidents that you remember, whether it be ARVN involved or multiple U.S. units involved?

JB: I don’t recall with our particular company, but I do recall a story that I heard. Within our battalion there was like four or five companies. Two of the other companies were patrolling in the same area. One point man from one company shot and killed the other point man from the other company. I don’t know how that happened. I don’t know the details about it. All I know I was working back in the office and word came around with these other company clerks and that was the story, unfortunately. Something like that happens within a small office environment you sort of hear all these things going on. That was probably in March or April of my tour. But other than that I don’t know if on our first interview if we talked about the guy, we were out on patrol and he hit a booby trap. Did we talk about that, do you remember?

SM: Yes.

JB: We did talk about it ok. It killed him instantly. Other than that I don’t recall any other incidents.

SM: What about fragging? Was that ever an issue? Was that ever brought up?

Did you ever hear any threats of fragging that someone might try to kill one of the NCOs or officers in your unit?

JB: I don’t recall that but I do recall. No threats. We had such an outstanding group that if that happened it was handled pretty quickly, at least at the platoon level. I do remember the first night I joined my company they were out on patrol, they were somewhere. I stayed in a hooch. The next night I pulled guard duty in our base camp. That particular night one of the guys who was in from sick call or something, in that same
building I was in got his M-16 and just sprayed the whole building. No one got hit or anything, but basically he just let out a lot of frustrations type of thing. That’s how some guys released themselves. I started thinking to myself man I was just in that building the night before.

SM: I meant to ask you with that incident involving the ARVN soldier where he shot the American, what happened to the ARVN soldier do you know?

JB: I don’t remember. I don’t remember. Probably what I do remember is maybe the next time we were out in the field they were not with us.

SM: Was that the only time you worked with ARVN?

JB: As I recall, yes.

SM: How about other country forces, Korean, Thai, Australian, New Zealand?

Any other country forces that you worked with?

JB: Not as I remember.

SM: How about other U.S. units or branches? Did you ever work in proximity with Marine units or any other major U.S. units?

JB: No Marine units.

SM: Were you pretty much in the division area.

JB: Pretty much First Infantry Division.

SM: With regard to your time in the base camp and actually both out in the field and in the base camp, what were I guess some of the problems that might have emerged or were there any problems that emerged with regard to race, ethnic issues, things like that?

JB: Yes.

JB: Would you describe what you remember about that?

JB: I remember being in my base camp which was Di An and the guys talking about going down to the enlisted men’s club. The blacks sort of stayed together and they had it in for the whites apparently as a group. Some guys did not go to certain enlisted men’s clubs because certain groups stayed there. That was their big hang out. We were in another base camp and I forget the name of the base camp around the rubber trees. A bunch of us went one night to have a few beers, there was a big fight that night with Raymond Castillo from my platoon, Raymond was from Angleton, Texas as I recall.
This particularly club was in old Vietnamese like building, two story. Had a very Chinese looking design to it. I remember walking out of that building, walking down these steps and someone hit me from the rear. I sort of just went falling down the steps and everything. Yes, there was a lot of problems in that area. I wasn’t too involved in them because I pretty much avoided those things. We did have a small little club there in our battalion area where you could watch TV. You could buy cokes, you could buy beer. Your battalion made a little money type thing. One thing I do remember this is sort of funny. Watching television on the Armed Forces Network, they had a platinum blonde, her name was Bobbie. She played the dumb blonde part to the hilt. She would point her finger at the monitor and say, ‘hi there weather fans’. You know talking to us. That was something that we would be interested in hearing about the weather. The way she said it just was so funny. She did a great job.

SM: Bobbie the Weather Girl?

JB: Bobbie the Weather Girl. ‘Hi there weather fans. The weather today in Vietnam’. It was like everyday hot and muggy.

SM: Now did she have the temperatures written on her body? Do you recall anything like that?

JB: No, she probably had a map there and showed what the high was going to be in Saigon and all the other major cities there.

SM: What was she dressed in, do you remember?

JB: Probably civilian clothes, I don’t remember. It wasn’t military. It was just Armed Forces TV network. I don’t recall if there was news, I just remember Bobbie, ‘hi there weather fans’. It’s been so long that you don’t remember things like that. I remember one other thing. During Christmas time I did get the chance to go to the Bob Hope Show and then Long Binh. I remember listening to the radio one night and Johnny Cash and his wife, June Carter Cash, were playing a show somewhere in the country. It was probably a recording of it. In the background you could hear the artillery going out of that base camp. June Carter Cash made a comment. She said, ‘this is scary’. I mean it was friendly fire going out, but it was constant. If you weren’t use to it, you really didn’t know what to think as a civilian.
SM: Well what were the other sources for you, for news? You mentioned of course Armed Forces television. What about newspapers or magazines and also radio?

