Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Jim Donovan on the 10th of August, year 2000, at approximately 2:30 in the afternoon in the Southwest Collections/Special Collections Library. Mr. Donovan, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

Jim Donovan: I was born 10-27-1936 in Chicago, Illinois. I went to Catholic schools until 8th grade and then we moved to a small town in Michigan, my whole family did. My father took a disability as a policeman and my grandfather and him had been raised on farms and grandfather was a doctor. So anyway, we bought a small farm in Michigan and went up there and I lasted one year in school there and dropped out of high school at 15 and I just worked the farm and odd jobs and my father, who was a chief petty officer in the Navy in the Second World War, thought it would be a good idea if I went into the military. My older brother had already been in the Marines, wounded in Korea. He fought with the 5th Marines. I had always been talking about the Navy so my dad naturally thought I was going to join the Navy. So I came home with the papers and I said, ‘Here, you have to sign and mom has to sign,’ and he said, ‘That’s fine,’ he said, ‘You probably go to Great Lakes for boot camp,’ and I said, ‘I’m going to San Diego,’ and he said, ‘Why San Diego? Great Lakes is closer,’ and I said, ‘I’m going into the Marines.’ He turned out to appreciate it. My generation all went military; I mean, you were either drafted or joined soon after high school or there were very little deferments
4F’s so it was nothing unusual for a 17-year-old. I was two weeks behind my 17th birthday and half my platoon in boot camp was 17-18. I went through boot camp in San Diego and then infantry training at Camp Pendleton, California and then went to 29 Palms, California. I reported in there around March of ’54 as training for a forward observer in the artillery and then we would go back and forth between 29 Palms and Camp Pendleton and do infantry training and maneuvers and all that, but 29 Palms is the biggest artillery base there is. We did a lot of work calling in fire and it helped me later in Vietnam, ten or 15 years later, in Vietnam that training did.

SM: Let me go ahead and ask you about your brother’s experience in the Marine Corps. Did he talk much about his combat experience in Korea with you?

JD: Did I what?

SM: Did your brother talk much about his combat experience in Korea?

JD: No, and he never has. He was in a very famous outfit, it was called Baker’s Bandits. It was B-15 first time, 5th Marines. They had a very great record in Korea, and he lasted about seven weeks and got shot up pretty bad. He’s never…you know, I never thought about that. We’d talk about boot camp and training and what have you. When I went into the Marine Corps he called. He was in the hospital at [Bel Boa] San Diego at the time and he encouraged me, not to join, but encouraged me by saying, ‘You can do it,’ and whatever. But you know we never got into any conversations about it. He’s asked me questions about combat experience, but when I see notices of B-15s having reunions I send them to him and he never goes. Colonel Warthouse, the famous Marine painter who does all the paintings? He painted one of the famous hills, 341, battle 341, B-15. My brother was in there. A whole company almost got killed. Maybe I’ll talk to him about that. We talk about other experiences, but not his combat experiences.

SM: What about your dad’s World War II experiences.

JD: That was spent at Great Lakes. He was 36 years old when he was drafted, one of the last ones. I have all his military records. My mother, when she passed away, gave them to me, or just before that gave them to me. He was 36, had three children. We were all in elementary school in Chicago, then. He was a lieutenant on the police department at the time and my grandfather, chief of police surgeons for the city of Chicago, a very well known doctor. So when he got to Great Lakes, drafted in the Navy,
he went to work for the CID and all he did was investigate things and got out on my birthday, October 27th, 1945. I have the discharge. It’s a funny story how he got in the Navy; he was standing in line. He was about 6’2’, 190, always had a real good build – he never worked out, he was a natural build – but anyway, this Marine came up and he’s standing in line for the physical thing and the Marine started talking to him and said, ‘Glad to talk to you,’ and took down his name and walked away and a Navy chief walked up and he said, ‘Do you know what he just did?’ and my dad said, ‘What?’ and he said, ‘He’s going to ask for you and you’re going to be drafted in the Marines,’ and my dad said, ‘No, how much to get in the Navy?’ and the chief said, ‘Ten dollars.’ So he gave him ten dollars. He paid to get into the Navy. It might have been a set up deal at the time. I think he was kind of disappointed I went into the Marines, but later on he was very proud that I did, at least I went military. My younger brother never went, he was 4F. My older brother was always proud that he went in the Marines.

SM: The Marine Corps…were you partial to or impartial to the Navy, or you just wanted Marine Corps? Why did you choose that, do you think?

JD: I think because my brother did it, plus I was…well, of course I’m 6’2’ now, I was probably 5’11’ or six foot maybe because I grew; I was only 17. I was pretty heavy, well, I’m heavy now, uncoordinated, what have you, and I think it was a challenge. I never, ever played football until I was 21 years old, so I never played any sports at all and my older brother and younger brother were pretty good at sports. I was pretty good at softball. Anyway, I thought, ‘If my older brother can do it, I can do it.’ I’m really glad I chose it. I enjoyed, every time I was onboard a ship, I enjoyed it, so I probably would have enjoyed the Navy also. But the Marine Corps was more of a macho thing. Maybe I wanted to be macho. I never regretted it.

SM: What did your mom think about you going in the corps?

JD: I remember when my father left and one time he was on overseas orders and he came home because we were living in Chicago and Great Lakes is right down the road and she just threw a fit like a good Irish mother and crying and all that stuff. Then my brother goes off into the Marine Corps and leaves for Korea. That was at Christmas week of 1950 he’s going over to Korea, right after Cho Sin Reservoir. Luckily he didn’t get in that one. So then she’s just crying, screaming, you know, and that hurts you. So
anyway, three years later I join and there’s no war. From 1953, ’54, to ’58, the world is fine. Berlin was heating up a little bit but nothing much. Everything’s peace time and all that, and so my mother gets me up that morning when I’m leaving for San Diego boot camp and I had breakfast and we walked through the door and I had to catch a bus at a certain time down town and so I’m standing at the door and I said, ‘Now mom, no tears. I saw what happened when dad left and when Chuck left’ and she looked at her watch and she said, ‘You’re going to miss your bus if you don’t hurry,’ so that kind of hurt me, you know. Later on I talked to her about it and she said, ‘Well, there was nothing going on.’ It really tore me up when I left for Vietnam because she threw a fit. Not a fit, I guess that’s the wrong word. A mother’s a mother, and while we’re on the subject of my mother when I came home from Vietnam about a week before that I’d had a hand grenade go off really close, I think it was…even to this day it might have been my own hand grenade, I’m not sure, but there were some hand grenades flying back and forth and I got hit here in the wrist and the hand so we bandaged it up. When I got to San Francisco I call home and so they say, ‘Well, we’re pick you up at the airport,’ and so I said, ‘Now don’t worry about my hand, please, don’t get worried.’ When was that, I was 31 years old I think, 32, so anyway I’m walking up the ramp towards my parents and my mother’s crying. Well, I put my arm around her and I said, ‘Ma, the wound is nothing! Please!’ and she said, ‘It’s not that, it’s that you look so skinny.’ You know mothers. I probably weighed about 190 at the time and solid as a rock. Hope I didn’t get off the track here.

SM: No, no, that’s great! [laughs]. Now, San Diego boot camp, what was it like getting off the bus?

JD: Oh, that’s an experience and a half! Let me tell you right now that I enjoyed boot camp; not every minute of it. I’ve got pictures in the boot camp, a series picture book that we had, I was a squad leader and they’d run ahead and take some pictures of us and I looked like Gomer Pyle because I had a big smile on my face, I got chewed out more times…the other guys are so serious. There’s a shot of us standing in the shot line getting shots and I’ve just got a big old grin; I look like an idiot from the farm or something because everything was new, it was a macho thing, and I was succeeding. I mean, they made me a squad leader, and all of a sudden I don’t think I did more than
three push-ups at one time. I was fairly strong but all of a sudden I’m doing 25 and then
the next week 30 and running, and so I enjoyed it. I really did. But that first night, oh
God almighty, I’ve never been called names like that in my life. In 1953 they could still
lay hands on you, I mean to the point of double-up fists and hit you, and some of them
were sadistic. I had some pretty good drill instructors. In the platoon I was in, Platoon
419 - you never forget what platoon you’re in, you never forget your serial number or
nothing – about half from Chicago and the other half from Ohio and the guys from Ohio
had all been either college graduates or they were sophomores and juniors, and the rest of
us were just a bunch of high school drop outs from the Midwest you know, but we
meshed pretty well. My drill instructors, in those days drill instructors didn’t go through
drill instructor school. They were just picked out of maybe an infantry unit and sent to
San Diego or Paris Island and, ‘Get out there, you’re a drill instructor now.’ They were
usually sharp individuals, they didn’t pick anybody, and so I had three of them, Thomas
and Grady and Acuna. Here I am, almost 64 years old, and I can remember those guy’s
names! Acuna had three hash marks which means over 12 years in and one stripe. He
was always getting busted because he drank too much. Grady had fought from Guadal
Canal all the way through Iwo Jima, in Korea. Korea was just over. Boot camp, in those
days, was tougher mentally but it’s tougher physically nowadays because I’ve seen it in
the last year. I was up at San Diego and its tough, very tough. I enjoyed it.

SM: What weapons training did you receive there?

JD: We had the M-1 there and a little bit more weapons training I think because
we had a week of what we called snapping in, just dry running and get used to your rifle,
and then a whole week of doing nothing but shooting and then record day. Record day is
almost like final exams in college, I mean, it’s nervous time, and we did the 100 off hand
standing up and 100 kneeling and I think 300 sitting and 500 prone, laying down prone
just open sites.

SM: And this was bull’s eye training, not silhouette training?

JD: No, bull’s eye. Silhouettes didn’t come in until the ‘70s, maybe the ‘80s;
maybe the ‘70s which is better. In fact, a couple of weeks ago when I was in Quantico,
Virginia for the military reunion they took us over to the range and showed us the
different silhouettes and the things I think were probably better training. We were too
used to silhouettes and now they’ve got those simulators that we went through, the
simulators. There was a bunch of Vietnam vets, infantry vets, and here we are and we’re
shooting at moving targets and all that and can’t hit them. But then when I went back in
the Marine Corps had the M-14 and then when I was in Vietnam they switched it to 16.
So, I’ve gone through the whole…

SM: What did you think of those three weapons? Which one did you think was
probably better suited for the combat you experienced?

JD: Right now the 16. When 16 first came out it was useless; they jammed way
too much. They modified it three or four times.

SM: You did receive a 16 in Vietnam?

JD: Yeah, I had a 14 and I kept my 14. Everybody was supposed to turn in their
14s and most of the infantry units they told at least two guys from each squad to keep a
14. That’s a powerful, powerful weapon, especially if you put it on full automatic; you’d
knock out buildings. They started using them for sniper fire. The 16 modified right now
is a good top-notch weapon. The first one, if it got just a little bit dirty and it jammed and
they didn’t have the thing coming out the side of it...

SM: The forward assist?

JD: It might have had it but it wasn’t as good. They were always jamming up,
plus the guys didn’t keep them clean and they rusted very easy. I remember when we
were supposed to turn in the M-14s they sent me with about ten of them and they sent
about four or five guys with a bunch back to regiment and I was sweating all the way
back because some of them were rusted, I mean the outside was rusted. Now the
mechanisms and barrels, they were all clean, but there were cracks in the stocks and all
that and I’m thinking, ‘God, we’re going to get in trouble,’ so we pulled in there and the
guy says, ‘Put it up on the counter, and read off the serial number to me,’ and he would
check off in his master list and then he would take and just throw it over his shoulder into
a big pile. So, the worrying was useless. I’d like to have one of those now, I’d like to
have a good M-1, too.

SM: So you used the 14 when you were with the caps?

JD: Uh-huh. The caps had everything from sub-machine guns to BARs. I’ve got
a picture of a couple of caps that are BARs, carbines, M-1s, that was the logistics
nightmare. So that was one of the things that we were supposed to do was try to get them all the same weapon which was a hard thing to do.

SM: So what about other training, weapons training in basic…boot camp, excuse me?

JD: The old carbine, the M-1 carbine, of course .45s, bazookas, the old bazooka, that was in boot camp, and that was probably it.

SM: What was…I’m sorry, go ahead…

JD: I was just going to say about some of the other training that we really didn’t have that much hand-to-hand, either, which of course they have a lot more nowadays.

SM: What about bayonet training?

JD: Yes, but not that much. I was talking about this to some of the older guys at the reunion and they have a lot more now with the what they call punji…not punji, the sticks. We had, I can remember the bayonet and run it up the straw things like they say, but times have changed and some of our…when I first got in the 29 Palms and some of those guys, old timers, I mean they went in in the late ‘20s and ‘30s because this is the early ‘50s, 20 and 30 year men, and they used to train with wooden rifles. They didn’t even have…in the late ‘30s, there was no money. Congress wasn’t giving the military any money, and if they went to the rifle range they’d have to exchange a rifle and there would be two or three of them using the real rifle. So they were saying our training was really good and nowadays the training is much, much better than what I think what we got. We were probably instilled with more…not the physical, but more esprit de corps, but that was a different kind of generation. Nowadays they’re good Marines, really good, top notch, but after about a year or so they lose that team. The infantry doesn’t, but the other units. I was talking to a bunch of people in Washington, and whereas we were more team players I think didn’t complain about the barracks, they are always complaining about three people in one room nowadays, we want their own single rooms, and I never had that. In eight years in the Marine Corps we always had barracks.

SM: Open bay barracks?

