Kim Sawyer: This is Kim Sawyer conducting an oral history interview with Mr. John W. Nelson on the 13th of December, year 2000 at 1:00 in the afternoon in the Special Collections Library, Interview room in Lubbock, Texas. This interview is part of the Lubbock Area Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project. Mr. Nelson, could you begin with giving us a brief biographical sketch?

John Nelson: Sure. As Kim said, my name is John Nelson. My home is really in Montana, but I’ll back up a little bit. I was born in Portland, Oregon. During WWII my father was working in the shipyards. Shortly, thereafter we moved to Montana. Grew up in Western Montana, Missoula. Attended the University of Montana. I’ll have to say at the time the University of Montana was a land grant school, which required ROTC the first two years. I enjoyed it very much. I got a little bit of direction from the military and the ROTC, decided to go advanced ROTC, which led to a commission. I may or may not have even finished college had it not been for the ROTC. They gave me some motivation and some work. From there, the military, upon graduation kind of set my life in one direction for five or six or seven years. I got married right upon graduation to a childhood sweetheart from Mozolua. Right through flight training up in Enid, Oklahoma. Which was a year program. Following flight training in Enid, Oklahoma which, was about four times as grueling as college I might add. College was a piece of cake; the flight training was real hard. I was assigned to a C-130. A C-130 transport. I’ll get into
that in just a few moments. As you may know, that C-130 was the workhorse of the
Vietnam era. In my class, which graduated from Vance Air Force Base, we had 56
students and 54 went to fly C-130s. Our whole class. Everyone likes to say ‘I’d like to be
a fighter pilot’, but the needs of the Air Force were our whole class went to Vietnam
together. Although we were assigned different places. Following flight training I
attended training in Smyrna, Tennessee. They called it upgrade training, before you go to
Vietnam. I was there for about six weeks, eight weeks. My first child was born there in
Smyrna, Tennessee. As soon as the military allowed me to extend my stay there just a
little bit, the baby was born. And as soon as the baby was born, up to Montana, dropped
her off and then I went over to Southeast Asia. Along the way, I might add, while I was
in Tennessee, not much to do with Vietnam, but while I was in Tennessee, the 1968
Democratic National Convention was going on in Chicago, Illinois. So, our C-130 unit
out of Tennessee transported 200 loads of Army soldiers from Lawton, Oklahoma to
Chicago because there were some riots with the Democratic Convention. That was my
first exposure to politics. Then, back to my story, of course, from there I went to
Southeast Asia, but the military had several training stops along the way. One was a
survival school up in Spokane, Washington, which was very, very, very, good. From
survival school there to my assignment in the Pacific which was at Ching Chong Kwan
Air Base, known as CCK in Taiwan. I’ll pause there and see what you’d like to ask.
KS: O.K. If we could back up real quick. What year did you graduate from
college?
KS: 1966 and you talked about flight training being much more difficult than
college. Could you maybe elaborate and tell me exactly what that entailed.
JN: I graduated from the University of Montana in December 1966. I came on
active duty in February of 1967. I spent a year in Enid, Oklahoma, which was my first
exposure to flat lands and wind. It was really a fun experience because there were people
from all over the United States were together going through a flight-training program,
most of whom were destined to go to Vietnam. We were, if I can use the phrase, pretty
gung ho, about the whole thing, about the whole situation. We weren’t much involved in
political goings-on at the time. We were more involved with trying to get through flight
training because it was very grueling. And in the flight training we started there with the
total program was about 200 flying hours in three different airplanes. We started in a
little Cessna type airplane that the Air Force called the T-41. That was really a washout
kind of a program. In other words, if people couldn’t get through that the government
wanted to wash you out of the program early rather than spend a lot of money on you to
go through training. Later, then we went to the jets, which were the T-37 aircraft. That’s
where we first soloed in the jet aircraft. I was in that program about five or six months
and then we graduated and moved up to the T-38, which is a supersonic fighter. All Air
Force pilots went through the same routine, regardless, of the end assignment, where we
would fly. Flight training was a lot of fun. We made some of my best friends in life, I
met there. Of course, it was a three-part program. It was a physical training program.
None of which I’d ever imagined in my life. Kind of like the Marine Corps, except
you’re in the Air Force, with a strong physical training program. A strong educational
program on the Doctrine of the United States Air Force, as well as, the aircraft systems
that we had to fly. Then quite a bit of aeronautics and weather and things of that nature.
Then, the third probably the most exciting was the physical skills of flying the airplane.
They all three had to go together. Upon graduation, there in February of 1967, I’m sorry
February of 1968, when we graduated then most of the graduates had four of five months
of various schools of training before they went to Southeast Asia. So, it was a little time
off to be with the family and then survival training. At that time, most of the aircrews
went to survival training at Spokane, Washington at Fairchild Air Force Base. That was
our first exposure to the fact that someone may shoot us, that life may be threatened.
That you may have to escape. We had to go through an enduring program of isolation.
We had to go through a very realistic program of being captured and being in an enemy
P.O.W. camp and we had to attempt an escape from that. This is, gosh, been 37 years
later, but what I still remember from that, and I carried all the way through Vietnam, was
that if you were ever captured. It’s much easier to escape right away. The longer you
were with the enemy that they’re carrying around. The stronger, and stronger, and
stronger they become. When you’re first captured you’re a long ways away from their
resources and with their sick and their wounded their taking you back. And if you’re not
alert and you don’t escape right away, the further you get into their homeland, the more
strongly reinforced they are and you’re not going to get away. i.e. Hanoi Prison. So, that’s a little bit of a side bar on the training at Fairchild, Washington. Many of my classmates went to SEA survival. The SEA stood for Southeast Asia. SEA survival in the Philippines. We called it jungle survival. For whatever reason the air crews that we were assigned to didn’t attend that. So, I didn’t go to SEA survival. Following the departure stage, we arrived as a fully qualified co-pilot on a C-130 in Taiwan. Taiwan was a military base. They trained the Chinese Air Force on the same base. It was a remote facility, which meant that the GI's could not take their families or their dependents over there. That’s what that meant. It was a 15-month tour. At the time, most of the aircraft commanders that were flying the C-130s were older, how do I say this nicely, desk jockeys that were pulled away from their midlevel career positions in the Air Force and put back in the cockpit, because of the tremendous need for the C-130s. The command that I belonged to was the 314th care division. I flew with the 345th tactical airlift squadron. The 314th is rather interesting in that, not that I’m a military historian, but they ultimately was the air division that Reese Air Force base was under toward the very end. So, I came back to the states eventually and was stationed at Reese. After a short indoctrination over in Taiwan and getting acclimated, they were very hungry for young gung ho crews to go in country. So, our routine there would be to be in Vietnam for 18-21 days and then back for three. Back to Taiwan for three. Then back to Vietnam for 21 days and then back for three. The reason that they had it set up that way with our aircraft and our personnel was the Department of Defense had some policy that if they left the air planes permanently in Vietnam they would have to give them to the Vietnam, Vietnamese Air Force, like, they did with many of their aircraft. The C-130 was too valuable of an airplane and they had no intention of doing that at the time. So our crews could not politically, could not be permanently stationed in Vietnam. It’s kind of interesting where the days in country, so to speak. You see all the war movies and things like this where people, ‘so many more days to go home’ and all this. Well, the people just assigned in Vietnam were only there 11 months. The aircrews were, Taiwan we started off going to be there 15 months, and then I extended to 24 months. So, we were there for 24 months. I had approximately 450 days in country, a long time. So, consequently we could not count the days in country if we just flew a mission into
Vietnam and back out. That didn’t count. It only counted if you stayed in Vietnam more
the 15 days at a time. So, I have more time than that, I’m sure.