JB: I listened to the radio as I recall. I don’t really remember off-hand when. But back in the base camp we would have musical shows where we could listen to music. That was available. The news, I probably didn’t have enough time to even sit down and watch the news, if it was on, about what was happening back in the States. If I did have the time, I probably would have been so disgusted with what I saw that I probably would have just done something else. But if you had any extra time even back in the base camp, you slept. Even if you started reading you would get so sleepy because you’d be so hot. I mean you’ve got to remember you’re on duty 24 hours a day. You’re never really off duty. You’re never away from the heat type of thing. It just took it’s toll on your body. I mean in the bigger places that have air-conditioned buildings or whatever that was sort of nice to have that. People have that all over the country. If you had someone that you could talk to one on one and this is sort of funny, but Lieutenant Webster and another lieutenant by the name of Ron Schultz they were really good friends. I would go down to their hooches at night. I was still an enlisted man and we would socialize. That was a rare thing. We had such a common bond. We had so much in common. We were the same age practically. We had gone through the college scene and all that. We had more in common to talk about just one on one as people. As most of the guys they like to play poker. They like to lose their money on payday. Then complained about not having money for the rest of the month. I never really got into that scene at all. My money went for my R&Rs and my savings account type of thing.

SM: Now where were your R&Rs?

JB: I took three R&Rs. My first R&R was to Hong Kong. Came out of the field in October right after the Iron Triangle incident. In re-reading my letters I think I knew right before I went in that R&R when I came back I was supposed to have that clerk position. So, it was sort of a nice R&R. But I went to Hong Kong. Then in February or so as our companies were not filling up the R&R slots, I went to Sydney, Australia for seven days. That was a great R&R because you were out of the country for seven days as opposed to most of the other R&Rs which were just five days. Everyday was important in your mind. If you could spend any time out of the country that was a blessing. Right
before I came home I went to Tokyo. Stayed on the base camp there in Tokyo another
five or six days out of the country before I came home in May.

SM: You mentioned earlier the USO? I guess you saw one major USO?

JB: Yes.

SM: How did that affect you? How important was that?

JB: It was great. Ann Margaret was there. By the time we got there it was
December the 23rd, two days before Christmas. We got in the jeep that morning. We
didn’t know where it was going to be until the day of the show. They couldn’t announce
those things. Three or four of us got into a jeep and Lieutenant Webster was the one who
said go. He was basically my boss at that time. We get there and it was around Long
Binh. I think it’s one of the shows maybe that has been shown here in this country. You
know with Bob Hope it just sort of looks like the place where I was the year I was there.
It may not have been. I remember there was maybe 20,000 troops there. It was sort of a
large amphitheatre. A hole in the ground and the stage was down there at the bottom. I
remember standing on some sand bags way back in the back just to sort of see the stage.
It was great. It was great.

SM: We had talked earlier about memorial services, the role of the chaplain.
Was there while you were there especially I guess in the base camp area was there ever
any available counseling? Counseling available for soldiers if they were having a hard
time dealing with stresses of combat, combat fatigue. Was there anyplace they could go
to talk with someone about the problems they were having so they could better deal with
that?

JB: No. There was no such thing like that. As we see today in our society.

SM: I mean the chaplains even in the base camp area weren’t available for that
type of activity.

JB: I was never aware of anything like that. The focus was not here. The focus
was not there at all. That’s probably the reason that a Vietnam veteran has so many
problems to deal with because whenever you’re out there and you have to carry a dead
man to the chopper or see a dead man die with his eyes closed in the field. You’re
supposed to pack up and move on. No, nothing like that to my knowledge was ever
available.
Richard Verrone: How much spirituality was in the field? There’s a belief that perhaps the longer you’re out there, the more religious you became? Did you see any of that as a factor?

JB: No, I didn’t really see it. The guys didn’t talk. When you’re in the field you really don’t have a lot of time to talk. It’s small talk type of thing. You were just so busy with the day to day, hour to hour activities. If you had a chance to talk, you talked about home. Mainly you talked about being back on the block. The day that you were going to be back there. That’s all you really talked about. Me personally I was lucky to be raised in a church where I was praying to my God every morning silently.

SM: An indirect way to get to that question, when you mentioned that chapel service that was available that one time and you and about 20 or 25 other people attended that. How many men were there with you that if they had wanted to they could have attended?

JB: There was anywhere from 100 to 200 guys in that position there. It was sort of like church services here in this country. If you were used to going to a service type thing and that was your way of handling things, you went. It was a choice. More did not go. If you had some religious background you could deal with a lot of things a lot better. I personally when I went to Vietnam, I didn’t think I was ever going to come home. I didn’t have any idea what I was getting into. Especially after going through all the training at Ft. Polk, Louisiana, basic training and advanced infantry training. Going 6,000 miles away from home at 22 years old was just something. Of course all you knew was what you heard, saw on the news as far as what was happening. The head count, the death count every Thursday on the news. I took a big risk, I took a big risk. But my prayer every morning. I didn’t want to be hurt to where I couldn’t live a normal life.

SM: Lets take a break. This will end CD number one, the interview with Jerry Benson.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing with the interview with Mr. Jerry Benson on the 20th of September 2002. This is CD number two of our interview. Again we are accompanied by Richard Verrone. Was there anything else sir that you wanted to add with regard to the way the war affected you either spiritually or religiously?
JB: I just wanted to say that I just asked my God to look after me every morning, all of us. If he was going to take us I would rather just go as opposed to live a different type of life. I really when I first went over there I didn’t think that I was going to come home. But the longer you sort of got into the routine of what was going on I think your confidence built a little bit as to thinking maybe there was a pretty good chance of coming home type of thing. I can literally say the happiest day of my life was the day I got on the airplane to leave Vietnam. The moment that I knew we were up in the air high enough to where we could not be hit. I said to myself the war is over for me. I’ve had a lot of happy days in my life since, but I have really got to say that I think that was the happiest moment.

SM: Do you think that’s something that feeling was shared with everyone on the aircraft?