JD: Oh yeah, open bay. I’ve lived in huts, I even lived in tents in 29 Palms for a while while they were still building base because the base wasn’t dedicated I think until the spring of ’54. They were still building some of the buildings. The pay was, what,
$78 dollars? We got a big pay raise in ’54 to $81 dollars, and then that stayed that way until the early ’60s and you can't say that it was comparable to what we had today because okay, $78 dollars take home is like $65 or I’m going to say $60. A beer was a dime, okay, that’s fine, but nowadays when you’re taking home $900, the beer’s $.50 cents and you can't tell me that that’s comparable to...they’re taking home more than $900 as a recruit. I don’t remember people really complaining about the pay. They had pay and that was fine. Most of us at that time were born mid ’30s or even a little bit earlier and didn’t have much. I guess I was lucky, my family, we never went without because my dad being a policeman and my grandfather a doctor, so its kind of a different generation.

Training wise, getting back to training wise, infantry training at Camp Pendleton was tough physically and that was where we learned more scouting patrolling, first aid, your hand signals, we had a couple of live fire things where we started crawling through the wire and they’re shooting over your head, I thought that was fun. Some guys really got scared. I was scared, but it was a fun type thing when you get through and, ‘Oh boy!’

SM: What were they shooting, .50 cals?

JD: No, the old .30, long one perforated thing, and in fact when I was in they still had a water cooled, but that was a long time ago. And then the .50, God, there was a special on The History Channel the other day, the different weapons they were using, they looked like outer space things, and then they shoot a grenade 400 meters away or something lovely. You know we couldn't throw them. That was about as far as you could throw them.

SM: What was the hardest thing about boot camp, for you personally?

JD: Probably the physical until a certain point about halfway through and then all of a sudden was getting...because I was out of shape. I was always a good worker, but that’s...if you get tired when you’re working you can sit down. You can't tire when you’re marching out there in that grinder or running and the drill instructor’s calling you every name in the book. Probably the physical until a certain time and then I started enjoying it, getting up early; wasn’t hard. It was interesting talking to guys from different parts of the United States. I remember being in shock when I met the first guy who couldn't read or write. I’ve met a lot of people since then, but I’d never been around people like that. He was from the hills of Tennessee or someplace and he couldn't read or
write. I remember just almost being in shock. I loved the food. Military food and me…and my mother was a great cook, but like my wife says, I’d eat dirt if I was hungry enough and if it looked good. I really…you know, a lot of guys when they look back they forget some hard times of boot camp and they say, ‘Oh yeah, I liked boot camp.’ I can remember the hard times, but everything was new. I think that’s what I…I’ve always liked that, and to this day I like something new; new experiences like today at the swimming meet. This thing’s a new experience for me and I look forward to it. It was new, something new, because later on in college I learned that a man’s personality is the sum total of his experiences, so the more experiences you have, I don’t know if I have a nice personality, but I’m not a dud, I know that. My ITR infantry training was hard physically because we were running up and down those hills in California in boot camp. I can remember a real good experience at boot camp, they don’t do it anymore. The rifle range was at a place called Camp Matthews which the military sold it to University of San Diego and it was about 11 or 12 miles from MCRD which is right in the middle of San Diego and it was through almost all residential areas and then into the foothills and that’s where the rifle range was, Camp Matthews, and you walked to Camp Matthews. But it was about…boot camp was 13 weeks then, and it was probably during the ninth week because we were going to go up there, like the eighth or ninth week, so we were in fairly good shape. But, we had to walk through residential areas and people are out there watching because you’ve got your rifles and helmets. Oh boy, proud Marines. I don’t know, they might have been laughing at us. ‘Look at those crazy kids!’ Oh, another thing, they still do it which really in Marine Corps history is drilled into you, is famous guys. Now doing some research on some of these famous Marines, which I don’t want to mention any names, but they turned out to be drunks and bums but they were characters. One of them came back into the Marine Corps and he was like 50 years old, goes over to Guadal Canal, gets wounded, they put him on a ship and sent him back to Hawaii, goes AWOL from the hospital, stows across another ship to get back into the battles, which he did. Well his name is very famous; Lou Diamond. People used to take their hats off when they’d talk about Lou Diamond. He was a God. But characters like that…and then in training like I said in 29th Palms, being an OF I worked with artillery. It was kind of interesting because you called in fire. In those days you didn’t have…it was
almost…well it was old fashioned, really. You just called in a fire and had a fire mission
and you see the explosion and you just say, ‘Left 50, right 50’ and you might tell them
where you were on the map. Nowadays, by God, they’re shooting azimuths and satellite
things and all that because I’ve talked to some FOs now and they’re saying, ‘Well
everything you’ve described we learned in the first two hours of class, and then we go
into the real stuff.’ Well, it took me two years to learn that.

SM: Well, you didn’t have GPS then?
JD: No.
SM: Or laser sighting?
JD: You just get down and say, ‘Well, I have a fire mission,’ and then you go
from there.
SM: Did you have any live fire exercises?
JD: Uh-huh.
SM: Were you brought in live artillery rounds?
JD: Oh yeah. They had almost every artillery unit in the Marine Corps at 29th
Palms. Now Camp Lejune, they had their own and at Pendleton but they would all come
out there because there’s nothing but the Mojave Desert. So, the biggest artillery pieces
in the Marine Corps had 155 guns and 55 howitzers, and then just before I left there to go
to 3rd Recon in Okinawa self propels first came into existence they looked nice. Jeez, you
don’t have to walk now, you could just drive with those guys. The OF came in handy in
Vietnam like I said because when I was a chief scout I got to…they relieved a guy at a
place called Dai Loc and the colonel happened to be in the bunker back there at 23 and he
said, ‘I want Sgt. so-and-so relieved, the Vietnamese at Dai Loc are starting to complain
about him and his attitude toward them,’ and it was a lieutenant by the name of We,
Lieutenant We, I’ve got a nice picture of him at home. So anyway, the colonel turned to
me and I had just got back from camp and so he said, ‘Donovan, you used to get along
with the Vietnamese. Can you, FO?’ I said, ‘Yes, sir, I used to be one,’ and he said,
‘Well get up to Dai Loc and relieve them.’ So I was up there about two weeks which was
nice because headquarters at that time moved to Dai Loc. Dai Loc became headquarters
for a really reinforced battalion so I was one of the first Americans up there, and this
sergeant, boy, he was crazy. I mean, his eyes were as big as saucers. I got off the
helicopter and he said, ‘Look out for these guys, they’re after you, they’ll get you,’ and I thought, ‘Okay, Frank,’ and they were nice to me, these guys, but he wouldn't give them a chance and that was the hard thing. I’ll get into that later, but that was the one thing that you needed to have to get along with him. Like I said, you had to go all the way back to boot camp meet some of these guys from Texas. I’d never been to Texas, and they talked a little bit weird and I thought everybody rode horses and owned big ranches. When I was in 29 Palms I met a guy that I’d never heard about…what’s the name of that wild pig, javelina, that they’ve got down in south Texas, they’re nasty, they’ve got the tufts? Javelina, that’s a Spanish name. Anyway, they’re wild pigs.

SM: Boars?

JD: Yeah, boars, I mean, they’ll kill you. This one guy, I happened to have duty one night and he was from south of San Antonio by the rally someplace and he was…we had a list of guys coming back off leave and he was supposed to be in by midnight and so I had 24 hour duty and he didn’t come in and so I waited until about six o’clock in the morning and I had to log him in absent. So oh, maybe eight or nine o’clock I was doing something and they called me into the office and they said, ‘We want you to initial that that you did lock him in but that later on he was excused,’ and this was the captain so I said, ‘Yes, sir.’ So I said, ‘Was he in an accident or something?’ and what had happened was he was supposed to catch a plane out of San Antonio like at four in the afternoon or something and fly to San Diego and he would be back in plenty of time, so he decided to get up real early and go boar hunting by himself and he got treed by about five or six of them and he had four or five rounds and he killed a couple and he decided, ‘Oh, I’d better hang on to my bullets,’ and every once in a while he’d shoot one off and of course they’d come looking for him and when they found him the sun was just going down and he’s sitting in a tree. They had to get him to town. They had to get the sheriff, get the Red Cross, and they finally radioed and they finally got the message a couple hours after I logged him in as missing that it was a bonafide excuse and he was on his way. I remembered when he got there and they were saying, ‘What put you up the tree?’ and he said, ‘These wild pigs.’ We’re going, ‘Pigs?’ You know I was living on a farm in Michigan. I knew a pig, but I’m thinking nice pink little skinned pigs that comes up and
licks you, you know. A little pig put you up a tree! But anyway, I mean, it’s interesting sitting down with those guys and talking to them.

SM: So you integrated the experience as kind of like a cross cultural experience where you meet new people and different people and that kind of helped you later on when you went home dealing with new different people?

JD: Oh yeah. I think that’s one of the reasons I became a history teacher or history major in college. My first two years I was physical education and then after Vietnam I changed it to history because my traveling around the world and all with the Marine Corps and meeting different people and its just interesting to read about different people. The Marine Corps sure has a bunch of different people…well, the Army and everybody does, but the Marines seem to have…people gravitate to the Marine Corps that are a little bit different than your normal person. As a high school counselor I never…oh, I’m sorry, one time did I ever steer a kid to the Marine Corps. But they would come in and if I knew they were going to go to military, they would come in and say, ‘I’m thinking of joining,’ you know and if I thought they belonged in college or…God, that’s almost like playing God, but some people don’t belong in college right away. They’re not ready for college. They’re not even ready for the work world, and they would do good in the military. But I steer them towards Air Force, they can learn something, or even the Navy, but the Marine Corps really you do need a different type personality. You’re not going to learn much in the Marine Corps unless you go the air wing and for a trade to help you on the outside. But you would learn discipline and all that. A lot of kids, I knew they would do good. Of course I grew up in a family that was like I knew what the word, ‘No,’ meant and, ‘It’s your turn to help your mother,’ or, ‘It’s time to get up, you’ve got to get out in the field,’ and there was none of this, ‘Well, can I lay in bed?’

SM: A different work ethic than most kids have today.

JD: I think I had good work ethic; I still do. Hell, I’ve retired three different jobs. I keep retiring and going back for other jobs.

SM: The training you received at boot camp and at Camp Pendleton, that’s right, yeah…

JD: First it was Pendleton infantry training and then FO at 29 Palms.
SM: What were the harshest disciplinary actions you ever saw taken against somebody, and for what reason? Do you recall?

JD: A closed fisted hit right in the mouth; that was at boot camp right in front of a general.

SM: What was the infraction?

JD: I don’t know, probably not listening. Acuna was walking up and down – I’ll never forget it – walking up and down talking and all of a sudden just reached over and whack! And not as hard as he could because it probably would have broke his jaw. Acuna was the biggest Hispanic you’ve ever laid eyes on; he had to be 6’3”, 220, and the general was in a ’53 Buick and the master sergeant and the general were standing by the driver, the master sergeant and the two star general, and after Acuna did it another drill instructor said, ‘Acuna, the general,’ and he turned around and saw him and said, ‘Good morning, sir,’ and saluted and the general just said, ‘Carry on,’ and that was it.

SM: That’s amazing.

JD: At 29 Palms I saw a real good one. Some guys had volunteered, for money, to work at the staff NCO club for a party or something. They needed extra help or something. So our gunny asked for a couple of guys and they ended up working there that night. I guess they stole some whiskey or something so they had to dig a ten by ten by ten and the sun in the desert is coming down. Well, they’re in shape, you know. So gunny said, ‘You guys thirsty?’ and they gave them each a bottle of champagne and they thought that was great until they got drunk and that sun coming down, you talk about some sick puppies; but I bet you they never stole another thing. When I was first in, and even to this day it was done but it was done much, much more then, the 1st Sergeants did all the discipline and the gunnies to the point that our 1st sergeant had a deal; you had your choice, you could go and see the skipper, or he’d take care of it, the 1st sergeant, and that was from guys being gone a couple of days. I mean, they might come wondering in on Monday afternoon, they had all got drunk in L.A. or shacked up some place or something, and so you’d say, ‘Okay, you’re 24 hours or 48 hours late,’ or, ‘What do you mean cussing out a corporal?’ That’s office hours, Article 15, so you’d say, ‘Do you want to see the skipper, or do you want to see me?’ They always took him. It was maybe two weeks restriction. Married guys might have to work three or four hours extra at night.
cleaning up the barracks and then they could go home, but nothing went on your record. They took care of it. I only saw one guy say, ‘No, uh-uh, I’m not taking your crap! I want to see the skipper.’ So the skipper gave him an Article 15, it went in his record book, and his punishment was two weeks restriction and to report to the 1st Sergeant every night.

SM: What an idiot.

JD: I saw some real chicken things like...that I thought...I can't remember any specifics, I mean minute little infractions of rules and they’d come down on them. To tell you how strict it was in those days, though, discipline...I had duty one time at battalion headquarters and I was probably 18 and a captain came in and wanted to know where dispersing was, and I’ll never forget that, and I really didn’t know myself. It wasn’t in our building, I knew that, he just happened to walk in and say, ‘Where’s dispersing?’ and a 1st Lieutenant was standing there and he said, ‘Lieutenant, do you happen to know where dispersing is? The captain wants to know.’ So the lieutenant said, ‘Sure,’ and he took him outside and he pointed, you know, and the next thing I know the Sgt. Major’s calling for me, I walk in his office, he makes me stand at attention and screams and hollers how dare I ask the lieutenant a question without asking permission to speak. That was in ’54, late ’54-early ’55. I mean I got my rear end chewed up, boy; screamed at! ‘Dumb ass, do you want to be a private all your life? You don’t talk to a lieutenant that way!’ and all I said was, ‘Excuse me, lieutenant, could you help the captain?’ instead of saying, ‘Sir, may I speak to you lieutenant, sir?’