KS: I was just going to ask you, again talking about training. Had any of your
instructors, had they been to Vietnam? Were they giving you any advice based on their
own experiences?

JN: Basically, I’ll break that into a couple areas. In pilot training the answer to
that was not very many, because pilot training, which was air-training command, was
mainly younger officers. Some probably, a handful had been in combat experience in
Vietnam. They had a few senior officers that were in Vietnam and perhaps Korea that
came back. Most of the younger people had limited combat experience. Usually there
was a few and I will limit their training to the war stories pretty much. Then when we
moved up to the C-130s training and they called that RTU. Some of these acronyms, I’m
a little hazy on, I think that stood for Replacement Training Unit. When we went through
RTU with the replacement training for the C-130, that specific weapon system had more
people that had been in combat. We were actually with an active wing, that actually flew
worldwide missions right there. Some of which when we were in training we would fly
from Tennessee to Little Rock, Arkansas and back. We’d fly like up to Chicago and
deliver troops up there. We’d fly regular missions at the Air Force fly for transports.
We’d fly out to New Mexico and drop flares for the fighters who were in training. We
would fly across the Atlantic on training navigators how to navigate. Then the intense
part of the C-130 RTU training was one, us learning the systems of that airplane and
becoming a real expert on the airplane. Two, being able to fly the thing, because it’s
different than flying the trainer fighters. Then three, learning how to do all the assault
tactics. When I say assault tactics that we would need in Vietnam. The assault tactic
meant, there’s a lot of them. Basically one, learning how to land a very large airplane
160,000 pounds on a 2000 foot runway. Very short. Learning how to fly the airplane in
formation with other big airplanes. Learning how to extract cargo out of the back which
we used a lot in Vietnam. We trained there on how to navigate very close to the ground.
We did a lot of low level navigating over around Kentucky and Tennessee, which looks a
lot like Vietnam. When, I say that it’s just all green. There’s not a lot of landmarks. We
became good map-readers in that training program. I believe the training program there
was probably about 200, maybe 100 hours of flying time or 150 hours of flying time.
The C-130, to upgrade to aircraft commander, which was my goal at the time. You know
everybody wants to be in charge. They don’t want to be number two. You had to have
1000 hours of total time. That was the military’s rule, so they wouldn’t have some young
buck that didn’t know much about it flying a 3 or 4 million dollar airplane.
Consequently, to accelerate my hours after I finished that training, I had about three or
four weeks to spare, so I stayed there. The government just let me stay there while my
wife was going to have a baby. So, I volunteered to fly with them and that’s why I flew
about an extra 400 hours, while I was just sitting there. I could either play golf or fly. I
chose to fly. So that accelerated my time, I was able to be a more valuable asset and then
upgrade to aircraft commander a lot quicker. By working all that I had flown a few
months in Vietnam in the missions. As soon as I had 1000 hours, right on the nose, and I
had all the examinations, then I was an aircraft commander. The Air Force was very
excited to have aircraft commanders over there because they rotated people back to the
States and they needed fresh blood that knew the country and knew all the procedures for
Vietnam.
KS: How would you rate your training? Did it prepare you enough?
JN: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I think training was excellent. The primary flight
training and all the training is a combination of you learning and you gaining confidence.
It could be the best training in the world, but if the person has no confidence, they’re
going to be a poor pilot or a poor combat soldier. Ours was a combination of very good
motivating type training and it’s kind of a sidebar, but that’s the reason the Air Force
solos a student in a jet when they only have 15 hours of time. You don’t do anything
when you solo, you just fly around the pattern a few times and land, but you’re
proving to yourself that you can do it without somebody else helping you. You know
like when your daddy taught you how to drive a car, it’s different when he was in the car
then when he got out, it’s the same procedure. The training in the C-130s was really
again, excellent. It was certainly a different kind of training. It was a little more laid
back than flight training. Flight training in the Air Force made a very strong attempt to
wash you out to wash you out of flight training. They want to make sure you can cut it.
After you once became a pilot then the government went to a lot more extremes to loosen
up a little bit and let you have a little better time. It was easier going. The difference in
the missions in the C-130 we’d fly five or six or seven hours at a time. Whereas in a jet
trainer you fly for an hour and you’re out of fuel. It was just different. Training was
good. Training was really good. As in any situation you can only train so much and then
you’ve got to learn the rest on the job. The Air Force calls it OJT on-the-job training.

KS: Were there any problems or accidents during your training that you recall?

JN: In my particular flight, going through flight training we had a number of
incidents where people had different things happen that kept them from becoming a pilot.
We didn’t have any accidents that killed anybody. The Air Force has a very good safety
record with their training aircraft, much better than the airlines. So, actually other than
people getting in car wrecks and going out and having a few too many drinks and
different things like that, we had no tragedies so to speak in the training pipeline at all.
We had a couple, a lot of incidents, but nothing that was out of the ordinary I don’t think.
Just kind of a lot of fun.

KS: How many people were cut from the program? You mentioned that.