JB: Yes, I really do. Not everyone was maybe going home. I think we flew to Tokyo, so maybe a lot of guys were going on R&R. But when I got to Tokyo it was a nine-hour flight from Tokyo to San Francisco. I want to share this story real quick. We get to San Francisco about 2:00 in the morning. Of course they have a large steak dinner for everybody that comes home from Vietnam there. We’re eating steaks about 4:00 in the morning. Then going to the San Francisco airport to make arrangements to fly home. At 6:00 in the morning in San Francisco most people are drinking their coffee and eating their breakfast except us four. We all order a beer at 6:00 in the morning. This young little waitress, I think just training, had to ask us all for our I.D.s. Which we all showed her. I was 24 at the time I believe. Across there was a major he had to be at least 45 year old. He had the same thoughts. He wanted a cold beer at 6:00 in the morning. Little Janie, the waitress, asked this major for his ID. We really got a big laugh out of that. We can understand us because we were all young. But the major, he’d been around.

SM: I want to come back to your trip home and experiences that you had initially when you came back to the U.S., but I did have a few follow up questions about in country experiences. In particular you had mentioned that you, yourself did not partake for instance in marijuana. I was wondering were drugs used in your unit? What were the drugs of preference?
JB: Marijuana was the only thing I ever saw. The hard stuff had not apparently got to our area. But we were at this night defensive position, which I have a photograph of right there by Long Binh. We were sitting in a tent. It must have been raining at that time at night. The marijuana smoke in that tent was just overwhelming because there’s nowhere for the smoke to get out. Our sergeant came in. Of course once the tent opened he said, ‘who’s smoking marijuana’. ‘No one sarge’. Of course that person was the one smoking you know? The rest of us were just sitting around doing whatever we were doing. If you wanted it, it was so readily available. I remember going to another base camp on one day. This guy who worked in the base camp, so he wasn’t a field person I went down to his little tent area. He had proably 500 marijuana cigarettes in a blanket area rolled up. He was just getting ready for his next several days I guess. It was really a neat sort of arrangement. He was sort of a neat person. If you wanted it, it was available. The hard stuff we didn’t see it because again we were so busy doing other things that we didn’t have time. We didn’t have the contacts. If we were in the field and we came back to the base camp it was just for one night, two at the most. We were outdoing something. We were out on the next operation.

SM: Was anybody ever punished for drug use while you were there?

JB: No, I never did see it. I’m sure it happened.

SM: But you didn’t know anyone who was? How rampant was alcohol use, or more appropriately I guess abuse?

JB: Well, when we could get it we certainly partook of it.

SM: Was it mostly beer?

JB: Yes, it was mostly beer. It was 3.2 alcohol as opposed to 6% alcohol here in the States. It was sort of like our version of light beer back in those days. If you had the money, several times we came back to our base camp in Di An and the trailer would be full of cold drinks and cold beer. Whatever you wanted to drink, anything cold. Water was a precious commodity over there. I remember in the Iron Triangle operation running out of water and literally going down to this little stream and drinking. I knew no one had water, if they did it was very precious and I really appreciated water for the first time in my life. I went down on my hands and knees and there was a little trickly of water. I probably just slurped up one or two little tongues. We were getting ready to head out of
that operation so it was after four days of being in a tough environment. Water is very, very precious.

SM: Now did you carry water purification tablets? Iodine tablets in the event you ran out and had to get stream water or pond water?

JB: Yes. Many times when I went out across the streams I would fill up my canteen. I was a person that sweated a lot. So, I had to replenish my body. Yes, whenever I could go to a stream and get water I would put those purification tablets in there. Every Monday you took your Malaria pill. I took that faithfully. A lot of guys I don’t think did. The mosquitoes were just unreal at night, on ambushes. You would literally just soak your face down, your arms, whatever was exposed just so you could. That was a tough environment to try to stay awake with mosquitoes everywhere.

SM: Did you use bug juice?

JB: Yes, bug juice. Yes, whatever you called it. Just sort of lathered your face up with it.

SM: The areas in which you operated did they come through with a Malathion aircraft, the birds that sprayed for mosquitoes? It would have been silver colored aircraft.

JB: No, I don’t recall seeing that.

SM: Any other spraying aircraft? Aircraft that flew around you spraying anything that you remember?

JB: No.

SM: Any of the areas in which you operated was it apparent that they had some defoliation missions through the trees that were completely leafless, that kind of stuff?

JB: Yes, I think in the Iron Triangle there was a lot of trees down in that area type thing. It was quite obvious that had happened. Either that or the bombs. It was hard to tell.

SM: You mentioned water and how precious a commodity that was. What about other supplies? Was there ever any supply shortage in your unit? Things that you wanted, things that you really needed but you couldn’t get your hands on?

JB: Well, we ate C-rations in the field most of the time. There would be a box of C-rations come out there. It was sort of a first come, first serve basis. You’ve got maybe one or two boxes for the next meals. There were certain meals that you liked. Liked the
fruit cocktail, the juicy stuff. Some of them had peanut butter and that was about the last thing I wanted was something dry in my mouth, was peanut butter. I swore at one time I would never eat peanut butter again because of that, but I have. Certain meals were better than others in the C-rations.

SM: How about food otherwise? Maybe back at the base camp, that kind of stuff?