SM: How long did that last during your first five years in the corps, or four years?

JD: It started to really loosen up probably early ’60s and then it went all to hell during Vietnam, discipline. There was still good discipline, but nothing like it had been in the ’40s and ’50s.

SM: And were you often required to ask permission to talk to officers?

JD: No, not after that.

SM: Before that?

JD: Oh yeah. ‘Permission to speak, sir?’ And he could tell me, ‘Hell no!’ In fact, in those times in Japan, I was in Recon, I was called in the office and said, ‘What do
you know about such-and-such an incident,’ and I can't even remember what it was about, and I wasn’t guilty or nothing, but I said something like, ‘Sir, can I stand at ease? I could explain it a lot better?’ Oh jeez, the captain got up and started screaming right behind the back of my head, screaming at me. How dare I ask to not stand at attention! See, because those early days you had guys that had...if they had 12 years in the Marine Corps, 13-14 years in the Marine Corps, they had been through maybe seven years of war and combat and they knew that discipline was extremely important. Plus, most of them had worked up through the ladder. Half the officers were Mustangs; now it’s very rare. You know, you have to go to college and all that. So there were some tough old birds. I don’t think they could run a mile, seriously; the officers were horrible. I saw staff NCOs - up until probably in the late ‘50s when they really cracked down - after boot camp that were fatter than I am right now and I’ve got a 44 waist. Oh, it was terrible. I saw a cook – in fact, his nickname was Two Belts – he had to have two belts on, cartridge belts, and right now I wear a cartridge belt because I did a couple weeks ago at a color guard back home. I probably had four inches left, so he could not even put on two belt, and now, though, 1st sergeants are out there running with them. I guess the discipline in the Marine Corps wasn’t too good in the late ‘40s; Korea brought around all that. Also, the uniforms were so different. We had the old utilities, the herringbone. We never gloss our boots, we just roll them up like cuffs; we might even turn the collars up. Things are a lot different today. Discipline is...in fact, its stricter nowadays, I know for a fact. You can get an Article 15 really easy, and if you get one you might as well get out. If an officer gets reprimanded, forget it; he might as well get out, which I don’t think is right because there are some guys in there that might a couple of times a year get drunk and tell the gunny where to go and okay, you’re in trouble, but they were great, good guys who just every once in a while get carried away. When I went back in the Marine Corps there was a guy in my unit named Brajourd in 1964 that had just shy of 20 years and had just made corporal, and the reason they made him a corporal was he was about to retire and they thought that would be a little bit of extra money for him. But that guy was a great Marine, and once a month got drunk and he just stay away but he’d work for 27-28 days and volunteer weekends and was just great, but once a month, look out.
SM: You mentioned that the discipline for married guys would be different sometimes. Were there many married Marines?

JD: No, my first hitch was rare. As a matter of fact, in my first company, in 29 Palms, the officers, which there was only a captain and two lieutenants, the 1st sergeant an the gunny had cars, and they weren't new cars, and maybe two other guys, but that was it. Nowadays everybody’s got a car. As a matter of fact, the new commandant of the Marine Corps is trying to go back to the rule where they don’t even recognize marriages unless you have over four years in the Marine Corps and I think you have to be at least a corporal, E4, and that’s how it was in those days. That’s tough, when you’re married, legally, and maybe the Catholic church and all that kind of jazz, and that’s tough. You’re not married in the eyes of the Marine Corps and you’re not getting the benefits. You should really talk to some of the guys that…there’s one of the guys there in my hometown who was an administrative person during that time, retired warrant officer, he could tell you some of those rules. Nowadays of course your wife gets money and you get the allotments and all that. A lot of guys…we would have kind of like a party once a month at some married guy’s house and we’d bring the beer but we’d also bring a bunch of food. Silverware would disappear from the mess hall. I know one couple who had mattresses, but they had nothing; even married people lived in trailers. The pay wasn’t that well, so it was tough, and I think I’ve heard where this new commandant’s going to say nobody married is coming in the Marine Corps, you have to be single, and then there’s only so many dependants allowed, and I think its good nowadays especially because the Marines are going on so many deployments, they’re always on the go and that’s not good for a marriage. Another thing in those days – I say those days, the ‘50s – the Marines were the only branch of the service where no dependents were allowed overseas. I was in Japan and Okinawa in ‘56-‘57 and came back August of ’57 and went to Florida. All kinds of dependents were overseas; no Marines, not allowed. They also had like two year tours of duty and the Marines were always a year overseas and that was it and then you’re back for two years and there one year so that’s still not good for marriage. There was a big stink, too, I don’t know who the commandant was, but he brought…a lot of the pilots who were flying out of Japan brought their wives over and the wives would get a six month visa or something like that, but that was all on their own;
they weren't getting any extra money or anything. Well the commandant happened to be on a tour over there in '56 or '57 and he brought his wife with him on the tour of the different bases and heard about it and gave an order that all wives would leave and there was a big stink saying, ‘Okay, how about your wife? She came over.’ ‘That’s different.’ ‘No, its not.’ Some people really for the first time ever would talk back to a commandant or at least wrote a letter saying, ‘It’s not right what you’ve done.’ But that was changed I think right after Vietnam. In the ‘70s they started allowing dependants over for their two and three year tour of duty, unless you’re on a float, of course. The Marines were always different. I can remember in the ‘50s we had the widest ties in the world when the style was skinny. Now in the ‘60s when they went wide, we went skinny. I'm serious, just the opposite. You have to be different. It was a time when congress was trying to save millions of dollars. ‘Let’s have one uniform for everybody, including Navy, and maybe different hats.’ Well, the Marines screamed. We had our dress blues – well, everybody did, but the Marines were the loudest - and of course you know the history that the Marine Corps was almost disbanded twice. Truman wanted to flatfoot it in the ‘40s. Twice they tried to have congress but understand the Marine Corps being no dummies with their PR; they made everybody that wasn’t in the reserves a colonel in the Marine Corps reserves in Congress, so now you’ve got all of congress and they’ve got commissions in the Marine Corps reserves. They’ve never been in boot camp or anything, but who’s going to complain because when they say, ‘Alright, who wants to vote to disband the Marine Corps?’ ‘No, nope!’ Politics! Getting back to the training… SM: As a forward observer, in your forward observer training, would you be in a unit environment or combat environment, would you be with an artillery unit or would you be passed off to an infantry unit?

JD: Infantry. I don’t know how they do it now but even during Vietnam you might be attached to a headquarters battery of a certain artillery battalion, and never go back there except every two months or three months for some administrative reason. Although you’re with the infantry, you’re there, and they’ve got officers. The FO officers were artillery officers qualified, your air officers were pilots, and they were always attached to the infantry, and artillery guys could speak the language of artillery and especially if they were AO’s, the air officers, and they would know some of these
guys flying. They could recognize their call signs and they’d break in and say, ‘John, is that you? Over.’ ‘Yeah, what are you doing here with the grunts? Over.’ ‘We need some help down here,’ ‘Alright, you got it,’ you know, so but you just stayed with them and I’ll never forget our call sign was Red Dog, our FO’s infantry unit I was with in ‘Nam because I had something going with them and I hung around with them. So yeah, administratively and everything…and some F.O.s, because I was infantry in ‘Nam, in the cav, but the F.O.s were more infantry than some of those infantry guys because they had me right up there running with the radios on the back and the lieutenant screaming at them and they’d be calling admissions also because you needed radio experience to know what to do.

SM: And your time at 29 Palms, any interesting events any further than that, any training problems, training casualties, or anything like that?
JD: I’d like to check on this. I was in a car and there was six of us in the car. We might have been coming back from range, a small arms range, and a truck passed us up on mountain road, a six by, and so we come around the turn and there’s a truck on its side with bodies laying all over the place and I say bodies, I mean they were alive, but there were just bodies, and I know four or five guys got killed because I was probably junior man because the guy driving there was a shack, guard shack, an ammunition dump or something off to the side and it was a long distance away and I remember the guy saying, ‘Donovan, get up there and call the emergency room or call the hospital or something,’ and I remember running up this hill in the sand and getting there and asking in a very calm voice, ‘Where’s the phone?’ and the guy was already on it and he says, ‘Here,’ and when I got the phone all of a sudden it hit me and I was out of breath, shook up, and the nerves finally caught up to me, but no short rounds that I could ever remember. There were some rounds that would go way off the side that weren't supposed to. A couple of them landed near the town, but nobody was killed or hurt. I do remember one time on a mortar range, and I don’t know why I was out there, because I had nothing to do, because I was standing behind the gun...maybe we were just watching mortars going off and they were about four deuce big mortars and watched 12 of them so that must be a whole company or battery so all 12 of them were there and they said, ‘Fire!’ and all 12 of them go off and you’re looking out with binoculars and [makes
noise] all the sudden went off [makes noise]. So I forget the command, it was like 1000 yards off to the right and I forget the command but its, ‘Don’t touch anything and fall back immediately.’ I think it might be, ‘Fall back in pieces.’ So they’re going along looking at everyone and one about two from the end, they’re all faced like this, his is over like this, and I don’t think they did it on purpose, but I remember the gunner saying, ‘Well how do you know I’m wrong?’ ‘They could all be wrong.’ I don't think he did it on purpose. No training accidents. I know we were on amphibious training in Coronado. A guy broke his neck, I always hated going over the side and getting down on the ropes, I mean on the nets, and he fell and broke his neck.

SM: Killed?

JD: I don’t know, I don’t think so. I’ve never been one for if I see a car accident I’m not going to stop, so maybe I push those things in the back of my mind subconsciously.

SM: What about during boot camp or infantry training, any training casualties there?

JD: No, we had a guy in the next platoon commit suicide which I guess the suicide rate’s pretty high. At that time it didn’t even dawn on us. No. I had one…which I’m getting way ahead of myself because there were no Marine reserve units out in west Texas when I was a teacher out there so I transferred over to the Army reserve actually as a National Guard infantry unit and the top-notch unit all three platoon sergeants of this one company in Pampa were all combat vets and there was a sprinkling of them. This was in the mid ‘70s. The XO was a former Marine corporal from Vietnam so he was pretty good, and I got a staff sergeant came in, I was an E7 platoon sergeant and this staff sergeant had just got out after 12 years in the Army and he let it be known that he wanted my job, and he did things…even the company commander called me in, and this guy’s name was McNeil I think, Mc something, McNeil, and he said, ‘Look out for that McNeil. He’s telling us things that you’re doing wrong out there and I don’t think you’re doing wrong, you’re doing alright, but you know how politics and things like that get in. This guy all his life wanted to be an infantry platoon sergeant. So we’re down on two weeks training at Fort Hood and there’s one of my squad leader’s names was Cowboy, and that’s his name; his brother’s name was Rowdy and the other one was Buster, I think,
which I thought were weird, but Cowboy, that’s his first name! Anyway, Cowboy was a
tremendous guy. So Cowboy and this McNeil went to the claymore range, and claymores
you’ve got to watch out for. You can set them off backwards, they can fall, so I guess
they set them up and they were walking away and McLean turned around…they were
backing up or something and one of them went off prematurely and luckily they were far
enough back but McLean caught some in the throat and the shoulder and Cowboy caught
one right above his eye. It would have put his eye out. Cowboy was back in a couple of
days, but McLean must have been worse off than that because…but anyway, the captain
come up to my position and he said, ‘I’ve got some good news and some bad news,’ and I
said, ‘What?’ He said, ‘The bad news is that Cowboy got hit with a claymore. He’ll
probably be back in a couple of days.’ I said, ‘That’s the good news?’ I mean, I said,
‘That is bad; what’s the good news?’ He said, ‘McLean also got hit, he’s not coming
back!’ So he knew that I didn’t like him. I’ve never been right in a training accident. I
know there have been some bad ones. I don't know if it’s just lucky or if I was always
with people who were safe. I was in Vietnam when one of our guys was killed by a
sergeant thinking his rifle was empty, and I’ve always been leery of people saying,
‘Don’t worry it’s unloaded.’ Don’t give me that crap! I shoot with some guys that are
pistol and rifle shots over there at Decatur all combat vets, and you should see us on the
range. We hold the pistols way up. If a guy said, ‘Gee, let me see your pistol,’ we will
hold it up, make sure it’s back, check it, and then we’ll give it to you and I guess its just
habit or something, and this sergeant they had come off a patrol they were going to sleep
for a couple of hours and go to chow, and he thought his rifle was unloaded and if we
were in battalion area or company area we always carried our weapons and we always on
the sling we would put a magazine holder just dangling there; just always had a magazine
there because you couldn't put one in the rifle, so if something did happen you had that
magazine right there because you’re going to go take a shower or go to the head or
something and you might not have any clothes on, but you grabbed your rifle and you
had the ammo there. But anyway, he shook this guy and he said, ‘Let’s go eat,’ and the
guy said, ‘I’d rather sleep,’ and he said ‘No, come on, you’ve got enough sleep, let’s go,‘
and he kiddingly grabbed his rifle and there was no magazine in it, and he said, ‘I’ll shoot
you.’ Pow! They took him away in a straight jacket; he was completely gone. To this
day he’s probably (?) or something but killed him right in his chest. Now evidently when he came in that night it was like four o’clock in the morning, he took the magazine out and it didn’t completely clear. So that’s probably the closest to accidents. In fact, I was watching a war movie last night and it was a dumb one; war movies are horrible. I thought Saving Private Ryan was very realistic and all that. These guys were on patrol and I thought, ‘You know, I was on patrol where a guy supposedly tripped and the gun had shot off, you know, walking and tripped,’ [makes firing noise] but he was always saying, ‘Do I have to go? What should I...’ He asked too many questions, so of course that’s aborted now; you have to go, you have come back. You can’t continue on without the zippers knowing you’re out there, you know, but I was watching this movie last night with the patrol and I thought, ‘I wonder if that guy did that on purpose?’ You know, we weren’t mad, okay, we have to go in. See, I snore so bad that I couldn’t go out on ambushes if I was overly tired or if it was going to be a long ambush. Now if we’re going to set up a quickie or go out like at three in the morning and try to get them coming out of villages or something especially when I was at cat because they would sneak into villages and spend the nights and get up and go out and if I had enough sleep then I could do it but if it was after working 15-16 hours and then planning an ambush and going out there, I’m going to go to sleep and snore. Well, if you snore now you abort so you just get to the point that it might not be my turn to go out or it was going to be a long one, they’d say, ‘Let Donovan go with us. Donovan, come out with us!’ Man, I’d make some noise. I’d try not to, of course, but it happens. There was one thing about the PF’S; if they thought that the Vietnamese VC - notice how I haven’t said gooks, I’m trying not to, I’m trying to be politically correct but to hell with it, the gooks – you could almost tell that they thought the gooks were around because they were overly good and quiet.