JN: We started in Enid, Oklahoma; with I believe 86 people and we graduated
57. Most people were cut for different reasons. It’s interesting. One of the reasons that
some people are afraid to fly. They don’t know that when you go, you say, ‘I want to be
a jet pilot’ and then you get there and you’re scared to death and they call that, it was
really a dirty word for us. It was called SIE, self initiated elimination, SIE. If you saw
Top Gun, the movie, Top Gun. You know like this guy in Top Gun that couldn’t cut the
mustard anymore so he washed up that is what it was. It was kind of a self-inflicted thing
or you’re washed out if you couldn’t pass the tests. We lost a lot, probably, academically
about 1/3 of the people that washed out were for academic reasons. The government was
very straight forward. Some of the people going through flight training would be
delivering nuclear bombs in their airplane. They didn’t want a dummy flying around that
couldn’t pass a math test. They did a good job with that. Some people were very smart,
loved to fly, but they just didn’t have the physical characteristics to fly the airplane.
Some people, they say, can’t walk and chew gum. Like, a lot of the college professors
that work around Texas Tech right? So, they’re really good people, but they’re never
going to be a racecar driver or get high (laughs). One other thing I’ll tell you and then
you can ask some questions about it. My wife and I made the decision, it turned out to be
a good decision, but it was a very bold decision at the time. To take her and our two
month old baby from the states to Taiwan and live on the economy. There was no law
precluding us from doing that, the military discouraged it. So, her name is Carol Ann,
and we’re still married, which is unusual in this day and age. When our baby was two
months old, after I had already flown two or three shovels into Vietnam and I found a
place where she could live there on the economy. Then we flew her over, borrowed some
money from my parents because we were flat broke. She flew into Taipei about
Christmas of 1968 with a two-month-old baby. She had more tragedies with that than I
did, you know, first few months in Vietnam. Just a side bar, one of her tragedies was, she
had all the clothing and baby food that she thought’d she’d need for about six months in
her baggage, which was lost en route to Taiwan. But it turned out, we weren’t alone with
this idea. There were probably 40 or 50 other service men that eventually brought their
families over. We could not use any of the military facilities for our dependants to
include the commissary or the medical, because it was a remote assignment. However,
we end up bargaining with the military a little bit. They could see the wisdom of what
we were doing, so they made us a deal. They said if we with our families would agree to
extend our tour of duty from 15 months to 24 months, then they would acknowledge that
they were there and allow, and pay for, what we called an accompanied trip back. In
other words, they would acknowledge and let them use the medical facilities at the base.
So, we did that. It turned out to be a real smart move for the military because, since this
is an archive, I’ll be glad to tell you as honest as I can. All kinds of these middle aged
men that didn’t have their families over there found some real sweet little Chinese girl to
live with, and then there was a great degree of divorces and things of that nature. So,
with all that, my wife and my two-month-old daughter joined me over there. Even then, I
was only home three days a month. It was still like going home once a month. Well, it
worked out quite well. My second child, Cathy was conceived on Taiwan and born in the
Navy Hospital in Taipei because of that.
KS: So, in your training you knew all along that you would eventually be sent to Vietnam? You volunteered for that. What was your wife’s feeling or your family’s feeling about that?

JN: I don’t think my wife was, I mean she was concerned, but not upset because she grew up with me going through flight training. I mean the service was as much to her, as it was to me. My parents up in Mizola, Montana were more freaked out about it because their little kid was going off to Vietnam. In 1968, when I graduated from flight training I was 24 years old. So, when I was 24 years old, like every other 24 year old, I was pretty gung ho. It was exciting and never had much concern for my own safety. Things were set up pretty well and I was pretty excited about the whole thing. And the whole time in Vietnam was exciting to me. It was not a dull, terrible thing that I was doing. We were working long and hard with a real sense of accomplishment of what we were doing. That part of it was great.

KS: Real quick before we discuss specifics in Vietnam, you mentioned, I’d like to ask you about the Democratic Convention, could you talk a little bit more about that? Exactly, the role and what you know.

JN: Sure. Basically, I wish that I would have been a more astute student of politics when I was in college, but I wasn’t. I was working 40 hours a week at a Safeway store. I was in love with my gal I was going to marry. I could care less about politics. All I wanted to do was graduate. It still drives me nuts that kids have so much time on their hands, that they do all these things, because they’re not occupied with themselves, but that’s neither here, nor there. The Chicago Convention just happened when I was going through training in Tennessee. This would have been in 1968 and it would have been sometime in June or July, maybe the first part of August, whenever you had the National Convention up there. There were some riots and the police in Chicago didn’t think that they could handle the riots. So, they called in the National Guard and then they called in the military. In the military, my whole role, I was co-pilot at the time, was to deliver troops. We took armed troops from Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. As I remember we had 100 airplanes, and we went in a steady stream going into Oklahoma picking up the Army troops. We made two trips from Oklahoma to Chicago, Illinois. We landed at the naval air station there. If you can imagine 100 airplanes following one another. As I
remember, they went north to Chicago at about 19,000 feet and they came back at 20,000 feet. So, you could see all the airplanes coming and going. When we land up there we wouldn’t even shut the engines off. We would come in turn around on the little apron, open the doors and they’d all exit out the back and we’d take off again. The military not only had our C-130s but also another group of aircraft called a C-141, which is a jet transport brought an equal amount of troops from another Army base in there. I think that was my first acknowledgement that we had a real mighty military, that we could move that many people in a few hours notice from one part of the country to another. Without most of the regular folks in the world even knowing we were doing it. We just moved them in there and there they were. And then we were gone. I don’t know much more about what happened at the Chicago thing because I really wasn’t interested, quite frankly. The politics of the moment even with all the decisions in Vietnam that a lot of people say we should have been there, we shouldn’t have been there and all that. At that time wasn’t of my concern. My concern was, ‘well we are here and this is a job’. I was pretty sure that I was going to stay in the military for a career. That was my intent. I was a regular officer and of course I went there as a Second Lieutenant and First Lieutenant, promoted to Captain, had a choice to stay in the service or get out and I chose to stay in at that time. Then after I came back to the States, we’ll get there in a little while, I was a jet instructor at Laredo Air Force base. Still training pilots for Vietnam. I was one of the experienced people teaching the students how to fly the jets. Then when that base was closed down at Laredo for political reasons, quite frankly the South Texas Democrats at that time were punishing the military, because they didn’t like Nixon. We closed that base down we moved to Lubbock to Reese Air Force Base. So, I wasn’t much into politics at that time. That really wasn’t my bag. I didn’t have much time for it. I would say whenever people go over to a foreign country like going to Taiwan en route to Vietnam, many, many people found little nests of work that they could do at Taiwan, instead of going into Vietnam. So, many people created themselves administrative roles. Which were important instead of the active combat roles. I thought the comment was funny.

KS: Anything else you’d like to add about your training?
JN: Not really. I would just say the training was really, really good. It was a good confidence builder. Of course, we were able to get all of our commercial ratings. We were able to get the same ratings as a commercial airline pilot, which I still have, because of the training there. The training was a lot better, a lot more superior, than the airline industry by a long shot, as far as training pilots and training crews. We had some other training that we had to accomplish. We had to learn how to bail out of an airplane and parasail. Now, you call it sky diving. We had to do some of that. We had to become certified to handle weapons M-16s and 38 caliber pistols. Most of all the training program, those kind of programs you want to do as well as you could, but you weren’t going to flunk. It was for your own self-defense that you wanted to get through. I would say the training program we had at Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington was called Winter Survival. You may find it very unusual we were going to Vietnam, yet we were scheduled to go to Winter Survival in Spokane, Washington. Looking back in that, it was one of the biggest confidence boosters, I’d ever had. I’m really from Western Montana, so I had come from around forest and woods and all that, but in the Winter Survival, they broke us up into small groups, a group of 10 men. Usually there were two officers, of which I was one, and eight enlisted. Because a lot of enlisted people were going over to Vietnam and places also. We actually had to survive out in the wilderness for about three or four days with the enemy chasing us. If you got caught, you weren’t going to flunk, but you weren’t going to do well. So, up there we had things like, a few onions and a few potatoes and knives and we didn’t have our revolver with us out there in that exercise. But we had to shoot rabbits and shoot animals and cook them and eat. These kinds of things which was kind of cool. It let you know, I would say, most people if they miss one meal, I think they’d die. It was a form of toughening us up, which was difficult. So, the training was great. I had no problem with that.