JB: Actually I was really surprised, the food was pretty good if we could get a hot meal. We probably had more hot meals than I think I ever expected going over there from training. It was a pleasant surprise really from my standpoint. Even out in the field sometimes I think we had fresh eggs as opposed to the powdered eggs. I don’t really recall that much powdered eggs if any at all. They really focused on as hot a meal as they could give you if the conditions were conducive for that.

SM: Any problem getting your hand on new uniforms and boots and other things that you might need, equipment?

JB: No, I did ruin my first pair of boots. Literally the bottoms came out. The boots, which I brought home, which I have here in Houston are the second pair of boots I had. When I sprained my ankle and was able to go down to the medical area and saw a young soldier with jungle rot, I had just gotten into country. I have never seen so many blisters on a guy’s feet from jungle rot. Socks were probably the most precious commodity that we had in the field. If you could change your socks out every day you felt like you had just had a shower, you were that refreshed if you could get dry feet.

SM: Any other physical ailments or problems that you personally encountered?

JB: I’ve always been sort of a lucky person as far as my health. I was sort of healthy. The Army told me I was pretty healthy, but really I was. I never got sick over there with any type of head colds or anything. No, I never did have any problems. Never did fake going on sick call because I didn’t want to go on a certain operation, which was a very, very common thing. A guy would say he was sick and of course the person in charge knew that was not the case, but they really didn’t have much control of the person. So, there was a lot of that going on. No, I stayed healthy the whole year. I was lucky.

SM: yes, sir.
JB: I was really lucky.

SM: Was your ankle injury, was that the only injury you suffered?

JB: Yes, that was the only injury.

SM: What would you say was the level of morale in your unit?

JB: Better than usual for an infantry company, much, much better. I don’t know why. Because of the leadership? Actually most of us got along fairly well with each other. We had a higher educational level of a company. Probably overall for some reason. I don’t know. I don’t recall problems. The petty problems that would lead to mistakes type thing. We were pretty well prepared.

SM: How would you say the unit was composed in terms of draftees versus volunteers? Was it mostly draftees or mostly volunteers?

JB: I would think probably mostly draftees overall. You know there was a turnover all the time. I would think mostly draftees.

SM: Did you witness any tension between either the draftees or the volunteers? The guys that were only in the military for Vietnam? Only going to be there for a year in the military as short a time as possible versus the lifers, the guys that were careerists? Was there any tension between those two groups?

JB: I don’t remember anyone that was going to be a lifer. We all talked about going home so much that I thought maybe we were all in the same boat. If there were lifers they were keeping it to themselves.

SM: We talked earlier about women before the interview and the women that you did see in Vietnam. You had indicated that you only saw one American woman that you remember and that was a nurse. Were there no Donut Dollies or Red Cross personnel working in any of the areas where you were assigned?

JB: No, never saw one. We got little packages of food, but that was just distribution. No, we never did see any of that type of support.

SM: The women that you did encounter were principally Vietnamese women back at the base camp. They played roles maids, hooches, barbers as you mentioned. Was there any kind of suspicion about the Vietnamese people that worked in the base camps where you were?
JB: I think you always were suspicious of anyone that you didn’t know who they were. We always kidded with the cleaning lady that cleaned our office. We called her Jeffrey for some reason. I have no idea if that was her name. One of the guys would kid her every morning and say, ‘Jeffrey how was ambush last night? Did you kill any Americans?’ She said, ‘You number 10 GI’. She was an older lady. She looked old but she was maybe not that old for someone in that country. That was the guy who really got upset because the Jets beat the Baltimore Colts in the Superbowl that year. This guy was from Baltimore so he really had a rough tour.

SM: How about Vietnamese men, civilian Vietnamese men working on the base camps?

JB: Probably more women as I recall.

SM: Was anybody ever caught doing anything suspicious? You know pacing off certain buildings within the perimeters of the base camp? Anybody kicked out of the base camp for doing something that they shouldn’t be doing?

JB: No.

SM: Especially the Vietnamese civilians?

JB: I don’t recall that.

SM: You had mentioned an interesting experience with wildlife earlier that is the mice. I was wondering were there any other incidents involving animals or wildlife in Vietnam to include big spiders, snakes, tigers, monkeys?

JB: Yes, I don’t know if we talked about the snake in the first interview. Yes, we were out on patrol one day and man there was big snake. He was curled up sunbathing like you wouldn’t believe. One of the guys saw him and he got so excited he wanted to shoot him. That was his first thought. He wasn’t too far off of the trail where half the company probably had gone through it. He said, ‘there’s a snake over there, I want to shoot him’. I remember Lieutenant Webster coming back or telling him. ‘Don’t shoot him, that’s going to make a sound. Just leave him alone. Is he bothering you?’ Some guys were really, really scared of snakes. That brings up another story in basic training or advanced infantry training. We were out there and this guy was telling us all about Vietnam, he’d been there and everything. This one black guy said, ‘Sergeant, are there snakes in Vietnam?’ He named off about four or five. He raised his hand and said,
‘Sergeant are they poisonous?’ Everybody just roared. He was dead serious. He was the type of person that was scared of snakes. Well this guy out in the field over there was scared of snakes, it was a large snake. I think the maybe put a machete to him or something. If they did anything at all. It was a pretty awesome looking snake. He was probably six foot long and a good foot in diameter. It was a big one. Other than that, no I don’t recall any other unusual animals.

SM: Well, I didn’t have any other questions about your in country experiences.

Richard did you have anything?