SM: Quick question since you brought it up; when you refer to…when you use that word, gook, are you referring to Viet Cong or NVA?

JD: Yeah.

SM: And you refer to the Vietnamese in their village or the ones that were friendly, either ARVN or whatever, by their…either ARVN or ruff puffs or just refer just to Viet?
JD: Oh yeah, I would never call...gook is a word that the Marines thought up way back before Korea meaning enemy, so I know guys who said, ‘Oh, you work with the gooks?’ meaning PF’s and all that, you know, and I remember at the time saying, ‘No, I work with the PF’s, I work with the ARVN,’ ‘But they’re gooks!’ But they’re not, and gooks is a derogatory term meaning enemy, that’s the way I use it. Here’s another thing; I was brought up in a home that was non-prejudice, you talk about being non-prejudice! We could not use derogatory terms like Pollack, [Guinea], things like that, and in Chicago that’s very common terms. Uh-uh, boy my dad would really get mad.

My dad and my uncle, he’s actually my great uncle, my dad’s uncle, when my dad was 41 his uncle was 42 and my dad was an only child so they were raised like brothers and they were both policemen and my uncle got killed breaking up a robbery of four black guys, and my dad happened to be in the hospital at the time and I remember making a derogatory term [in front of] my dad; boy, he came unglued. He said, ‘Don’t you ever say those words in [my house],’ and one reason being first generation Irish, Ireland, the history of Ireland, the Irish were very prejudice against...so anyway, so I was brought up not...and I never...when somebody’s talking, other Vietnam veterans, and if they’re saying, ‘Gooks,’ and I know they’re talking about the VC, fine. If they say, ‘Gooks,’ it really hurts me; not hurts, its just the little hair, you know, and I’ll say, ‘Hold it, guy, come on. They weren’t our enemies.’ ‘Yeah, they were no good.’ ‘Don’t give me that stuff.’ Usually its guys who have had bitter experiences or something. I usually say VC.

To get back to the...we were on an ambush one night in dried up rice paddies and we were kind of over the edge of it waiting, and somebody was making a sound like a ‘Psst! Psst,’ and I turned real slow and there’s a snake calling over the guy next to me’s PF’s laid out and he’s just looking back looking at it, watching that baby go off. It wasn’t poisonous, it was one of those that hang around rice paddies, but I would have been up running! In fact, I stepped off a paddy one time, a dyke, into the water because we had to make a 180 turn and I stepped right on a snake. But they would buy them in the market and eat the rodents and the bugs and they didn’t eat rice, and then I think after farmers would harvest it, if they didn’t have too many snakes they would eat it and then the next harvest they’d go to the market and buy them. They use everything over there, [used it], but this thing was just laying underneath the water and I stepped on that baby and went,
'Shoo!' [makes running sound] and I went, ‘Shoo!’ [makes running sound]. But I’ll bet you that if the PF’s thought that the VC or somebody weren’t even in the area the guy would have jumped up. They had a lot more nerve than I had, I’ll tell you.

SM: So why don’t you go ahead and discuss your duty in Okinawa with Force Recon?

JD: When I joined Recon which was in October of ’56, in those days they had one Recon company per division, and that was it; no Force Recon, no Battalion Recon, just one Recon battalion and the 3rd Marine Division was spread out all over the Pacific so they had one platoon on Hawaii and two platoons on Okinawa. So, there were only two platoons. Nowadays, the new commandant is starting to go back to Battalion Recon and of course Force Recon now is battalion size. Recon is really big time. 4th Recon started from our Recon there in Okinawa in 1958, about six months after I left. I’d already been jump qualified; in fact, I went to jump school before I left over there, so they all went to jump qualified and scuba and then grew into two companies and then battalions and it really got big. But anyway, meanwhile it was just one company. We did an awful lot of rubber boat training; nine man boats, we had four on each side and the Coxswain in the back. Everybody had to do rubber boat training because if you're going to hit an island at night, a Recon raid or something like that or Recon information the corpsman had to be qualified, all the officers. The best Coxswain we had was a corpsman, a Navy corpsman, [Wimpy Witmar ?]. It ended up retiring as Coxswain Master Chief. That’s all we did was train; now that was the trainingest outfit that I’ve ever been in; lots of swimming. The Marine Corps taught me how to jump out of airplanes and swim. Oh boy I tell you, that’s great. See, that’s another thing, I enjoyed Recon; well, most guys do. In fact, when I came back after Vietnam which is another nice story. I volunteered for Recon and I got it. So getting back to 3rd Recon, there was only the one…two was actually on Okinawa. We started out by every other week we had the same training schedule. Monday’s we loaded all the [boats] on trucks, which we didn’t have trucks, we had to get them from another outfit and we would go up to Northern Okinawa. Nowadays Camp [Schwab] is up there and its really a [tough] area but in those days it was nothing, and we had one place where we set up tents, aired up the boats, got everything ready, and Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday – we trained almost
all night Thursday – got up Friday morning, knocked down all the tents and all that, went back, cleaned up everything, had inspection on Saturday’s, and then we had nothing to do from Saturday noon to Sunday night. There was Cinderella liberty, no overnight liberty in those days and then we started again on Monday. There was another thing, up until about, oh, I’d say ‘58-’59 all government employees, Washington D.C., military, and everybody had to work five and a half days a week, so Saturday mornings…we considered a long weekend liberty from Friday night. Oh boy, if you did good all week long you could get off Friday night so that was something. Then the next week – that was one week’s training – then the next week we would only go out for two days, come back, make a 20-mile [hike] and an eight-mile paddle.

SM: How many men in a boat with a paddle?
JD: Nine.

SM: Nine men in a boat with a paddle?
JD: Four guys paddling and the Coxswain and headquarters section that had a couple of people riding, plus all your gear.

SM: How long would that generally take you?
JD: Oh, we’d start out in daylight and walk to Kim Beach. Now, Camp Hade where we were at was in a big, gigantic cove – I mean it was miles inland – and Kim Beach…no, did I say 20 before? It was actually 12 by water. It was 20 total; it was eight miles across the water and it was 12. We would walk around Kim Beach and paddle the boats back to Camp Hade. Now there was sometime when the tide was out we always wore tennis shoes so we just upped boats then walked across not all the way, and then the front boat all of a sudden said ‘Whoa!’ The guy had fallen. Okay, this is a big ledge. So that was physical training and teamwork because a lot of times the seal would absolute quiet paddle, and boy, you had…and no noise. If you were coming up from a stroke and hit the guy in front of you his paddle, who was coming back, the noise at night, so if you were coming in we work off of subs once in a while, too, if you were coming in to make a raid and they’ve got guards around the beach and they can’t see you because it’s so dark but they can hear somebody out there, so if you do that then we have to turn around and go back. That wasn’t on the eight-mile thing, that was on the maneuvers. We were
really good. I say we were good; we thought we were good. If we’d gone into combat, we probably would have gotten chewed up if the enemy was any good.

SM: Why do you say that?

JD: Because we were trained in Second World War tactics. If we’d have ever had to go into the jungles and do this...we were good in the water, we were good at getting on the beach, but the combat veterans were all Korean combat veterans, COs and the staffs, some of the sergeants. I don’t...I just often thought that just like in Vietnam we had to learn the awful hard way so we would have had to learn the hard way. We would have done alright because it was some real good guys physically but I’m sure we’d got chewed up, just like when they went to Korea they got chewed up in the Second World War...because the military was probably top notch until the mid-70’s and all of a sudden now you don’t have that many more veterans. About two years ago one of our guys who was a corporal that stayed in, a retired gunnery sergeant, his name is about a foot long and the first letter is A and the last letter in his name is Z, so of course he was called AZ. He just started...he called up a guy he knew, he called up another guy. We’ve got 40 some odd guys on our roster now and they’re having a reunion next week but I can't make it because school starts. Next year about 30 some odd guys of the 40 – now that’s about a six-month period platoon from Amphibious. It wasn’t called Recon, it was called Amphibious Reconnaissance Company because that’s all we did was water and having reunions, that’s kind of nice. Everybody’s...well, I’m 64 so they’re all 63-64-65 years old.

SM: What was your...speaking of that name difference, what was the mission or the role that Amphibious Reconnaissance played in the larger unit?

JD: Good question because we had a division landing on the Philippines in the spring of ’57. It was the first time anybody had made a big landing and maneuvers in the Philippines since the Second World War and we did our exact mission. As a matter of fact, Dr. Reckner was on the ship that I’m about to talk about. It was called the...well, it was either on the Weiss or the Bi-Dock.. They almost looked like destroyers, only smaller. Destroyers have two guns up forward, they only had one. They’re for UDT teams and Recon teams and I’m positive that Jim was on the Weiss or the Bi-Dock, and I’ve been on both. Anyway, so all the divisions on these ships and they’re on their way
like for invasion and while they’re still over the horizon, the Weiss and the Bi-Dock
would come in and start to go along the shore and we would peel off into our rubber
boats and we might even be towed kind of slow. Submarines would bring us in and tow
us, too, and all of a sudden just break off. Okay, once we’re in a rubber boat, then we
would start to paddle in and our mission was to get in and we had two missions; one, to
Recon from the high water mark to 15 foot of depths and UDT took 15 feet out. We
would do 15 feet free dive, no tanks. And surveying it meaning there might be a big
corral block or something and we would have to mark that on the chart and let the Navy
know so that they wouldn’t bring their LST’s in and all that. But that was just one…that
was a side mission, really, because UDT usually did most of that because they could get
in there and [blow] that stuff. But anyway, our mission was to get in and as soon as we
hit the sand get the boats in, covered, hit the jungle line or something like that, and then
they would have maps and then go find different positions, bring back as much intel as
we could do without shooting around, no killing unless you had to, of course - luckily this
was only maneuvers for me – and just bring it all back and then they’d debrief us on these
boats that were sailing back out towards the fleets and then they would get all these forms
and then give them to the people on the invasion. We gathered intel, but we would use
amphibious means of doing it so that’s why it was Amphibious Reconnaissance. So it
was fun, we enjoyed it. Now the beach surveys, here’s what we did for about…oh, God,
i bet you it was three weeks in a row, from Monday until Friday, we set up camps and we
moved them and we surveyed almost the whole island of Okinawa. We would take
people and move them in a straight line out and then you’d have a guy on the beach drop
a flag, a mark, and you had a little thing around your neck and you had squares and you
would mark if there was any obstacles and how deep they were, and you had a little thing
around your A tape. Then, you’d mark it and then you’d move over…well, like if you
were in place 15, then when you came in they had a gigantic map of the coast and they’d
say, ‘Number one, what was your depth?’ and he was only five feet off shore and he
might say, ‘You know, two feet,’ and then they would just mark it. ‘Number 15,’ if I was
the number 15, I might say, ‘Over 15 feet,’ and then they would mark 15. Any vessel
could come in, so they would have the charts. They did it some kind of way but we did
almost a whole beach and it was to help out. It was really weird, a couple of mornings
we’d get out in the water and get all ready, you know, and you get your mask and we had fins and all that and you look down and there might be a truck. One guy found a tank that had blown up or had been on barges and been hit and sunk, tropical fish would come up and look at you. So that outfit was good and I said that we would have got chewed up, not shoot up, we were training for our job but being inexperienced I think in the jungle warfare, just like all Marine units. In fact, they had...I don’t know if you guys maybe even have some here lessons learned. Every week the division in Vietnam would call lessons learned and they were very good, like, ‘Look out for this,’ or ‘Here’s a new tactic the VC using.’ Well you have to learn by experience. Sometimes that experience cost lives.

SM: What kind of weapons did you carry with Amphibious reconnaissance, M-1s and the old…

JD: Well, I don't even know…we called them grease guns.

SM: I was just going to say, it sounds like the purposes of going in a grease gun or something like that would be easier to handle, maneuverable.

JD: And some M-1s because I remember one time a boat tipped over from a wave and the next day we had to go down diving for the M-1s. In fact everybody had to strip off their equipment, get it off, and the boat went over, but the old grease gun where you open up the lid

SM: The ones they used to carry in the armor, in the tanks?