KS: So after the training could you describe the trip over? You went via Taiwan or you were on a commercial flight.

JN: When the aircrews went over, when most of the military went over we went commercial airline. Now I didn’t fly directly into Vietnam because I flew into Taiwan, but we flew on a contract carrier out of McCoy Air Force Base in Washington. Non-stop direct into Taipei I believe. I believe into Taipei, Taipei, Taiwan. Everyone on that liner,
some people were going to Korea, some people were going there. Some people were
going to the Philippines, so it was a stop. I would just say we had, I had, one duffle bag
and one little suitcase. I still laugh when I go to Dallas and people carry three suitcases
to go to Dallas for the weekend. They bring back two they didn’t need, because now
people don’t prepare. So, we had everything we needed for two years in those bags. We
got to the base and had a little indoctrination. Kind of like a welcoming meeting.
Probably when we got to the base there in Taiwan, we were assigned to a smaller unit.
Then the smaller unit kind of brings you in and shows you the ropes, and tells you who
and what to do and everything like that. So our smaller unit was the unit I was actively
assigned to. In Taiwan, at CCK Air Base the unit was called a squadron. In the squadron
up there in Taiwan. We had four squadrons and I was in one of those four squadrons.
We had about 20 airplanes assigned to that squadron and about probably 100 flight
crewmembers, approximately. Two or three crews per airplane is the way it worked. We
had a few orientation things that we had to do over there before we could go into
Vietnam. Things like getting photographs taken of you with just a t-shirt on without your
uniform, without your rank. Things like how to sanitize everything you have, so you
didn’t have Texas driver’s licenses with you and stuff like that. They didn’t want you
carrying all that stuff around, because we flew a lot of missions over there. Some of
them were Laos and some of them were over China and different places where they
didn’t want our identity to be known. So, we went through some programs, kind of
sterilization so to speak. One other thing I’ll mention, combat pay. That was a real big
deal for everybody. In order to earn combat pay you have to be in combat. So, if you
were sitting behind a desk at CCK Air Base Taiwan, maybe a personnel officer you
didn’t get combat pay. Even if you were a Lieutenant Colonel pilot, but your job was
now a personnel officer, you wouldn’t get combat pay unless once a month you went to
Vietnam and back. So, we had many, many airplanes. We had about 2-3 airplanes every
other day that went in country. We always had airplanes going into Vietnam and back.
Invariably, when we had missions, like when I was home, we may have to go to work
that day and we have, what I call an out and back. That’d be go to Vietnam and back or
go to Tokyo and back, or go to Huang and back. So, those are just those missions
though. So, invariably whenever we had a mission which were, which I call an out and
back to Vietnam and back we would be loaded with all the desk jockeys that got on the order somehow or other to go in at once to get their combat pay. If they were real skilled they would go in on the 30th. We’d get in there by midnight and get back on the 1st on the same flight, so then they’d have two months taken care of. So, we had a lot of jokes and a lot of yucks about that. The people that were involved were in Vietnam all the time. Other people that were up on the fringes did all kinds of weird stuff just to get credit for it. But that’s all right. Those people probably had a heart attack from eating too much cholesterol back at the base.

KS: Could you describe the base a little bit?

JN: The Ching Chong Kwan Air Base, I’ll refer to it as CCK. CCK is a base that I suspect the United States paid for because it had a very long runway, about 10,000 feet. They had buildings and all for some quarters. Some barracks and a chow hall and each squadron had their own little office building. But most things were kind of centered around the runway. The runway was here, there was no housing divisions like from an Air Force base. Everybody there was living in kind of like an apartment about the size of this room I suppose. They had the base set up so that our aircraft, we had a wing of C-130s there. They also had a wing of tankers called KC-135s and they’re the refueling tankers. So, the KC-135s was also U.S. crews that were there. They didn’t live there. They would just come over there from somewhere in the States from a base and stay there like 60 days and go back. They were not considered a remote assignment. They were just there temporary duty. But the tankers had a very, very tough missions because the tankers would refuel all the B-52 bombers. The B-52s were all stationed in Guam, which was way out in the middle of nowhere. Everyday the B-52s would leave Guam, around the clock. They didn’t bomb just at 8:00 in the morning, all around the clock. It was all coordinated so that when they over flew Taiwan, somewhere between Taiwan and Vietnam, I’d say about half way to Vietnam the KC-135s would report that they would take off from Taiwan fully loaded with fuel. It would take them a long time to climb to altitude because they were very, very heavy, like a tank car flying, with weight on it. Before the bombers got to the boundary separating the Pacific from the war zone in Vietnam the tankers would refuel there. They’d be hooked up to them for probably 20 minutes or so. Transferring all that fuel to the B-52 bombers. So, that the bombers
would have enough fuel to then continue the missions. Fly in, drop their bomb over
wherever they were dropping them and make a U-turn and fly back to Guam. I have a lot
of respect for the B-52 crews. I knew a lot of friends that were flying in KC-135s. We
had a crazy thing happen, where one crashed on departure of the air base there. When the
tankers take off, they take off in a cell, which is three. They take off with a little bit of
spacing, maybe a mile spacing. Of course, in the Air Force we fly in all kinds of weather,
day and night, all kinds of weather. The weather was real crummy one day and they took
off early in the morning and when they popped up above the weather one of the tankers
was missing. Only two of the three came. One of them came apart and crashed in the
ocean and killed the crew. Then they called upon our C-130s there to fly the search and
rescue, trying to find the men and the remains of the airplane and all that type of thing.
That was my first experience at flying 50 feet above the water, with real high waves. It
was very rough. We were flying looking for debris, life preservers and things of that
nature, which we found none. We flew for a day out there looking for them. That was
not unusual for a big airplane, heavy to go through some big turbulence or something like
that and break apart. That’s probably what happened to that airplane.