RV: Yes, I wonder if you could describe Vietnam itself. The environment, what it looked like. When you went out on patrol, were you on a road, were you and a very small path in the jungle? Were you cutting through the trees? What was it like?

JB: We were doing all of that on patrol. Typically you would not walk a trail that had been walked before. You would try to make a new trail because that was the typical place for a booby trap to be. I received an air medal, which means I was in a helicopter a lot. I was totally amazed on certain days when I get up there and how beautiful the country was. The greenery and the rivers and the beauty. I said to myself one time there can’t be a war going on down there. It was just too pretty for that to be happening. On a pretty day, we would be in a helicopter. We would be loaded up from each side. We had no doors so we were sort of literally hanging on when the helicopter would maybe take a turn in the air. The vibration of the blades, you wanted to make sure you stayed in that helicopter. But it was really a pretty country. It was really a pretty country from the air. Anytime you’re around water, rivers. I mean anywhere in the world water adds beauty to the environment. Other than that the villages that we went through it was sort of just old stuff. Hooches, we called them hooches. Just straw roofs. It was very, very primitive and how people lived over there. We would go through a little area, maybe a farmer would be out there working on his rice crop. When you have 100 soldiers coming through with rifles and everything just think how you would feel if someone was coming through your farm here in the States. And not knowing what was going on or what may be happening or whatever. That’s a pretty awesome thing to see that in the eyes of the citizens over there. It sort of made me realize that war in your own country is not a very, very good thing to be around.
SM: How would the civilian people respond to your patrols through their villages and through their areas?

JB: Like I say they went on with their business. A lot of times the women would be out there cooking outdoors around the fire. They were cooking their meal for their family, whatever. It was very, very primitive. They sort of kept one eye on what they were doing and the other eye on us. Like I say you never knew when something may develop. They showed a lot of respect for us. They didn’t come up and bad mouth us or say anything to that nature. It was a pretty silent type of a setting, as I recall. Not many words were spoken. The eye contact was our speaking in those situations.

RV: Were you given instructions on how to act as you passed through a village?

JB: No, but I remember one time we were in an area where some ARVN soldiers were working. We sort of set up around this village. This was a village that had a lot of houses in it. I really didn’t know what was in that village, but I remember seeing what turned out to be ARVN soldiers in green uniforms. They went over to this door and I said to myself at that particular point in time is that the enemy? Because you normally couldn’t recognize the enemy in a uniform. I think I was sort of behind a rice paddy little mound and everything. I probably asked someone, ‘who is that?’ He probably knew. He said, ‘they’re ARVN soldiers, they’re ours’. But you know you just didn’t sometimes know what was going on in the field. I could see where a lot of mistakes were made like that.

RV: Can you describe the enemy? What did they tell you about the Vietcong and North Vietnamese soldier? What were your experiences?

JB: That was basically back in training where you really didn’t know. I literally saw this, was a Highway 1 situation where we set up that one day. It was in a rubber tree. I saw at least two or maybe three of them coming toward the highway with their AK-47s. We were set up, it was like 3:00 in the afternoon that I saw them. These guys probably had a green fatigue on. A military looking fatigue. We opened up on them, our machine gunner did. They popped back their AK-47s. That was the only time I really saw the enemy from a distance. If we had waited we would probably have gotten them. The excitement of the situation, the machine gunner opened up too early. He was told to wait. He was told to wait. When you’re in that situation sometimes you’re not going to be
doing what your heart tells you to do or your emotions. He opened up too early, he was
too far away. So, nothing. They got away and we left that area immediately after that
incident. That was the incident where we left one. One of our guys I had to go back and
find him, the kid from Puerto Rico. He reacted in another way he didn’t leave with the
rest of us. Everybody reacts differently.

RV: I take it you didn’t have a lot of contact with the enemy. Your average
experience just day to day just really didn’t have a lot of contact. Potential I guess.

JB: Potential contact. Even in the Iron Triangle our patrol did not get hit. The
other company did. They lost several men, many wounded. We talked about it in our
first interview, how lucky. I mean the potential was there at anytime. Why did it happen,
it was just hard for me. Why I’m here today is hard for me to understand. Alan Jackson
has a song out from the 9-11. Do you feel guilty because you’re a survivor? That’s sort
of the feeling that a lot of us have, I think, that served in the field. You think about these
things that could have happened all the time. You know 35 years later I’m here talking
about it with you guys. I would never have thought that would happen even five years
ago. I would have never worn this hat five years ago. I don’t wear it very often anyway
because too many people want to talk about it. That’s about the last thing I want to do, is
just talk about it in that type of environment, other than something like this. I don’t even
wear anything for people to know my history, my background. This is great. What you
guys are doing here at Texas Tech University in the Vietnam Archive Center is great. I
think 50 years from now when my grandkids maybe hear this, that’ll be great.

SM: Did you have any other in country follow up questions you wanted to ask?

RV: I did want to ask one question. Earlier you said when you left the States to
go over to Vietnam you thought you were not going to come back. Do you know why
you though that? I mean is it because of what you saw on the news? You know the
tempo of the war had increased, the amount of Americans in country had increased. Why
did you think you were not going to come back? Just maybe the unknown?