JD: All the officers I think might have still had the old carbine which is nice and small. They didn’t have the old little sawed-off handles and all that kind of stuff, which they do now. Everybody had two K-bars. That was a good unit for a couple of reasons; one, really close because everybody was pretty physical. People, even to this day, when you say, ‘Recon,’ ‘Oh, boy, you were in Recon?’ It’s like saying, ‘I was Special Forces.’ But they thought we were animals which was great. ‘You’re an animal!’ ‘Oh, well thank you!’ So you had a reputation for being nasty. Our 1st Sergeant just passed away Christmas Day and the message went to all the guys who were on our roster; 1st Sergeant Dowlen, about 6’7”, he was a monster of a man, real nice. The captain, Captain Lamont, oh maybe three or four years ago, so Mrs. Lamont sent us all...A-Z got a collection up and sent her something. She sent us all thank you cards. So after…what is that, 40
something years, and then I got out. Well, I went back to the States in Opalaca, O-P-A-
L-A-C-A, Opalaca. Oh, it’s a suburb of Miami, used to be a Coast Guard air station or
something and the Marine Corps took it over. Amelia Earhart, that’s where she took off
from on her famous voyage. Then, they turned it into a Cuban refugee camp and now it’s
a suburb housing. Somebody has made a lot of money on that one. But that was kind of
funny, too, because I reported in there and I had a primary MOS of O3 infantry,
secondary O2, intel, and a third one, 8651 Recon. So when I was leaving Okinawa our
company clerk’s name was Pena, P-E-N-A, he was an Indian, Zuni Indian, from Arizona
– he’s a character, he’s still alive – so anyway he says, ‘Why don’t you put in for a duty
station?’ and I had just been busted from corporal, but that’s another story.

SM: Well let’s talk about that!
JD: What was that time? I got busted three different times.
SM: Did you? Well, let’s talk about the first.
JD: I got a Summary Court Martial.
SM: When did you get busted the first time, and for what?
JD: Oh, talk about old times, discipline. I made corporal in 23 months which was
considered very good, that’s the old corporal. Nowadays if you can’t make that now, you
might as well get out because they used to call me he kid corporal. I was young. I might
have been…
SM: 19?
JD: Yeah, I’d just turned 19, and I was over in…oh, I spent about three months
with the 3rd Marines, A Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines, before I went to Recon.
That was such a short time sometimes I even forget that I was with them. So anyway,
this sergeant who’s a drunk alcoholic prick who I later ran into at Lejune, which he was
still a sergeant about ten years later, he’d been drinking and it was early in the morning,
he’d probably just got in, but anyway he said – I was a squad leader – he said, ‘Get your
squad, get in there, and clean up.’ I said, ‘It’s not my turn to clean up the head.’ He said,
‘I’m ordering you to get into the head and clean it up,’ and I said, ‘Okay,’ so I turned to
the squad and I said, ‘Get in there,’ ‘Ah, it’s not our turn!’ and I said, ‘Do it.’ Well, they
didn’t do it; they did, but not a very good job and I didn’t check it. Okay, I’m wrong.
Well, about ten o’clock the platoon sergeant I think said, ‘They want to see you in
headquarters.’ ‘Okay.’ I walk in there and the sergeant major said, ‘Go in there and report to the colonel,’ so I go in there and I said, ‘Corporal Donovan reporting as ordered, sir.’ I don’t know nothing! There’s the sergeant standing off to the side and my CO, and dereliction of duty, disobedience from an NCO or something. Bam, boy, there goes the stripe. Oh, I was pissed. Then…okay, now I’m at Opalaca. Let’s get back to Opalaca when I was a PFC, with almost four years. Well, not for a while there in Opalaca because in November of ’57 I had my four years in. In those days a hash mark PFC, a hash mark corporal wasn’t looked at like it is now. It was, ‘Well, you either got busted or you’re in a bad MOS or something.’ So report in and I got all these MOS’s and they said, ‘What the hell are we going to do with you?’ Well, let’s get back to Pena, Pena says, ‘Why don’t you put in for some duty?’ and I said, ‘I’m a PFC!’ He said, ‘You can put in three wishes if you want to.’ So I said, ‘Okay.’ Guard detachment in Great Lakes, some place in New York, and a guy said, ‘There’s a Marine detachment in Opalaca, Florida,’ so they put that down. I get to San Francisco and they had me orders to Opalaca, Florida. There’s two Marine air squadrons there. So 30 days later I reported into [?]. It’s a nice suburb of Miami, Florida. So anyway, sergeant major says, ‘What the hell are we going to do with you? You’re a grunt, intel, Recon.’ And he said, ‘I’m going to tell you right now I don’t like any of those MOS’s. I’ve been air wing for 25 years and you infantry people and especially Recon…’ We did not get along very well. So they made me a mail clerk. Well, I’ve got like five months of duty and while I was with Recon I played some football and oh God, I’m getting back to a football story here! A guy named [Buddy Bear] who had gone to Western Michigan University had played football with me and myself and a guy named Bobby Anderson were the only two players on the team that hadn’t played college football and he wrote his old coach and I’ll be darned if they didn’t give us scholarships. Well, they did a lot of recruiting in those days in the military. I mean, the colleges loved to get 22-23 year old guys who’d been in the military already and been through all that stuff, you know, you’re older. So they made me a mail clerk. I thought, ‘Okay,’ and I had it made. Well, I had a jeep driver and we went down and picked up all the mail and we were supposed to guard so going back and I’m thirsty and said, ‘Let’s stop at the PX and get a coke.’ He said, ‘We can’t leave the mail.’ I said, ‘Ah, nobody’s going to know!’ so we jam it
underneath the seats. I kept the .45 with me, we go in, get a coke, come out, and the mail is gone. So I report to the sergeant major and I said, ‘I stopped for a coke, I know I shouldn’t have, and the mail’s gone.’ ‘Is this the mail?’ Some MPs had saw me do it and got the mail, found out the squadron, and brought it to the squadron to get me in trouble. So I said, ‘Oh good, you found it,’ and he said, ‘No, its not good.’ You’re about to be a Private. Let’s go.’ I get busted and now I’m a Private. Alright, so I get out a Private. It didn’t bother me any, I could care less.

SM: When you got out, what were your plans?
JD: To go to college and play football. I had no idea of going back in the Marine Corps, that’s later. I wanted to become a teacher. I knew that right then because of being able to instruct some classes in the Marine Corps and I found out I wasn’t too bad at it, and I found out that I could do anything that I set my mind to. That’s what the Marine Corps really changed me I think because I had, like I said, a bad self-image. My mom and dad were very supportive. I remember I was always having a hard time in school and that’s why I quit school. I really thought I was stupid, but I had a disease that was called lazy. I mean, I’ve had IQ tests and I’m up in the 130s, but I was lazy and my parents were very supportive. So I was going to get out, go to college, play some football, and what have you, so I remember the sergeant major saying something about…oh, right after that I said, ‘Okay, I want to transfer to Recon, 2nd Recon,’ and he said, ‘No, you’re never going back to Recon,’ and I said, ‘Well screw you guys.’ I was always good disciplined but this sergeant major and I just hit it. He could walk in here right now and I wouldn’t know him. So I remember him saying, ‘We’re not recommending you for reenlistment,’ and I said, ‘Well big deal! I wasn’t going to reenlist anyway.’ They draw a line on your DD214, honorable discharge. I got a good conduct because the first three years I was a good guy. So I go to join the reserves when I was in college and they said, ‘You’re not recommended.’ I had to get letters from all the people, Recon guys, so they said, ‘Okay, you can join the reserves for one year,’ which I did but they were sending reports to headquarters, Marine Corps, that I was doing alright and they marked it down as immaturity which was probably right at the time, but at the time, who gives a shit? I’ve got that discharge with one little line through it. I didn’t know there was little codes. Of course I didn’t care at the time and it really didn’t stop me from anything but it was
honorable, honorable discharge, because I think had eleven honorable discharges. Every
time I reenlisted in the reserves they’d give me an honorable. I could paste your wall and
I’m proud of them too. People would say, ‘Oh, I got a general discharge.’ They’ve
always got a good excuse, too. ‘Medically, I couldn't do it.’ ‘Why didn’t you get a
medical discharge?’ ‘Well, it was easier to take the general.’ That was my little step
with the air wing and the clerk, and then when I got out the second time like I was saying
before is that I got out so that I could finish up college. The first time I didn’t make it in
college was that my grades in my sophomore year were not too wonderful and maybe it
was because I had my own car, I had the GI Bill, and I had a full ride scholarship, and I
hung around with some of these guys from Hamtramck, Michigan. I don’t know if
you’ve ever heard of Hamtramck. It’s a Polish enclave within Detroit. I mean, it’s
just…and they still speak Polish there and these guys had grown up to be big, nasty
football players. If they don’t play for Michigan State, they play for Western Michigan.
It was [Ronkowsky] and [Mazalowsky], [Myesky], well, they were all linemen, and I
hung around with the linemen. These guys talked broken English and they act like the
old cliché of a dumb Pollock. I didn’t know it, but they’re all straight A students. They
go out and drink and I’d go out with them. They could afford to do it, I couldn’t
mentally. I’m wondering why my grades are going down and they’re getting A’s. One
of them is a big-time dentist now and one became a lawyer; just the stereotype of acting
like big, dumb linemen and they would pull stunts. John Mykowski, he’s a legend. He’s
still the legend out there. I’ve seen the best football stories, and we don’t want to get into
those. The football team was made up of about half veterans at college you don’t see it
that much. Because of the draft a lot of guys would go in first and colleges would
actually recruit guys and say, We suggest...’ because you could go in for two years in
those days and that’s about one year in the active reserve, Marines and Army. They said,
‘Why don’t you go in the Army, why don’t you go in the Marines, for two years, and
you’ll still have your scholarship here?’ Well, the guys would grow, muscle wise,
mentally, and everything and be ready for college, too. Oh yeah, it was famous for
colleges. They might have had a team of starting II and might have seven marines. ‘Gee,
is that a coincidence?’ No, I don't think so. They told them to go in there.
SM: Well just out of curiosity, from the time you went in, from boot camp all the way through the 3rd Amphibious Recon in Okinawa how much would either your trainers or your NCOs or even your officers invoke lessons from the Korean War or from World War II when they were it either in the training, or just trying to invoke the importance of certain aspects of [?]?  

JD: All the time, and I remember going to NCO school at Camp Pendleton right after I made corporal and every one of the instructors was a Second World War and a Korean vet. I remember them always telling stories, and especially in NCO school about leadership or digging in. We had a lot of scout patrolling and things like this, and I can remember them telling the difference, a lot of sea stories, but if you listen to sea stories you going to get something out of them, and a lot of them are lessons learned. I can remember a couple of them were telling us how green they were in Guadal Canal and got slapped upside the head there in the beginning of Guadal Canal because that was the first time that anybody was in combat. In Guadal Canal they hit, I think there was only a couple of rounds fired, and boy they got on the beach and all of a sudden the shit hit the fan and they fought for 40 something days…I think it was three months before the Army came in and relieved the Marines and the Army fought for a while there, too, but I mean finally just... but they had to put all the Marines out there. But some of these guys were in Guadal Canal because they were in the Marine Corps in 1939 and ’40 and what have you, so they would say lessons learned there. I’ll never forget this one, a thing that they picked up against the Japanese, the Japanese knew that they had Enfields which had five rounds so that if the Japanese would hit a machine gun nest or someplace where there was two or three Marines, they would actually count the rounds and they’d get up and charge and now they got M-1s, so they would fire five quick rounds and they still had three and they’d just kind of wait for the Japs to jump up. They said that lasted maybe two days until the Japanese caught on. But, meanwhile, I’m sure the Japanese lost maybe 20-30 troops because of that one thing but you learn. So, the Marines did the same thing. The Korean thing was such a different war because in trench warfare they did lots of patrolling, so I went to mountain warfare school in Pickle Mills, California, northern California, it was in February…so the guys who were Korean vets, that really brought back a lot of memories for them with the mountains and the cold. But it was like I said, it
was altogether different from the Second World War. I understand the Army in Korea because of their experiences in Europe which was a lot of sitting here and going out patrolling some villages and towns in the cold and the weather was very similar to Korea whereas the Marines were so used to the Pacific jungle-type warfare now they’re bogged down in Choson reservoir which was a horrible thing but it’s a feather in Marine Corps history. That’s a great thing that they did. That’s a bad way to say that but they came out with everybody, dead or alive. I can remember being in 5th Recon and giving classes on scouting patrol and I used to open up my classes by going to the classroom window and throwing out the book because the book was written on Korea scouting patrol so I used to say, ‘See this?’ [makes throwing noise], ‘The book’s out the window. Now here’s the way it’s done in the jungles of Vietnam.’ Scouting and patrolling in Korea I guess was you could walk a lot faster, you didn’t have to look out for mines. You did an awful lot of it at night, not during the daytime. We did a lot in the daytime, too, and you had to be on the lookout for everything. So we would put two men out front instead of one and two in the back. Experiences came into it, and some of the instructors would get carried away though, with war stories and they might be telling war stories that happened to other people, too, like that book we were discussing yesterday that you might be putting other people’s experiences in there. That’s a good question I’m sure you have or you should talk to somebody who’d been in all three wars. You better get some of those guys because they’re getting older. That one guy over there that I know that belonged to the veterans group with me, he does not want to be interviewed. I think one reason was that after the Second World War he decided that he wanted to stay in the Marine Corps but not as a grunt and an [amtrax ?], he was an [amtrax ?] so he became a clerk and then spent the next 30 years…first five years infantry and next 30 years was as a clerk, he worked all the way up to Warrant Officer 4 and I don’t know if he’s ashamed or…because he’s made comments about, ‘How can you respect that guy? He never even left the states?’ Well yeah, but he spent time in the military. But guys like that could be really good to tell you the difference in the training and what have you, because of course you always say the Old Corps. Did you ever hear of Old Corps? Did you ever hear of Tons Tavern, the guys when they first signed up with Tons Tavern who was the first commandant, Nichols? Yeah, Nichols was the first commandant, so he’s the bartender
and so a guy walks in with a coonskin cap and the buckskins and he says, ‘How would
you like to be one of our new things? We’re starting a thing called the Marine Corps,’
and he said, ‘Well, yeah, fine. Where do I sign?’ He said, ‘Here, have a drink, sign right
here,’ and the guy signs, and he says, ‘Now, get your rear end out back and I’ll be right
with you. We’re going to start our training,’ and the guy walks out back and there’s two
guys standing out there drinking and he said, ‘Man, that guy in there heading the Marines
is kind of nasty,’ and the other guy says, ‘You should have been in the Old Corps, it was
worse.’ And what, he was in the Marine Corps two minutes before the other guy? So
that story’s always been…you know, like it’s always been tougher.