KS: Is that standard procedure to use a C-130 for search and rescue?
JN: Yes. Basically they used whatever they could find, whatever was available.
The C-130s are a very good platform for that. They have enough fuel they could stay up
there all day long if they want to. They would always have a search and rescue specialist
that would be out in one of the airplanes. They would set it up kind of like a checker
board, and they would tell you, so you wouldn’t be running into other airplanes out there.
They’d give you one area to search. All this time, in my stories so far, I’m still a co-pilot.
I was like a Second Officer.

KS: What year was this?
JN: This was ’68. It was in 1968.

KS: If you could talk about some of your missions into Vietnam. I know in your
questionnaire you mentioned you flew out of just about every air base. If you could talk
a little bit about what your typical missions would be like.

JN: I’ll give you a little overview first. I actually have a little diary that I kept.
I’ve got it all here, all of the days and the missions. I’ll read a couple of them on the
paper. Basically, the first trips over to Vietnam, we were going in, we were stationed at a
little place called Tuy Hoa. Tuy Hoa is north of Cam Ranh Bay it’s spelled T-U-Y H-O-A, Tuy Hoa. Tuy Hoa was right on the ocean and when we got in there, the first time I
got there, it was very remote, we had little rickety places we stayed in, they called them
Hooches. We had check in, get there the first day. Usually when you flew in from
Taiwan in to Vietnam our typical missions would be leave Taiwan, probably stop at
Clark Air Base in the Philippines and pick up a load of whatever they had going in. Fly
into Vietnam and drop it off somewhere perhaps Da Nang or Cam Ranh Bay or wherever
they wanted it. Then we would fly from there over to our final destination. Which is
where we were going to stay for the next three weeks, which would be Tuy Hoa. And
Tuy Hoa was a small, small little base. We had about 25 airplanes. Tuy Hoa was
protected by the Korean soldiers. They took great pride in never having anybody come
on base. We had no threat of getting shot at while we were on base. We had no
interaction with them except seeing them on base. They had their own separate barracks
and all that. They were just real tough. They had a lot of pride in their protection of that
base and that area. The perimeter probably five miles out or something like that. We
would get there and of course, as an officer most places had pretty nice places to eat and
sleep. I mean not nice like the State side, but they wanted the aircrews to get a good
nights rest and get a good meal. So, we slept in air-conditioned quarters most of the time.
The soldiers in the field of course didn’t, but the aircrews did. We were flying 16-hour
days in a cockpit. So, they wanted us to be fresh. It’s kind of like when you’re flying
Southwest Airlines and you know the pilots been up there all day long and the weather’s
bad. He’s not feeling so great either, so you want the pilot to be rested. When we would
leave for our early morning briefing, we would go down to the operational part of the
squadron there. Let’s say that we were departing at 6 a.m. Well, if were departing at 6
a.m. then our whole crew, because the officers stayed in one place and the enlisted stayed
in another, our whole crew would show up two hours before take off, so we’d show up at
4 a.m., make sure everybody was there and no one was hung over. No one was sick or
anything like that. Then we’ all go in as a crew for the operational briefing, which meant,
until then we didn’t know what we were going to do that day, didn’t know where we
were going or anything like that. So, we go into the operational briefing and they would
have our orders, called a Frag order. F-R-A-G, I believe, a frag order. A Frag order was 
sent down from above about what we would do that day. Generally speaking, it was all 
coordinated with the field commanders and the different people that wanted this unit 
moved from here to here. This wanted food and ammunition and all that and so forth. In 
there, about 1/3 of our airplanes over there were used as passenger and logistic support. 
Hauling stuff everywhere. Another 1/3 was used for moving units, moving people. Not 
just I want to say passengers, maybe some officers and people need to go from Da Nang 
to Saigon for administrative meeting or else they were getting transferred out. They 
would just be flying passengers on our flight. So, that’s 1/3 of it. A third of our missions 
were combat support hauling troops that were going from this base to this base. SO, we 
were hauling tanks and jeeps and not tanks, we were hauling jeeps and ammo and food 
and people and all that. The other 1/3 was hauling cargo, ammunition, fuel things of that 
nature. So, we’d show up there at 6:00 in the morning, or 4:00 in the morning for 6:00 
take off. Then different people had different duties. The flight engineer, his job would 
be to go out and check out the airplane, make sure it’s full of fuel and all the maintenance 
has been done and all that. He was enlisted, usually a master sergeant or a staff sergeant. 
Then we would have a younger guy, usually a staff sergeant that was a loadmaster he 
would look at the frag and see what had to get loaded on the airplane, and go out there 
and meet the area port people and they would put it all on the airplane. He had a very 
important job and that was always testing the weight and balance of the load. If it’s not 
centered it could be dangerous to crash upon take off. I’ll tell you a little story about that 
in a bit, I’ll tell it now. One morning we had a mission. We weren’t out of Tuy Hoa we 
were out of Saigon. We were loading up to haul this load of gun barrels, which were 105 
Howitzer barrels, big barrels. In Vietnam they came in wooden boxes because they 
would take them back to the States somewhere and refurbish them and come back. They 
had markings on the box telling the loadmaster how to load those barrels. Well, he had 
this load of about 25,000 pounds of barrels on this airplane and when it got time to leave, 
the co-pilot and myself came out to the airplane to get on the airplane and the airplane 
was all hunched down in the back and the front wheel was clear off the ground. It was 
sitting there like this. Not clear off the ground, but almost off the ground. The 
loadmaster said, ‘Something’s wrong sir. I don’t know what it is. I measured this and
did all everything else, but it’s just too tail heavy. I’ve done all the math right. We had
another guy the area port manager came out, who was a captain and he was saying stuff
like, of course that’s right, you get in that damn airplane and get it out of here. We
fought and argued with him for a while, finally we got in the airplane and we backed
those airplanes up, put it in reverse. So as soon as we put it in reverse the whole nose
reared up in the air sitting there. Then we shut her back down. The long story, making it
short they offloaded the packages and they found out that these gun barrels which were
shipped from Ft. Dix, New Jersey, as I recall, were put in those boxes backwards, on
purpose or not, I never know, so that the instructions were reversed. All the heavy ends