JB: There was the unknown. It was the fact that all the training that I had
handling hand grenades. I think we carried maybe three to four hand grenades at all
times. We put tape around them so that if the pin ever came out, hopefully it wouldn’t go
off. The explosion in training of one hand grenade is a pretty overwhelming sound. Just
all the things that you know could go wrong. Carrying all this equipment, a rifle and
everything. Just the height of the war and the death count was really high. Three to four
hundred a week on the news. You were forced to go. There was a change of your life
dramatically. I didn’t know. I have so many friends that never went into the military,
like high school friends. Here I am singled out. Why was I chosen to do this? Why was
my college roommate not? He had flat feet, I found out 30 years later. Why was it me?
The percentages of going over there and knowing that one year was a long time, a long
time. It was probably 10 years mentally. Every month was a year. The odds were not
good. The war was not popular. No one cared if you’re not directly involved in it what
you were getting ready to do, what you did or what you wanted to talk about. No one
cared. I was almost ashamed to put that on my resume when I came back and started
getting a job. I was a Vietnam veteran because the stigma of doing that at that time was
just not the right thing.

SM: Did you ever feel discriminated against because of your Vietnam veteran
experiences?

JB: Probably not. The reason I didn’t because I never let people know, unless
they knew me type of thing. When I came home to Houston my mother and my dad were
there at the airport, which I knew they were going to be there. But I had two friends from
my DeMolay chapter, two adult leaders that found out I was coming home and I didn’t
expect them at the airport in Houston. It was during the day, so they took off from work.
The both worked at the same place. Those were very special friends. They still are
today. If it wasn’t for people like that, no one would have been there. I’m sure most of
the guys that came home, there was no one there at the airport to greet them, to hug.

SM: When you traveled home were you in uniform?

JB: Yes, I was still in the Army.

SM: At that point they hadn’t been telling people go ahead and change into
civilian clothes when you arrived in San Francisco, to travel the rest of your journey
home?

JB: No, I didn’t have any civilian clothes (laughs).

SM: Did you encounter any kind of hostility? Anybody say anything negative to
you as you were traveling across the country?
JB: No, not to me. I was lucky I came back to Texas and served my last six months at Ft. Hood, Texas. I was here in the South. I don’t think we had that down in the South as much as maybe other parts of the country. I remember hearing the story of a military officer being spit on in California by someone I worked with many years later. I never experienced that. You know when you went to the airport even in your uniform, wearing your combat infantryman badge type thing most people would know that. No one would say thanks for where you’ve been.

SM: When you got home to Houston, could you tell that anything had changed in terms of the attitude of the people in the cities and towns where you were residing? From the time you left to the time you came back, was there much change in their attitudes towards the war?

JB: No one ever talked about it. The only person I ran into I went to my DeMolay organization meeting the next Wednesday night once I got home. The first person that I see in that building that night is that father of Aalund, who had gotten killed, a guy from my high school. I probably told him I just came home from Vietnam and I think his comment to me was, ‘you’re lucky, my son didn’t come home’. That was enough to say, I don’t need that type thing. I went back to my DeMolay organization, it’s youth, and everything, involved in all that. Only one or two of my friends even knew where I had been. You just didn’t want to talk about it. You just didn’t know what kind of reaction you were going to get from anyone. You stayed silent for many, many years.

SM: Did you get questioned very much by other people? Even though you didn’t yourself want to bring it up, did other people bring it up to you? Did you find any kind of interest at all?

JB: No, none.

SM: As you tried to reintegrate yourself into civilian life what were some of the challenges you faced? Going from Vietnam one day and basically several days after being back in the United States? Now you did stay in the military for six months later. Then you had to integrate yourself back into civilian life. Were there any challenges?

JB: No, my first job when I got out of the military was through a newspaper article. It was a small manufacturing company on the other side of town, which in Houston back in those days was quite a ways. It turned out to be a retired marine officer
I think. He required me to be there at 6:00 every morning. It was probably a job I wasn’t even qualified to do. It was manufacturing and you had to know a lot about machinery and all that. I stayed on that job for three weeks and I probably told him I wasn’t really probably the person for this job and he appreciated that. The mere fact that I was working for someone that had a military attitude, number one. A military schedule, being at work at 6:00, number two. That was probably something that I couldn’t deal with. I finally went to work for a savings and loan, a banking environment. I had already graduated with a business degree before I even went to the military. Looking back I was telling my daughter, last night. She’s going to finish her last semester next semester here at Texas Tech. About job interviews and everything. I said when I was in your situation I went and talked to some companies, but they had no interest in me because I was draft eligible. There were some pretty good jobs available at that time in Houston and Dallas and places. The business school at Sam Houston was a pretty good business school. I think it still is. There were so many things I think back now, where I may be in the business world if that had not happened to me. If things were not like that going on at that time. I have no regrets about what I have done but you always think about what may have been.

SM: Yes, sir. When you left Vietnam what was your attitude about your service? Do you feel like you had accomplished very much? What did you think more importantly perhaps about what the United States was trying to accomplish?