SM: Of course, of course..
JD: We’re not even up to my…
SM: We’re getting close.
JD: Okay.
SM: So let’s go ahead and do that. Let’s jump up to your decision to go back
Corps in 1964.
JD: I was a lifeguard in Fort Lauderdale and I just saw that I was really enjoying
life but it was going nowhere and I was 27…in ’64? Well, I was almost 28 – well, I
turned 28 in the fall so I joined in early spring. I was playing semi-pro football and was a
lifeguard and I enjoyed it. I loved it, but how long could I do it. I had the work ethic
like, ‘My God, I’ve got to get some security!’ My folks would spend every winter on the
beach of Florida and my mother would say, ‘When are you going back to school? When
are you going to do this?’ and my dad would say, ‘For God’s sakes, leave him alone!’
My dad thought like I did. But in the military, I liked discipline and yet I liked being an
individual, but I liked discipline, and so I was hanging out with a recruiting sergeant, I
mean he hung around with us, and they have like the ASVAB nowadays that they did
back in the military, they actually had a test and he said, ‘Well, if you’re thinking about it
you can take the test, what the heck?’ so I had nothing to do on a day off and so I went
down to a recruiting station. They had all the branches of the service there. Anyway, I
took the test and I did exceptionally well. In fact, if I had a degree they would have sent
me to OCS. So the Air Force guy found out the score and came running in saying, ‘What
do you want? We’ll give you this!’ and the Navy guy said, ‘Get away from him!’ and the
gunny that told me said, ‘Don’t let anybody talk to you after you take the test.’ So anyway I went back in and requested Camp Lejune, North Carolina. I had never been on the East Coast as a Marine, I’d always been on the West Coast and the Pacific, and I wanted to make a Med crew and go over to Europe so when I got to Lejune I’d requested the 2nd Recon and they had no openings for O3s. They had one opening for O2 in intel, and I said, ‘Okay, I’ll take it,’ and then about a half hour later I was still being in processed and a guy came in and said, ‘No, you can’t. You have to go to 2nd Marines.’ I wish I would have fought it. I often think of what would have happened if I would have said, ‘Wait a minute, show me something!’ But here I am, I had made PFC in the reserves so I came back as PFC. So anyway we went into the 2nd Marines and it worked out fine.

SM: And that’s where you were a chief scout?

JD: Yes, I worked my way up. I was is for seven months and I made lance corporal and you had to have seven months in grade in order to make it so I made it first thing. I made lance corporal in the morning and marichoice corporal in the afternoon. I’ve heard that’s rare, but it happens, and usually it was somebody who had been busted a couple of times but is doing really good, and older guy like I was, and I was really mature; I was in charge of the barracks as an E3 and the day that I...that afternoon I had to go up for marichoice corporal. So I appeared before a board and then they said, ‘Okay, why don’t you get outside and we’ll talk about it,’ and this warrant officer came out and I was standing on the porch at headquarters and Montford Point is across Montford Bay and he walked out and he said, ‘Do you know where Montford Point’s at, Corporal?’ or Lance Corporal, and I said, ‘Yes, sir, its right over there.’ He said, ‘How would you get there?’ and I said, ‘Well, if I had a car I’d drive you,’ and he said, ‘Could you walk over there?’ and I said, ‘Yes, sir.’ I’m wondering, ‘What’s this guy driving at?’ and he said, ‘I mean across the water. Could you walk on that water?’ and I said, ‘No, sir.’ And he said, ‘They think you can, but I don’t.’ So they called me back in. I’ll never forget that old fart. They said, ‘What we’re going to do is put you in and we’re recommending you for a corporal’s position within your unit in three months, and then if your CO thinks that you handle it all...’ [trails off intelligibly] which they did, and well I was 29 by that time. Clean slate, too, boy I was a good guy until later in 5th Recon. I ended up getting a
summary court marshal for maltreatment of the troops. I’m not bragging, but I think
that’s funny. I could have got out of that one.

SM: Okay, so what was your position or what were the duties that you were
assigned as a scout and then chief scout with the…

JD: Scouting is…they used us in those days before the Vietnam War as runners,
as clean up the barracks, as go for this; it was bad. But, you worked out of S-2’s which
was nice because I learned the Intel business. When I made chief scout they moved me to
regiment and I started working on a regimental institute. If I had stayed there like three
more months I would have made sergeant. So you learned an awful lot of Intel, you
learned a lot of how to gather information supposedly, but just being a very quiet infantry
guy, that’s all.

SM: How about counterintelligence work?

JD: I have a secondary counterintelligence 0211 and when I went into the Army I
was called back for duty in Desert Storm. I worked counterintelligence but I never
worked it in those days those days.

SM: How about physical security and that kind of stuff?

JD: Yeah, when I went to regimental I would work with S&C files, secret and
confidential, crypto, and we did a lot of inventory for them, income classes, that security
intel.

SM: Did you have to get clearance?

JD: Oh yeah, I had top secret, and later on when I was in Europe working for the
government and then I got called back for Desert Storm. They upgraded it to NATO
nuclear top secret, which is…there’s only one other one and that’s White House top
secret. Every five years I had to fill out some more forms because my last reserve unit
was with Dill Air Force Base with special operations, working J3 joint operations. But
going back to the chief scout thing at Lejune, I was working with a different companies
when they would go out. I never did make a Med cruise and like I said, they really didn’t
use us. They didn’t use the intel, either, until the [?] and I had an intel chief by the name
of F.A. Avery that used to say, ‘Nobody cares about intel until there’s a war.’ This was
during peacetime and boy, was he true. Once a war, and now of a sudden now you’re
important. It used to get to the point that the operations officers, the S3s, would come
down and the S2s and they’d say, ‘You guys aren't doing anything, do this,’ things that
weren't even intel. In a way they were right because you didn’t have that much to do, to
read over orders and discuss different cases and all that, but they changed their mind after
Vietnam and after getting because you got an awful lot of information, the scouts did.
We had to learn all the…I say learn, we had little booklets of all the weapons, and on
maneuvers you would get somebody that would have a key, key something in their
pocket. I say key, maybe a piece of paper with a couple of words on it like weapons so
you would bring out your book and say, ‘Okay, you were captured with this kind of what
weapon? In your unit, did you ever see these kinds of weapons?’ learn a lot of
techniques of talking to them. When I went to counterintelligence school to get certified
we probably did more interrogation whereas in scout, you had, even in Vietnam, you had
just a few questions and then, ‘Get their ass back,’ weapons. We used to go into villages
and you’d show the people pictures of weapons.

SM: How about running agents and stuff like that?

JD: No, counterintelligence did all that. I never did any of that. At school you’d
learn how to do it but I never did it. See, I did a lot of it in Vietnam, but I understand I’d
be kind of interested. Let me check on that. A lot of those agents were double agents,
plus, as you know, Saigon knew everything was going off and half the guys G3 in Saigon
Viet Cong to start with. So, they might have a chain of three or four agents going up
north and then whammo, that stopped. But they’d keep the information going, feeding
right to their own people so I don’t think that worked out that well. I often, well, you can
regret some things you did in your life, not bad, but saying, ‘Gee, if I would have taken a
corner here, if I would have studied this or that?’ I often thought that if I’d stayed in
government work and went counterintelligence how much more interesting it might be,
but a lot of those guys did nothing but sit in front of computers. You can get good jobs,
though, once you retire with counterintelligence. Like I said, I was a scout and all that
then when I went to ‘Nam, I had the experience.

SM: Well during the period that you were at Camp Lejune some pretty
significant events occurred; Gulf of Tonkin. When these things started to happen, what
was going through your mind, what was the scuttlebutt on base, and everything else?
JD: Half the guys didn’t even know where Vietnam was. Things really started
heating up, what, December ’64 and January ’65? Johnson really started sending more
people over, helicopter squadrons were over there strictly as advisors supposedly, no
combat troops went until March. So, they’re building it up and all of a sudden the
Dominican Republic Crisis happens.

SM: Yeah, ’65.

JD: So they move the 6th Marines out and the 2nd Marines, we got to Wilmington
and stayed in Wilmington which was kind of nice.

SM: Wilmington, North Carolina?

JD: Yeah, stayed on the docks out on the beach. The 6th Marines went and I
remember…

SM: Just out of curiosity, about the Wilmington thing; you went to Cape Fear and
stayed along the docks along Cape Fear?

JD: Not quite out there, there was a place, not Montford Point, there was a place
near right south of Wilmington.

SM: Fort Fisher?

JD: It’s where the ships could actually come right into the dock. We got on
APAs and all that. I’ll think of the name while I’m talking here. The 6th Marines went
and one of our battalions, 2-2 went. 6th Marines lost about 18 guys and 2-2 lost about six
or seven killed.

SM: In the Dom Rep Crisis?

JD: In the Dominican Republic. There was a nice screw up in the Dominican
Republic where the guys, when they came back, were at a party or something and they
said two APA’s pulled right along side each other and they started transferring some stuff
and all that and the one ship that the whole battalion was on had all .45 ammunition and
somebody discovered it down in the hull saying, ‘There’s no ammo for the 14’s! What
the hell are we going to do?’ There was some shooting up going on but nothing that
much. I can remember talking to an AO, a captain and saying something like, ‘Maybe
I’ll put in for Vietnam or for the Far East,’ we called it, and he said, ‘Oh, no, that’s not
going to last.’ He said, ‘The thing in the Dominican Republic will probably be going on
for a good year with lots of patrolling and police work.’ He said, ‘That thing in Vietnam’s not going to last at all.’

SM: It was the exact opposite.

JD: The Dominican Republic stopped in a couple of days practically.

SM: AO, you mean the air officer?

JD: Yeah, so our battalion was breaking up. What they would do is you went through about an 18-month cycle of training. You start out with squad and platoon captains and battalions and some went to the Med so you’re pretty well trained and then you would go all over the place, guard detachments, Far East, whatever. If you had a couple more months to do they would send you to work in the brig or MPs or things like that. So I had two years to do on that hitch so I put in for – and I still have these set of orders at home – I put in for guard detachment Asugi Naval Air Station, Asugi, Japan, corporal of the guard. I got the orders because I had top secret clearance, got the orders, the CO of the barracks had sent a 1st Sergeant and CO, signed it, a nice duties letter; one day on, two days off, two days off, one day would be actually a backup and going to classes and things like that and then one complete 24 hour day off and then start another cycle, guard two men to a room and all that kind of jazz, oh, I’m going to Asugi. So the company is breaking up, the 1st Sergeant is retiring, everybody in the company is going the Far East except for the guys who were getting out. So, there was about 30 of us that kind of hung around together, the platoon, and we invited the 1st Sergeant. His name is Frank Bilskey, and we rented a room in Jacksonville and had a going away party. Now they started getting out and the more beer they drank they started saying, ‘What are you, chicken shit?’ One of our squad leaders and chief scout, ‘You’re going to Japan, we’re going to go fight.’ So 1st Sergeant is talking to me and says, ‘Joe, are you going to stay in now?’ and I said, ‘Yes sir,’ and he said, ‘You know, I don't think Vietnam is going to last. It will be like Korea, a couple of years,’ and he said, ‘That’s a two year duty station over in Japan,’ and he said, ‘You’re going to have to get some, okay?’ Next morning I went in and sergeant major said change my orders. You can send a speed letter. In those days we called it speed letter to Washington. He said, ‘Are you a fool?’ and I said, ‘I want to go to war.’ I was an idiot. I think I probably pretty well hung over. But you know, that’s a decision I made, and here’s what happened; I’m in Vietnam for about three
months and here comes a bunch of guys from Asugi that had been anywhere from a
couple months to a couple of years. The guy’s getting slightly wounded. They were
sending them to Asugi to more or less get better and they would walk a post or sit down
and type and taking able bodied guys and sending them over there. So, I went over. I
only had a couple of months anyway. But, I’ll never forget that night talking to Bilskey
and he said, ‘Where you from?’ and I said, ‘Michigan,’ and he said, ‘I was an A-11 and
witnessed and signed a letter for a guy that got a medal of honor.’ And I said, ‘That’s
[Dwayne Dewey] from Grand Junction, Michigan,’ and he said, ‘Yeah, how do you know
him?’ and I said, ‘I’m from Grand Junction.’ Dewey had joined the Marine Corps with
my brother and won the medal of honor and Bilskey was his gunnery sergeant. So, when
I got home on leave before I went to Vietnam our VFW’s named Corporal Dwayne
Dewey post and so I was over at...Dwayne’s farm was about two farms down from us so I
went down there one night and I said, ‘By the way, I ran into your old gunnery sergeant
Bilskey,’ and he said, ‘The night I got my medal of honor I shot him.’ I said, ‘You what?’
Dwayne was out on a listening post and he had taken off his jacket or something and he
put on a Chinese jacket and hat because they were warmer than the Marine coats and he
went back up the hill to get some ammunition for his machine gun and the gunnery
 sergeants are in charge of the ammunition so he said, ‘Dewey coming in,’ and they said,
‘Alright, come in,’ and he jumped over the trench line and down to get the ammunition
and he said, ‘I’m running down the hill and I’m in a Chinese thing and I had a .45 and a
lumination went up and I hit the machine gun [?] .45 and hit him in the leg. I just
grabbed up the ammo and said, ‘Corpsman, fix them up,’ grabbed the ammo and went
back to the hole.’ Well, that was just a shot clean through, didn’t break any bones, but
Bilskey used to wear the Purple Heart and say, ‘I got this Purple Heart.’ So anyway
Dewey says, ‘Yeah, two days later I come to in a hospital ship there’s a couple of guys
from my unit standing there looking at me wondering if I’m going to die,’ and he said,
‘The first thing I said, ‘Bilskey alright?’ and they said, ‘Yeah, he’s up on the other ward.
He got shot in the leg,’ and he said, ‘Oh, God, tell him I’m really sorry; I’m the one that
shot him. Go up there and see if he’s really doing good,’ so he said the guy came back
and he said, ‘The gunny’s alright and if you tell one more person that you’re the one that
shot him he’s coming down here and killing you!’ So anyway, Dewey was like 19, got
the medal of honor. It’s a small world. For a whole year and didn’t even know. But