of the barrels, which weighed about three times as much as the little end was in the aft of
the aircraft. My story is just saying that if an inexperienced person would have taken off,
we would have crashed on take-off and killed them. Also, to say that the importance of
having a good working relationship with the enlisted people. The loadmasters and the
Engineers save your life. If you were just a smart alleck, college grad talking to these
guys, looking down your nose at them, you’d get nowhere. You had to work together as
a team. The same thing with the flight engineer. His job was to check the mechanical
aspects of the airplane and the pilot did a quick walk-around pre-flight, very cursory
compared to what the flight engineer did. Then you get in it and go. So, back to Tuy
Hoa we take off at 6:00 in the morning and we’d have our route, where we’re going to
go. Most of the time if things went as scheduled, as soon as you were airborne most of
the missions over there were 20-30 minute in length, very short. In that airplane I could
fly from one end of Vietnam to the other in two hours. C-130 flew about 300 miles an
hour. It would cover a lot of ground. Most of the missions were real short. If you take
off from Tuy Hoa and land at Cam Ranh Bay you no more than got the landing gear up
and all the checklist stuff and a couple radios calls and now you’re approaching to land at
the next place. Vietnam is a very small country. We would check-in, they had a very
good command post over there that as soon as you were airborne, you’d’ call and check-
in so someone on the ground knew where you were at at all times. Put a little grease
board where they put an ‘X’ that this airplane was going here and then if they had to
divert you from different missions they could do that. Then we’d drop that off and go to
the next place, and the next place and the next place, until the mission was done, usually
which took about 16 hours. From 6:00 in the morning, when we would actually take-off
it’d really be about 14 hours later, when we’d actually be all done. So, it was 8:00 or
9:00 at night. Most of the time on our missions over there, if we took off at 6:00 the first
morning, then next morning it would be slipped to 8:00. The next morning it would be
slipped to 10:00. So, two or three hours. Then we had a day off and then we’d continue.
Our operation we flew around the clock. A lot of the commands over there only flew
during the daylight hours. We flew 24 hours a day. We flew day missions and night
missions and all that kind of stuff. Our crews had a pretty good workout. I might just
mention over there. I know I just amble on a lot of this stuff. The three areas in country
where we operated out of was Tuy Hoa. The second one was Cam Ranh Bay and the
third one was Saigon. Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. One wasn’t better than the
other. They were all the same. Early on, when we would have a shuttle in Saigon we
could go off the base if we wanted to. You could go downtown, downtown Saigon and
buy a camera or whatever you wanted to do. I never ventured very far from the base. I
was usually too tired. When I had time off I wanted to maybe lay in the sun a little bit.
Maybe play some poker, get a good night’s rest. I was really exhausted most of the time.
The first couple of days in country I was real fresh and then it got to be a real drag. Very,
very, very fatiguing being hot and sweaty and out and not in air conditioning and walking
around in fatigues and flight suits with salt stains square down to your stomach. It was
very, very fatiguing. It wasn’t much time off, like you’d be real spry to go on vacation.
Most of the time those were the bases. Our routine, if we had such a thing, we would fly
two of these shuttle missions in Vietnam. In other words, 18 days, back to Taiwan for
three, and back in Vietnam again for 18 days and back for three. And the third one we
would go to Thailand. It was kind of a treat, kind of break for us. In Thailand we would
either stay at Bangkok, which was an airport there at Dang Mong Airport or at Uthapoa.
A big Air Force, big strategic air command SAC base including Uthapoa. There it was a
little more leisure, people weren’t shooting at you. There was not much bad stuff
happening. Although, we flew to Vietnam from there quite a bit. Most people liked
going to Bangkok for a shuttle for a change of pace. We lived in a nice hotel there, when
we were there. We flew around the clock there too. There wasn’t much time off, very
little sight seeing and stuff like that to go on. Frequently, we would fly missions out of
Bangkok or out of Uthapoa. Our nickname over there was sand hog airlines. We make a circuit around all the bases around Thailand twice in one day. Kind of like flying Southwest Airlines except there’s a lot of GIs going around there. On the night missions we would actually haul armament lots of time, bombs from Uthapoa. They’d come into Uthapoa by ship, then we’d haul them from there into Saigon. We usually would make two or three ships a night, if that was our mission, going to Saigon with a load of bombs and back, Saigon with a load of bombs and back. When I say bombs, I don’t what they were. They could have been bombs, or they could have been ammunition casings or whatever else, high explosive stuff. I’ll share with you a couple of things in here. I’ll look at one of these days. I didn’t keep as good records as I wish I had. I had a movie camera that I took some pictures of over there in the airplane, but they were big and bulky. You got so used to everything you thought you’d always see it and always remember it. I have a lot of pictures. I kept a diary. The reason that I kept a diary was to just keep track of my flight time. It wasn’t like the Full Metal Jacket kind of diary, where these guys are writing to their Momma and stuff like that. I was just had to keep track of where I’d been. I’ll show you. This is an example, and I’ll read these to you. This is on October 6, 1970. It’s one of my last missions over there. I left late in October of 1970. I was flying out of Cam Ranh Bay. The flight number was 847/279, because it was the 279th Bullion Day. They kept track of all the missions on Bullion days. The aircraft listed under here 63-7812. That means the aircraft was made in 1963. I’ve got a picture of one of the airplanes in Lubbock that I actually flew. I kept the numbers here and some of the Air Force posters had this picture on it. So, I have that picture, not just of one, but the one that I flew. This particular mission we took off out of Cam Ranh Bay at 12:00. Cam Ranh Bay to Pleiku, which was 45 minutes. On the ground about 30 minutes from Pleiku to Qui Nhon. That was about 40 minutes. Qui Nhon to Tuy Hoa 25 minutes. Tuy Hoa to Nha Trang about 25 minutes. Nha Trang back to Cam Ranh Bay. Cam Ranh Bay back up the Coast of Chu Lai. Chu Lai to Da Nang. That was now about 10:00 at night. Then Da Nang to Cam Ranh Bay. It was 1 hour and 30 minutes from Da Nang to Cam Ranh Bay. That day we flew 5.4 hours of flight time. That was uneventful. When we had problems going on in here. I would make notes, like we blew a tire or lost an engine or something like that. That was an uneventful one. I have one that I’d like to get in here
before I run out of gas in this interview, if I can find it. This was kind of interesting.