JB: I was so glad to get out of the country when that plane left the airport there in Vietnam. It was hard for me to imagine that the war was still going on. In 1969 in May of ’69 for the next two or three of four years or whatever, still hearing about deaths or whatever on the news and everything. That really bothered me to know that there were still guys getting killed, women getting killed. It was still going on. They were going back in the same areas and operations as we went in 1968 and ’69. Nothing was happening militarily to end it. In one of my letters I wrote home it says is this war has got to end, this can’t go on. One of the other happiest day in my life was to see in 1973 all the prisoners of war coming off. I remember seeing them on television, because that had to be one of my highlights of seeing that happen. I couldn’t have ever imagined myself being a prisoner of war. That probably never entered my mind. Although it did
one time in the field around that rubber tree area. We sort of got lost out there, a couple of us. If we’d have gotten captured by the enemy, you know making a wrong turn in the jungle where you didn’t know what was 10 feet away from you. Become a prisoner of war very easily. I don’t know how I would have handled that. I’d have probably made it, because of my religious background. That was not something that I was trained in number one. That was something that would have been even longer years if that would have happened to me personally.

SM: When you left did you feel the United States was going to win and the ARVN and the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese?

JB: No, win never had that feeling from day one. I didn’t know if there was ever that feeling. It was more of a feeling of this is what’s happening, but winning the war, no. It’s not crossing the goal line and winning the football game or losing a football game. It was sort of an attitude of just do what you have to do and try to get it over with as quickly as possible. You knew your obligation was two years, unlike other wars. World War II or whatever some people served four or five years. You really never knew where you were going to be or how long. You knew that during this time frame it was one year in the county, if you made it. Certainly a lot of people re-uped and went back over there, which I guess that’s their military mindset. But that was certainly not mine. I was not the ideal soldier when it came to that.

SM: What did you think as the war progressed? When you came home, you mentioned already in 1973, after the Paris Peace Accords were signed and the release of the prisoners, were you keeping fairy close track of events, for the time you got back in 1969, through ’73.

JB: Yes, I was very focused on what was going on and through the news media and newspapers and everything. My prayers were with everybody, with the country and everything. Like I say, mentally when the war ended for me, when I left the country, I just had a hard time thinking it was still going on over there. I was back in civilian life, I was back working. I was living the life I was living before all this happened to me. I adjusted pretty well from that standpoint. I guess one of the things that sort of pleases me right now is that the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. is the most visited thing in Washington. That’s saying something because there’s a lot of nice things that you can
visit in Washington that are free. But there is something awesome about that wall. There
is something awesome. They interviewed a young teenage, high school girl somewhere
and I forget where it was. She went up there in Ft. Worth. She said it was overwhelming
what she saw 58,000 names is just something. To see it is just so unbelievable. You can
read about it all the time. But just to see it, it really is an awesome thing. The Vietnam
Wall was in Houston this past weekend. If it hadn’t been for a family funeral I had to go
to, I probably would have gone out there one day just to say hi to the guys. I have seen
that before, twice in Houston. It’s really a good thing to see as a Veteran.

SM: Have you been to the Wall in Washington yourself?
 JB: No, I have not. I have not.
 SM: Is this intentional? You don’t want to go yet?
 JB: Just never have. No, I’d love to go. I would love to go just be there, just to
say hello. I know Jimmy Walker the guy from California, apparently back in 1988 when
I talked to him over the phone he ran me down in Houston. He literally called one
Sunday morning and told me who he was and he talked about the wall. Probably for
Jimmy Walker to be in the field for 12 months, the Wall really means a lot to him. It
means a lot to me too. He had the greatest potential of not coming home. Twelve
months is a long time as an infantry soldier in Vietnam. I don’t care where you were in
the field. That’s a rough year.

SM: What did you think when the war ended for the United States in 1973?
SM: Has that thought changed over time?
JB: A little bit. I’ve tried. Communism was the big focus back in those days.

Now that I’ve seen Communism go away, I can sort of sense that maybe I had a little part
to do with that in a round about way. Willie Nelson always said that ‘time will take care
of itself, so just leave time alone’. Willie’s right.

SM: What do you remember thinking when Saigon fell in April of ’75?
JB: I’ll be very honest with you. I probably didn’t focus too much on that. By
that time I was married and things were changing. I guess it sort of ended for me when
most of the military came home. The fighting pretty much had stopped. When I say
stopped, there were still soldiers there, but the main military part of it. It really didn’t
phase me one-way or the other. It just sort of highlighted what I always thought. What a
waste, what a waste.

SM: What was the most important thing you took away from your Vietnam War
experience for you personally?

JB: That life is precious, everyday is precious. Live life to the fullest. I have no
regrets about what I did at this point in my life.

SM: Are there different lessons we should takeaway as a nation from the
Vietnam War?

JB: Yes, never ever send your soldiers into a military conflict unless you’re going
to win it. There was no sense of winning anything in the time I was in the field. There
was no game plan, no victory plan as I saw it. America, that’s not the way America is. I
just didn’t understand a lot about what was going on. Now I can see the politics involved
and everything. But my father was not a military person. He didn’t serve in World War
II. He worked on the planes. I did have a lot of family background. Probably if I did I
don’t know what I would have done. My uncle who served in World War II told my
mother, ‘Don’t let him go over there. Don’t let him join something’. Because he had a
little military background and knew what the military was like. He was in the Navy.