anyway, that’s how I changed my orders.

SM: And you found yourself in Vietnam? And when you got over there you

were assigned to Regimentalist 3rd Marine as an intel analyst?

JD: Yes, and I just stood 12 on, 12 off, really.

SM: [?] once you got there? What did you think the United States was trying to

accomplish in Vietnam?

JD: Stop the communists from coming into a democratic country, and I was

really gung-ho. I wrote letters saying the communists are bad, of course, which I still

believe it, and these poor people over here would be enslaved and all that kind of stuff

and some of it was true but later on I found out that they people just wanted to be left

alone, they didn’t care who in the hell was in charge and just let them work their rice

paddies and whatever, and I would do the same thing. I’d help the enemy if they’re in

my backyard and I’d help the friendlies because sometimes they’d help us Marines. If

the VC came in we’d help the VC. Now I look back and say I would have done the same
damn thing. I believed in the Domino Theory at the time, not knowing what we know

now that there really was enough backup for them to do much more. I thought

everything we did was good, and everything they did was bad. Morals and everything, of

course probably different from them, too. I’ve never been disillusioned, going, ‘Gosh,

was I wrong.’ I just said, ‘Well, I was wrong, okay?’ I think one thing that I think

probably helped me not being not being an alcoholic, drug, psycho, was that I did a good

job; my job, I think I did a real good job of what I did, and plus I was 30 years old. I

wasn’t 18 and 19. I just had my military reunion from 23 when I was at 23, and about

half those guys were with post-Vietnam syndrome even they realize that they were 18

and 19. I talked to a friend, to a guy named Mark Woodruff who wrote a good book on

Vietnam. He was in our company. The author is Mark Woodruff and I bought the book

and I’ll be darned if I can remember the name of it. It is supposed to be one of the best

histories of Vietnam and it took him ten years to write it. It’s not written about our

company, he mentions our company, but he was a lieutenant then. Now, he’s a

psychologist working out of Australia. He and I talked one night and we kind of agreed

that these guys are bringing a lot of this stuff on themselves. Definitely they’re going to
have nightmares or they’ll hear a helicopter – even I think back when I hear a helicopter – but I think a lot of it’s an excuse, I mean if I’d like to get drunk tonight and say, ‘Well, those damned Vietnamese,’ and go get drunk, well why blame it on them? A lot of it is brought on themselves. Getting back to what I thought at the time. I remember going over aboard ship, on the Mitchell APA and a lot of guys called me professor because I had had two years of college - in the Marines, that’s a lot of education – and they say, ‘Where is this Indochina and Vietnam?’ They had no idea where it was, these guys didn’t. The first troops – we were talking about this at the reunion, Army and the Marines, up until about ’66, later part of ’66 or ’67 - were good, and then they started getting some people in there that weren't so good because they started thinking about some of these things that were going on in the United States should we really be over here and it effected them. I think after Tet things went downhill but anyway, going over there was guys that had been in peace time and really didn’t know what they were going in…I don’t think they could spell communism, let alone understand what it was, and I understood a little bit. I was probably naïve…yeah, there’s a good word, naïve to the things that went on. If I had been told at that time some of the things that McNamara, Johnson, Westmoreland, some of the things that had come out since then, I would have called the people liars, ‘No, nobody would ever do that to us. They’re not going to do that to us. We’re going to win this war,’ and I’m not holding anything against those men, I just said I think they probably think they were doing right doing some of the things they did. I think Johnson was being picked on an awful lot but I just think he got in over his head and then that thing that he kept saying, ‘I don’t want to be the first president to lose a war,’ well gosh, can’t you suck in your pride, but I think he thought he was doing right. But at first some of the atrocities that I’d heard about, I never witnessed them for a while, I wouldn’t… ‘No, Americans wouldn’t do that. Viet Cong would do that, north Vietnamese, but not…” I guess I was really mom and apple pie.’

SM: Well speaking of mom, what did she think of you going to Vietnam?

JD: You know, never said anything for or against, come to think of it, why do you have to do this, can't you get out of this? I was…do what you’re supposed to do and come home. My dad…

SM: Your mom didn’t cry this time when you left?
JD: Oh yes, no. I’ll tell you what, I made a deal with him that they were going to drop me off at the airport and I was in the backseat and they were not to come in the airport wished they didn’t. Now I found out later, yeah, she cried, okay, but I didn’t see it. So, everything’s fine. We were out in California for maybe two or three weeks before we got on board ship, so…this is a funny story. Well, I’m sorry, what I’m about to say is not funny but because of something. They had a plane loaded…they came in our barracks one time and said, ‘All mechanics, track vehicle mechanics, because of something transport people, go outside.’ So, they were told, ‘Pack your bags, you’re flying home,’ and this was infantry, and combat arms people were taking the shit so we’re pissed. Well, the plane crashed in California and 78 guys were killed [?], very sad. It happened, and I can almost tell you the date. There was an Air Force plane flying out of El Toro Marine base and that’s right in middle of Orange County with the mountains around it. I guess the guy was supposed to turn this way but turned this way and just pancaked right in. You talk about…my brother was a producer for CBS out at LA at that time and he couldn't even get information because he knew I was on the base, he drove me out there. So, they told everybody to call home. Well, I called home. My mother had been around long enough to say, ‘Well, Jim, I know that if you’d have been on the plane,’ and it was all over the news, ‘That they would have notified me.’ Then she cracked up. ‘Ma!’ ‘I wish you hadn't called!’ ‘Ma!’ and I mean, she cracked up then. Okay, the funny part, though, and that made me feel bad. The only time I was scared was we went to a captured film one time, part of our training before we went over, and it showed some old farmers with single action rifles in holes that were at a certain angle and hold it up there and they were told that planes were coming over to shoot and that one bullet maybe hit the plane, but they had some kind of system where if they hit just right, there’d be a lucky shot if they hit the wing just enough to tear it or something like that, and I thought, ‘How in the hell are you going to beat people who lay in the ditch for hours with bolt action ancient rifle and shoot one round at jets. And they want to win, and that made me start thinking, ‘My God, these people are sincere!’ Okay, the funny story, funny story; the action happened I think we’ll say Thursday morning. I had duty NCO Friday from four o’clock until Saturday morning at eight o’clock. In those days you had liberty cards, I mean you had to come in, show your ID card, we signed them
out, gave a liberty card. Now there was a bunch of recruits just after infantry training
getting ready to go to ‘Nam. This kid came in, I’ll say Jones, and he’s going to sign off
for liberty and he’s in uniform, [?] and I said, ‘Okay,’ and I said, ‘Where are you going?’
you know, destination, and he said, ‘Tijuana.’ I said, ‘No, I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘You can't
leave the continental United States! San Diego, tell me San Diego and I’ll put it down,’
and he said, ‘I can’t tell you that, that’s a lie.’ It turned out he’s a very religious kid, and I
said, ‘Just tell me San Diego!’ Dummy, you know, long line of guys, you know, ‘Get out
of line, quit arguing,’ okay, I said, ‘Get your ass out of here!’ ‘Okay.’ Him and his
buddy come back in, okay, ‘We’re really going to Tijuana, but put us down what you’re
supposed to,’ so I put down San Diego, so he leaves. Well we had a list of all the guys in
our unit. If the name wasn’t on there, they were on the plane, so we were instructed that
a lot of guys had given up the barrack’s phone, ‘If you want to get a hold of me I’ll be at
this phone number for three weeks before I go to Vietnam.’ So if they would have called
and said, ‘Jim Donovan,’ I would have looked down and I’d see Jim Donovan, and I’d
say, ‘Oh no, he’s on leave, or he’s on liberty, he went to the PX.’ They’d say, ‘So and
so,’ and his name isn't on here, I’d say, ‘Hold on, please,’ and put them on hold and I’d
hit this buzzer and they had some chaplains and some professional counselors in little
rooms and they would pick it up and they would say, ‘I’m sorry,’ so they had to break the
news. So Mrs. Jones called me from Georgia, and she said, ‘Is my son James there?’ so I
said, ‘He’s on leave for the weekend.’ ‘Oh, thank the Lord,’ cause I thought he might
have been on a plane and I said, ‘No mam,’ cause I remembered. I hung up. A half an
hour later it rang, ‘This is Mrs. Jones from Georgia again,’ and said, ‘He joined the
Marine Corps with so and so and so and so, and this, and the mother had just received
word that he was on that plane and James said he was going to be with his buddy the
whole time,’ and I said, ‘No, mam, I’m sorry, but your son is all right.’ She called me
back a third time and said, ‘I wish you’d check.’ I said, ‘Mam, let me tell you something,
I know your son’s here because the little turd went down to Tijuana!’ There was silence
on the other end. She said, ‘When that boy comes in, you tell him to call his momma!’
So I did, and I stood there and watched him call his mother. ‘Oh, we didn’t do anything,
Ma!’ ‘Your daddy and I told you that you’re a good Christian boy and you don’t go
down there,’ and he said, ‘Why did you tell them?’ and I said, ‘Why didn’t you keep your
mouth shut when you checked out, and I would have told her you were in San Diego!’

That’s a funny story because of a terrible thing that happened. I think that 78 Marines killed before they even got over there, and then during those times it was just getting paperwork that wasn’t a training cycle before you went over.

SM: What did you…did you do any kind of prep work before you left? Did you have special training for Southeast Asia or Vietnam?

JD: A lot of weather, different things, what’s going to happen, but when it actually comes to combat training, no, because you were…there was just a mish-mush of everybody who was on board that ship and in the barracks. I mean, everybody just going over. For about a year we traveled by ships and then after that it was just a lot cheaper and faster by plane. I came back by plane. A lot of people [?] and making sure everything was right. I remember an officer I thought was so cold at the time, an officer saying, ‘You people who are married or might have had businesses or something, don’t make your wives the soul survivor. Give it to a friend or something,’ because there were so many guys who went over there and the wives would have all this authority, and would get divorced and they might have the business signed over and whenever I say business, I had a gunnery sergeant who had a dry cleaners and he signed everything over to his wife and gave her power of attorney; wow.

SM: And she actually signed the business over to herself and filed for divorce from him?

JD: Yes, and his brother, ran off with the brother, his brother and the business, sold the business. We had a Navy chief petty officer…

SM: She ran off with her brother in law?

JD: Yeah, the gunny’s brother.

SM: My God!

JD: He inherited the business from his folks. They had died or something because he had about five years to go to retire, just stay in anyway and then get the retirement money and close the business. We had a chief petty officer corpsman that was our battalion corpsman have something similar, his wife filed for divorce while he was over there and sold his house or something in San Diego and he committed suicide. He was 45. A lot of guys ‘Dear Johns.’ I had a couple of girls I was dating. I was dating a
couple of girls but that was it, which was...probably made it easier for me. Married guys had it tough, and I never realized it. I remember telling people this, I never realized what they were going through, even guys who were engaged, until I married and had a kid. I would have never went off [?] but I thought, ‘God, if I had to leave my family right now?’ Especially my son – I love my wife and we’re very happily married – but to just leave that little boy - now he is 6’1’ - but it was just really hard.

SM: What do you remember when you arrived in Vietnam in July of ’65? What do you remember about getting off the boat?