This one was on July the 10th. This was in 1969 and I was upgrading my, I was becoming an aircraft commander at the time. I had an old major that was my aircraft commander instructor pilot, Major Ludwig. He’s sitting in the right seat and I was sitting in the left seat. He was just acting as my co-pilot. Whenever you had an instructor with you, they gave you the worst missions you could get. The ones that were real tough to do. As an example, we took off out of Cam Ranh Bay at 5 minutes after midnight. That was the start of our day, five minutes after midnight. Cam Ranh Bay to Pleiku, Pleiku to Da Nang, Da Nang to Hue Phu Bai. And that was 4:00 in the morning. So, we’re landing at Hue Phu Bai at 3:40 in the morning. Near the demilitarized zone, up near nowhere. So, we land there at 3:45 and departed at 4:05. Most of the time, our ground times, were about 20 minutes. That’s a lot for off-loading cargo and off-loading stuff from getting on. Then from Hue we flew into Da Nang, that’s about 40 minutes. You have to understand up in the North part of the country the weather was usually crappy. I mean we were flying instruments most of the time. It wasn’t just nice, clear sunny afternoons. It was very difficult flying. Then from Da Nang back to Dong Ha. If you look on the map to see where Dong Ha is, you’ll see it’s about eight miles from the demilitarized zone. We took a lot of fire and they fired upon us a lot up there. Dong Ha to Da Nang, Da Nang to Dong Ha. We were hauling milk and ammunition. So, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. That was a very, very difficult time. Let me see if I can find this one here on February 2, then I’ll tell you the story. This is on February 2, 1969. I was still a co-pilot I had not upgraded aircraft commander. This was February 2, Groundhog Day on a Sunday morning and we took off from Tuy Hoa. That’s when we were up there at Tuy Hoa. We were flying aircraft #62-1841. The significance of that is, I’ll tell you in a minute. We flew from Tuy Hoa to Da Nang and picked up a load of armament out at Da Nang. And then we went from Da Nang to An Hoa, spelled A-N H-O-A was only 39 miles. That’s like going from here to half way to Plainview, and it took us 15 minutes from Da Nang to An Hoa. In a big airplane, you take off, you’re in the clouds and you’re just getting all ready to go and then your time to land again. So we landed at An Hoa at 10:05. We were on the ground there about 15 minutes off-loading, I don’t remember what we had on board that time. Then back to Da Nang, loaded up
again. Took off, left Da Nang at 11:50 and got in there at 12:10. In my handwritten
notes here it says on the leg from Da Nang to An Hoa we took numerous hit on the
aircraft, approximately .30 caliber. Upon landing in An Hoa, the left wing was engulfed
in flames and we had 20,000 pounds of ammo on board. I cut my right knee egressing
from the airplane. The airplane was destroyed. Two of us on board got a Purple Heart. I
got a Purple Heart from injury to my knee and the loadmaster broke a nose and broke an
arm in the back. On that mission, matter of fact I’ve got the names of the crew written in
here as well. On that mission we were flying in real low, under the clouds and we called
it low-level. So, we’d fly as fast as we can, as close to the ground as we can. There were
some rolling hills along there. A lot of the snipers would sit on the hills and would take
shots at the airplanes that went by. In the C-130 the wings had all the fuel in them. If we
took a hit, then the fuel would pour out of the wing and it would catch on fire and that’s
what happened here. We were engulfed in flames before we got to An Hoa. We were
burning in the air. The aircraft commander ordered me to shut down the #1 and 2 engines
and that’s both of them on the same side. Because they were on fire on that side of the
airplane. We had this big airplane with two engines on one side and none on the other.
All of this happened so fast, by this time we were already almost above this little field of
An Hoa. We were there. We didn’t think we could fly back to Da Nang, which would
have been the safe thing to do because it was still on fire. We made one big circling turn
and made a landing on this little Marine Camp called An Hoa. At that time, we weighed
about 150,000 pounds. We were landing on a short runway, about 2,000 feet. With two
engines out we had to land really, really, really fast otherwise the aircraft would just keep
turning. On this particular one, we knew going in that we would not be able to stop on
the runway. We were going to run off the end of the runway. Like Southwest Airlines
when you land and they put the engine in reverse, well we did the same thing and we get
60% of our breaking from the reverse propellers. With two engines out we couldn’t use
that, so we landed, kind of like landing without brakes. So, we landed and parts of the
left wing was falling off. Matter of fact, the whole tip of the wing and the outside engine
fell off on the runway. We were still going about 50 miles an hour or 50 knots when we
departed the runway and ran out through the departure end of the runway through a
jungle and through a minefield. The Marines were very tactful; they mine both ends of
the runways because they wanted the enemy to run through a minefield. Airplanes aren’t
supposed to be out there. So, we actually, out through the minefield and it blew the
landing gear off and it did a lot of damage to it. The aircraft actually burned out there. It
didn’t burn all the way up. We egressed, got everybody together and the airplane was
burning like crazy. We opened up the big, aft cargo door. I actually escaped through the
copilots window. There’s a little window you can open up and jump out about 10-15
feet. I jumped out onto the ground. We all went around back and got everybody together
because people were all up shook. We knew there was a minefield there. We also knew
there was wooden boxes full of ammunition on this airplane that were burning. We got
together and very carefully walked the tire tracks back out through that deal. Got up
there on the end of the runway. About this time the Marines came out with their little fire
trick and a minesweeper and they swept it and picked up the mines out there that didn’t
blow up. Then they went out there and were able to extinguish the fire and off-load the
ammunition. It’s interesting because in these small firebases, this was a firebase called
Fire Base An Hoa, they stacked all the ammunition just on both sides of the runway and
the fuel. We actually landed right in the middle of the ammunition dump. After they got
the fire out and we called our command post, they knew that we were down. We got all
of our personal gear off the airplane was sitting around out there on the ramp and they
flew in a C-123. Another airplane and our crew was able to get on that airplane with all
of our weapons. We carried M-16s with us and .38 caliber pistols. Got on the airplane,
they flew us back to Cam Ranh Bay. Kind of a side note, when this happened, they
radioed to our squadron in Cam Ranh Bay that our crew had been shot down. They
didn’t know about the status of everybody, just that we’d had an accident. That squadron
radioed to our commander in Taiwan we had an accident. That squadron relayed that to
my wife Carol Ann that we had an accident. Now, I wasn’t dead I was just banged up a
little bit. People thought that we were down. On February 2, that was kind of an eventful
day, I noticed that we had the next day off and then back in the cockpit. We didn’t get to
go home. The next day, actually on February 5th, we were back in flying the same
mission. Back to Dang Ha, Cam Ranh Bay, Dang Ha, Cam Ranh Bay, Dang Ha, Tuy
Hoa, Cam Ranh Bay, Hue Phu Bai. That was kind of interesting. That was early in the
war, I was still a copilot. Then I upgraded aircraft commander was there about another
13 months after that. We had lots and lots on incidents, lots of ground fire, lots of small holes in the aircraft.