When you go from taking 15 hours in college and finishing in late May and becoming
draft eligible on June 1st, you can’t focus on everything in your life that was going on.
Life was pretty hectic back in those days. Not like it is now. You just didn’t know how
to plan too far in advance if you were doing what I was doing. I was trying to get a
degree. That was my main focus. I had nightmares for 25 years waking up, did I finish
college? No flashbacks to the military. Did I finish college? I’d wake up from a dream
and say, ‘yes, I did finish’. That was sort of my goal back in the mid-60s. I was taught to
get a college education. My brother and I were the first ones in our family to finish
college. Even after finishing college I sort of thought that maybe it meant something. I
thought maybe I could work in an office somewhere. I had worked in an office all four
years I was going to college in Houston. I could work in an office pretty good I thought.
I could type pretty well too. And to carry a rifle for six months and do all that, something
just didn’t sit well with that. Tom Carroll was in my company. He was the company
clerk before I was. I forget where he went to college, but Tom was a good guy. Tom
made a comment one time about over there, the power of music. When you don’t really
have much to cling to, music in your life is really, really a powerful thing. Whatever kind
of music it is. He made that comment. I wrote that down today to mention that. He was
a good guy. He was sort of in the same boat I was, finished college, got drafted was out
their humping the boonies.

SM: You mentioned a number of country music artists, was country music what
helped you?

JB: Well, I always like country music. I was a big Willie Nelson fan before I
got in the Army. I used to go see Willie in the small clubs, back before he hit it big. He
played Texas music back in the days when we didn’t know what Texas music was. My
dad was a big country western person, so that was my influence. To me some of the
greatest country western songs were written back in the 1960s. Some of the greatest
songs and you can understand the words to them. You can understand the story behind
them and everything. The music really helped me. Whenever you got to the point where
you couldn’t do anything, you could maybe hum a tune. One of your favorite tunes. I
could do that at least, passing the time away for whatever time I have. Yes, music was
important to all of us.

SM: Is there a song now that when you hear it, you can’t think but help of
Vietnam?

JB: There is one song by Johnny Horton the country singer, ‘all for the love of
girl’. I remember that we were up in the base camp. The base camp that had all the
rubber trees. We woke up at 4:30 one morning to go out on an operation about 5:00.
When I woke up somebody had the radio on and that song was being played, ‘all for the
love of the girl’ by Johnny Horton. Every time I think of Johnny Horton I think of that
moment and that song. That was not one of his favorite songs as a musician. I remember
that morning we packed up and everything and we had to cross a small river about
shoulder high. This 5:00 in the morning, still at night it got cold over there. We had to
get literally soaking wet and hold on to this rope to cross this river. I was going out to the
base camp out of the wire. How cold your body got from that. You didn’t dry off until
the sun came up. You dried off fairly quickly. ‘All for the love of the girl’ was how I
woke up that morning at 4:30.

SM: How about movies? Is there any movie that you can think of that you’ve
seen about the Vietnam War that you feel is more accurate than the others?

JB: I made a point to not go see Vietnam movies a long time ago. I finally went
to see the movie ‘Platoon’. Other than all the cussing that went on in that movie there
was a lot of scenes that I could relate to out there in the field. Scenes where the guy was
walking and he could hear sounds but he didn’t know what they were. It could have been
a bird or something flying away. I could relate very well to that scene. I am still jumpy
today. I had a person come up to my truck the other day, I was working doing
paperwork. He came up on his bicycle, I didn’t hear him and he said something to my
left. I must have jumped like this. I’m still jumpy to this day when something like that
happens. He said, ‘I’m sorry I scared you’. I wanted to say I’m a Vietnam veteran so
I’m used to it. But I didn’t say that. It probably wouldn’t have meant anything. But
that’s my feeling. I went through a war. I’m still jumpy 35 years later.

SM: Did you have any other questions for him?

RV: Yes, one question. Future students of the war when they’re in the classroom
learning about this war, trying to understand it. What should they be told about the
Vietnam War?

JB: That’s a good question. What should they be told? I think what they should
be told is that life is not always good. People make mistakes, countries make mistakes.
This was a big mistake by our country, in my opinion. Sometimes we have to live with
the mistakes that are made by other people that we don’t have control over. If we do
make mistakes, let’s try to learn not to make them again. This country’s too great for that
to happen. I think a lot about the Civil War veterans you know. That time in our history
when there’s maybe 30,000 soldiers killed in a day or two, here on our land. The
awesome thing that happened which is not recorded history like this can be recorded for
future generations. This country had seen a lot. Any country has seen a lot militarily.
Let’s don’t make the same mistakes again. Let’s be better than that. The only difference
between North America and South America according to one minister one time, North
America the people came here looking for God. South America they were trying to discover gold. Let's keep our God.

SM: I can’t think of anything else to ask specifically. I just want to ask you if there’s anything you’d like to add before we finish up.

JB: I want to say to the Vietnam Archive here at Texas tech University thank you very much. Four years ago when I came up here I thought I was going to just go to a little museum. This is my daughter’s fourth year at Texas Tech and were winding up our interview verbally, orally. This has really meant a lot to me to be asked questions about the era, the war, what was happening and everything. This is 2002 and the focus is on the military again. That’s really, really great to see. Sort of got into a cycle and I was on the down cycle. The downside of that cycle. Thank you very much for what ya’ll are doing. Keep up the good work. Hopefully the new building will be on campus here, shortly. Where people will have more opportunity to learn about this part of our history. The best of luck to the University and this project that you guys are involved in.

SM: Thank you sir.

RV: Thank you.

SM: Thank you for the interview.

JB: Well, I’ve always enjoyed coming out here to Lubbock. It’s a great get away from Houston and the rat race of Houston, Texas. Walking on campus this beautiful morning was something that brings back a lot of good memories about my college days. Hope things continue well. Thank you very much.

SM: Thank you. This will end the interview with Jerry Benson.