JD: I’ve got a funny story on that one; we went to Okinawa first and we flew from Okinawa, went to Japan and had the liberty and that was like the old movie, ‘Mr. Robert’ where they were off at sea for a year and a half, that dock side like that. Guys driving taxi’s back, and the Navy short patrol pulled in and the guys got out in a half Marine, half Navy uniform, drunk. The officer of the day was a young ensign, Navy guy, looked like he was 18 but he had to be over 21 and he was the officer of the day so you walk up the gang plank and turned around to salute the ensign at the back of the ship and then you salute the officer to request permission to come aboard. This Army major female, Army major nurse who had been around, Korean War ribbons on, she was kind of a husky girl and she’d been drinking and the boy walks up that thing and says, ‘You’re cute!’ and starts kissing on him. He stared her in the face and said, ‘Ma’am!’ I’ll never forget that. Oh, so anyway, then we got to Okinawa and they had us in alphabetical order by compartments and they read us off and a lot of the guys that I went over with what did it take, 21 days, we kind of gravitated towards each other and the guys in [intel] and started talking about Recon and infantry. Well, we had a guy by the name of Donnelley and who stayed in the Marine Corps and retired a master gunnery sergeant, but he was a corporal and he was an engineer and he had been to every engineering school that the Army and the Marines had. He had a dozen MOSs, anything from demolitions to dozer job operator and heavy equipment operator, just all kinds. He loved the engineers. So, he hung around with us and we were always talking Recon and he said, ‘Well, maybe I can get Recon,’ and we said, ‘There’s no way you’re going to get Recon, you’ve got too many engineers and you’re too MOS qualified.’ Donnelley’s like a couple in front of me in alphabetical order. We’re coming off the ship and a little desk sat there and the 2nd
lieutenants giving out IBM cards and then written on it was what unit you’re going to go
to. Donnelley comes down and gets his chart, takes a step and he goes, ‘Donovan, guys, I
got Recon! I got 3rd Recon!’ and I said, ‘Good, I’ll be with you.’ Lieutenant hands me
thins thing and it says 7th Engineers.

SM: You got his card?
JD: I said, ‘Lieutenant, there’s got to be a mistake here. See this 8651? That’s
Recon MOS. See that guy over there? He’s got engineering, and I bet the machine made
a mistake.’ The 2nd lieutenant said, ‘Corporal, that’s my machine. I operate that
machine. That machine did not make a mistake. Now move on.’ Donnelley stayed in
Recon and is decorated. He loved Recon. He reenlisted for Recon. He’s very well
known in Recon circles. I joined the 3rd Recon association because of my association
with them years before and we have newsletters and all that and I got an email from them
one time, ‘What would have happened if I had gone into the engineers and you had gone
Recon?’ So I went to 7th and big signs on them 2nd for two days. Oh, that’s another
story. I get to 7th And big signs on them 2nd, get off the truck, and I’m pissed.

SM: So where did you arrive in Vietnam?
JD: Danang.

SM: And this is where[?]
JD: Yeah, then we went to a barrack and then the next morning got up, got on a
plane, and flew to Danang. Then they had trucks there and big signs on them 2nd
Marines, I mean 23 and 7th and big signs on them 2nd and Recon.

SM: What were your first impressions of Vietnam off that plane?
JD: We landed and they dropped that…it was a C-5 cargo airplane. We opened
up the windows and the heat was just stifling. That’s a good question because my truck
and a couple of other ones weren’t there yet and it was chow time so they said, ‘Just go
over there and get some chow.’ So I went through a little chow right there at the hanger
at Danang. They were building Danang air base, just expanding it, and jets were flying
off and whatever. So I got my tray and they had like 50 tables out back. I sat down there
and all of a sudden somebody said, ‘Look at that, the plane’s on fire!’ and I looked up
and two planes were just turning to make a final approach to come in and the second one
is on fire and all of a sudden he goes straight up and then pow, he pops out, and the plane
went on for about five more seconds and then it just disintegrated over the ocean.

Evidentially, I talked to the guys since then that are pilots saying that he probably had a fuel leak or something. They were coming back from a mission and his red light was blinking, he was on fire, and he punched out luckily and then the plane just blew up. So he opens up the parachutes coming down and the choppers are already on their way, and here I’ve been in Vietnam an hour and I’m seeing planes blow up, and somebody said, ‘Welcome to Vietnam, guys.’ Wow! Anyway, the truck comes for the engineers, I’d get on the engineers and I’m thinking I’m going to Recon or infantry. I’m not going to engineers. It would have been a nice job, though. So I get off the truck and Sergeant Major Carson who was the Sergeant Major from the 2nd Marines that tried to talk me out of going, Carson was a II World War and Korean vet, so when I see my old sergeant major I’m thinking…I mean, this man pushed for me to be the area in charge of the enlisted man’s club or representative, always come to all softball games and tried to push me for meritorious corporal, so I see him and right away my ego’s going, ‘Hell, Carson saw my name coming over and he requested me to keep me out of harm’s way.’ I said, ‘Jeez, come on, Sergeant Major, you didn’t need to have me over here,’ and he said, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ I said, ‘You didn’t request me?’ ‘Hell no.’ He said, ‘It’s a good job, you’re probably working intel and shower every night and all that, but I’ve been a grunt all my life, you think I like this? But I’m here, and orders are orders.’ So the next day somebody sent for me and he said, ‘Why don’t you put in for...’ I forget what you call it, but it’s request, administrative request. He said, ‘I okayed it. I’ll make sure it’s signed,’ so that’s when I went to the 3rd Marines. But I remember that hurt my ego thinking, ‘Jeez, I thought maybe he requested me. He doesn’t give a shit if I’m here or not.’ Oh, have you ever heard the story of the guy, the Marine, who tried to steal the plane and go bomb Hanoi?

SM: No.

JD: Oh, I read about it but I saw it. A guy from the engineers got drunk, a high school drop out from the hills of someplace, Carolinas or something, he went to the Air Force side of Danang, hit a guard, jumped in an airplane and was trying to get it started because he was going to go bomb Hanoi. He was going to kill Ho Chi Minh. Well, I guess the MPs drug him out of there and he fought with the MPs and after being escaped
from the stockade they found him arguing with a colonel at the officer’s club. He had got some…he was in there drinking and then according to what I hear, he was doing a good job.

SM: [?] officer rank

JD: Yeah, the officer’s club in Danang right after he escaped from the brig. So, he was a Marine problem, the Air Force didn’t want to deal with him so they sent him back to 7th engineers. What’s he going to do? So, his punishment was to dig a hole and it was so God damn deep that they had a ladder and I remember getting off the truck and talking to Carson and I’m going, ‘What is this?’ and he told me, he said, ‘Wow, this guy is filling a bucket!’ Carson said, ‘Yeah, tomorrow he’s going to start filling it in bucket by bucket.’ and he’ll dig another hole. He ended up going to Leavenworth. It seems to me that he didn’t kill the guard, seems it was a concussion and damage to the plane and just an idiot. He was going to bomb Hanoi. So there was my induction to it. Now my second day with the S-2, 3rd Marines, Captain Coones, C-O-O-N-E-S, was a tanker but he was attached. In the Marine Corps and I guess in the Army too you could have a tanker officer and an S-2 because he filled in some staff duty and they needed a staff officer so staff job. But he was a tanker and he wanted to get back into tanks to go run over huts or something. A couple of the scouts had been slightly wounded a couple of days before that – I never even knew – and he was going to go visit them in the hospital and come on along for the ride so we pull up to Charlie med and he said, ‘I’ll go say hello to them. Just stay right here,’ and there was a tent and the flaps were out and so I got out of the jeep and walked underneath this tent because the sun was out and I had my back to the actual tent. It was a strong back, all screened in and all that, and I heard somebody saying something and I turned around and it was…they were all bringing chopper in and they were bringing in this guy and they were setting up his as an operation like MASH and half his head was gone. I remember going, ‘Oh my God!’ and captain looked up and he said, ‘Welcome to Vietnam.’ Everybody always had one little experience where somebody says, ‘Welcome to Vietnam,’ and it is, it’s a hell of a welcome, and I remember saying it to other guys, too. I remember picking up a guy at the airport and brand new recruit…no, it must have been to the battalion, must have been at the time because we didn’t get new guys in Cav. We picked him up. Jim Roland was driving the
jeep and I was sitting up front and they had this guy in the backseat and we come up to an
intersection right outside of Danang and a girl was selling some cokes. So, I gave the
guy ten bucks, maybe even twenty, the new guy, and I said, ‘Go get us a coke.’ So he
came back and handed me the money. I said, ‘What’s wrong?’ He said, ‘She wants four
dollars a piece for them!’ I said, ‘I know how much she wants for them, go get them!’
He said, ‘I’m not paying that!’ I said, ‘I’m buying.’ So Finally Roland said, ‘I’ll go get
it,’ and a couple months later I ran into that kid and he said, ‘You know I paid ten bucks
for a coke last night.’ But he said, ‘No, I’m not going to go sergeant. Kill me!’ It’s like,
‘Welcome to Vietnam, kid!’ The day I left, I gone to camp and I went back to battalion,
Colonel William [White], he died maybe five or six years ago of cancer, a lieutenant
colonel, a great man, he gave us all cigarette lighters with the emblem, ‘2\textsuperscript{nd} battalion, 3\textsuperscript{rd}
Marines,’ on them which I’ve lost since then, and there was 22 of us leaving that day
going back to the States and everybody was corporals and sergeants. That’s a hell of a lot
of NCOs to be moving from the battalion from battalion, and just as we’re about to go
down the hill a truck came up the hill with new recruits on it, so they didn't have helmets
or flak jackets. The regiment was either out of them or the battalion was but they hadn’t
issued them yet. So the sergeant major says, ‘Some of you guys get off the truck and
give these new guys your helmets and flak jackets.’ Well we were going down to
Danang and so I jumped out and I had an extra large long flak jacket and of course I had
a big head for my helmet, and this kid was probably 5’6’, 100 pounds, and the thing came
around his knees and the helmet was down around his throat, and when I got up in the
truck he kind of looked up and all I could see was a big smile; he was in Vietnam, and the
thing looked like a dress and we were all laughing and I thought, ‘God Almighty, how we
made it.’ That thing was heavy, it was an extra long and had extra plates in it and
everything. I later ran into the sergeant, well, in fact when I came to California I bought
a bar in 5th Recon [?], sergeant major [?], once in a while he liked to tend bar and he said,
‘I thought the colonel was going to cry that day.’ He said, ‘He missed an awful lot of
NCOs. You guys had been over there a year, eight months of steady combat.’ The
sergeant major…do you have time for a little story here?

SM: Yes.
JD: I had an officer while I was over in ‘Nam. I had probably four or five
days [to do] and we got a brand new 2nd lieutenant who had 16 years in the Marine Corps
and had been a gunnery sergeant and had made 2nd lieutenant and shipped to Vietnam
and he had never been out of the United States before, even during peace time; that’s
rare. He always worked out of Quantico, the headquarters of the Marine Corps. In his
benefit, he did later on turn into a pretty good guy, but I’ll never forget what he did.
Anyway, he called me in and he said, ‘I want you to send Cong killer with the golf
company with the three new recruits, three new scouts, and you and you and [Vicum]
cal,’ no, it was Jim Owens [?], that’s another funny story, [?], he said, ‘You guys go [?],’
and I said, ‘Sir, I’ve got Cong killer, his name is Frank [Callen] from Spokane,
Washington, nicknamed Cong Killer,’ so I said, ‘Cong Killer and I were going to go
[with Gulf?] because the shit’s going to hit the fan on that one,’ and I said, ‘I was going
to send Jim out with the three new guys and [?] and let them get used to scouting patrol.’
He said, ‘I’m ordering you to do what I said.’ So we are in an underground bunker about
this big and I turned to Captain Sheridan, who was our S-3, and I said, ‘Skipper, I’ve
been around a little bit longer than this lieutenant and I’m trying to tell him something but
he’s ordering me not to and I’d like to go on record that I don’t like what he’s telling me,’
and I had nerve four or five days to do, what the hell are they going to do to me?
Sheridan said, ‘Lieutenant, you might want to listen to the sergeant,’ and he said, ‘The
sergeant has been in charge of this section too long; I’m in charge now.’ So I go out
with…and the milk run had a couple of beers, showered, had a couple of beers, and a jeep
pulls up and this is at Dai Loc, jeep pulls up and says, ‘Do you have Frank [Callen’s]
gear?’ and he named the other three guys and I said, ‘What do you need from them? Are
they going to spend the night?’ and he said, ‘No, they’re all dead.’ [Callen] wasn’t but
the other three were. [Callen] lost both of his legs, so man, I started out a walk, and then
a fast walk, and then a run before I hit that bunker and Lieutenant Cook stands up and
says, ‘Things happen.’ Boy, I let him have it with an open hand, luckily and then I
jumped on him and they pulled me off. I was crying and I was kicking and screaming,
and he said – see, I was up for a silver star – he said, ‘I’ll have your silver star for this,’
and I said, ‘I don’t care what you do, lieutenant.’ What saved me…what I did was not
right, too. Okay. So, I finally calmed down enough to go back and pack the gear and all
that. So, it was starting to get dark and a guy comes in and says, ‘The sergeant major
wants to see you,’ so I go down there and he says, ‘Okay, colonel’s got the reports.’ He
says, ‘You got to go down and talk,’ and he said, ‘Watch your tongue. The colonel’s
almost on your side here.’ I’d been with the colonel too long and on a first name basis –
not me to him, I mean he could call me Jim – but he knew everybody in the battalion.
That man could remember names and was great at names. So anyway, we go in there and
he said, ‘I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,’ he said, ‘I’m going to tell the lieutenant to
write you up,’ but he said, ‘It’s never going to get beyond battalion headquarters and by
that time he’ll be back in the States…[interview and CD one end]