KS: This is C.D. 2 with the interview with John Nelson.

JN: We had lots of fun times in Vietnam. A lot of the missions were like that. That was just an example of stuff that went on. We had good times. I would like to say that the crews were treated extremely well. The food was good. Although, we improvised a lot when we lived at Cam Ranh Bay for 21 days at a time. Occasionally, one of our crews, generally speaking would be hauling food to the GIsand we would enable ourselves to scarf off a big box of steaks and keep it on the airplane and take it back, so whoever had the food run that day would bring back a box of steaks and we’d have a big cookout on the beach and cook our own steaks and food. That was all really, really good. We had other missions that, like up in the highlands, around Pleiku where we would haul in Agent Orange in barrels and drop it. When we would drop it off there, I was not a Ranch Hand pilot. They had a special crew for that, but we would handle the Agent Orange and drop it off. I’ve been on the Ranch Hand airplanes, we’d meet them in the middle of the night and transport the stuff over. Because of that, after I got back they always were worried whether we were harmed by the Agent Orange and different things like that. I would just say that the aircrews over there in Vietnam were treated with great respect. They had a great job to do. It was interesting where a First Lieutenant aircraft commander like myself may have a General onboard, but I was the commander of that airplane, not the General. He may have a very strong input as to what he wanted me to do, but it was my decision. It was very encouraging to have senior officers know that the young people knew what was going on. That he may be real smart about what he had to do, but I was in charge of that airplane, they would leave us alone even in emergency situations. In the movies you get a distorted thing where some high-ranking place is ordering this pilot to do something, but they didn’t do that. The pilots were in charge. Frequently, on the ground we would have a unit commander wanting to move his people and he would have jeeps and ammunition and C-rations and all this stuff that he would in the heat of getting everything on the airplane, the airplane would have been overloaded. We would have to say, we’re not taking all that stuff. We’d like to, but we can’t. Usually, the commanders were like lieutenant colonel or a colonel. They’d be very upset
with us for a while because we wouldn’t take all that stuff. It would have to go on the
next airplane. You can imagine if your unit gets separated somewhere, then it’s hard to
get them all back together. We never had to really get horsy with people and pull rank on
them or anything like that. That was just a very courteous thing amongst people. We did
a lot of variety of missions. One mission I want to make sure is on here, you know. We
dropped some 10,000-pound bombs and 15,000-pound bombs, which were blockbuster
bombs in Word War II. We dropped them, only one bomb on the airplane. We would
drop them. We would haul them out of Saigon. We called them instant helicopter
landing pads. If the Army was having an exercise somewhere and they wanted a clearing
for their choppers, they would bring in the C-130s. Usually, there’d be three of us, with
one bomb on each one of three airplanes. We would fly in low-level and drop those three
bombs. The bombs, I don’t know much about armament that was my job I was a pilot,
we’d have a specialist on board that would arm them. They would be sitting in the back
of the airplane. A bomb is not very big. It’s about the size of a great big coffee table. It
was all mounted there on rollers in our airplane. So when we got close to the drop zone,
it was all setup and our navigator had to know right where it was at. When it was close to
the drop zone we would open up the back cargo door and we would push one button,
which would drop a little tiny parachute out the back of the airplane. We would just put
a little pressure on that rope. At the right point we’d push another button and it would
chop this big piece of webbing that held the bomb there and just kind of roll out the back.
When this 10,000-pound bomb, that’s 5 tons, would roll out the back, the airplane of
course would pitch up in the air. We’d have to push forward on it. We were only
dropping these bombs from an altitude of about 1,000 feet. So, very low. We would be
pretty much gone and over the horizon when the explosion would go off. But it would
explode and they say that one of those would blow a hole about half the size of a football
field, then we’d have three of those. While we were en route back to Saigon, the Army
choppers were already coming in landing right there and getting their people.

KS: You would get a call in from the Army, it would change day by day?

JN: Yes. When we would go down for our mission that morning. I only did that
twice the whole time I was there. No one would know about it. You’d go down for your
mission and your mission was to go drop that bomb out here. Everybody knew about it
in advance, the people that needed to know. The aircrew didn’t even know. We just
need to go out and drop that bomb. That day was kind of short. It may only be 30 or 40
minutes from Saigon and then right back. You could do it again somewhere else. One
other interesting little story, we flew a lot of night missions there. We were flying from
Saigon down to, oh, my memory’s gone. I think it was a place called Binh Tuy, down in
the IV Corps, down south of Saigon. It was night. At night, you could see the tracers.
You’re always getting shot at, but at night you can see the tracers. In the C-130s and
most airplanes, if you’re above 3,000 feet they consider that safe. It is only unsafe when
you’re making takeoffs and landings. When we would come into Binh Tuy we had to
come down across this big river and you could see the tracers going. Ching, ching, ching,
ching, all around the airplane. In the airplane we wore the microphones. I called them
hot mics. If a navigator wanted to talk to you, he just talked to you. You could hear
conversation. I was the aircraft commander and I was just about ready to land because
we had a load of something, just ready to land and I heard a gurgling on the hot mic. I
didn’t know what it was because I was pretty well involved with getting it on the ground
and landing. Just got it on the ground and a C-130s pretty noisy. Rolling out and the
engineer said the navigator’s been hit. He was rolling around on the floor and bleeding
all over the place. Here I am a 25-year-old kid. Not an old man, but a young kid. I knew
he’d been hit. So what I did I just turn the aircraft around at the other end and made a
downwind departure. Just took right off again, right out of there. Flew back to Saigon, it
was only about 15 minutes back to Saigon. We radioed ahead that he’d been hit. When
he got to Saigon, the medics met him and took him to an Army MASH unit, kind of like
you see on TV. The short story here is, the guy actually had a bullet, come up right
through the cheek of his behind in and out. Really a couple of band-aids would have
fixed him up. He wasn’t hurt that bad. His pride was hurt, but he wasn’t going to die.
They took him to the Army MASH unit and then they did some exploratory surgery on
him, to see if everything was o.k. Following that, I believe he got hepatitis in the
hospital. He was in the hospital there about 60 days or so, then they transported him back
to States. The injury was not significant. It was the treatment in the medical hospital
there that was. In our airplanes, I should have mentioned, we had armor plating under the
seats. Under the pilot, co-pilot seat we had some steel plates. If a bullet would come
through it normally would hit on the plate, it wouldn’t hurt you. When you’re making a
lot of landings a lot of times at night the Navigator would be up looking through the
window helping look for things and see where they’re at. That’s when he got hit. I’ll end
there and let you ask me some questions. War story, after war story, after war story and
to me I was young and it was exciting. It was routine in that we had become extremely
good pilots. We could land the airplane anywhere, and any emergency we could handle.
Sometimes, you almost wanted things to happen to see how good you were. We were
good. That was really it. We had a few humanitarian missions. The humanitarian
missions, I guess it wasn’t really humanitarian; we would also be a medevac flight. At
Tan Son Nhut one morning and say ‘oh, we got the medevac flight today’. There was
one everyday, if it was your turn in the barrel. You had the medevac flight. I’ve got
some wonderful pictures I can bring in if you ever wanted, sitting on the ramp up at
Pleiku where they are bringing in a stretcher onto the airplane because he had something
happen. An armored personnel carrier was blown up and it had all the people. We’d
have nurses and we’d be rigged for litters. So they could put the litters on there and strap
them in like a stretcher. Leave them on a stretcher and strap them in there. Then we
would fly, we’d usually make two or three stops with the nurses on board and maybe a
doctor, picking up these people and we’d take them in to Tan Son Nhut. Then we’d go
do it again. We did that quite a bit. Usually, whenever there was a major scrimmage
somewhere, the next day our medevac flight would pick up the people.

KS: Would you pick these up from field hospitals?
JN: Yeah. We’d pick them up. We’d just stop; we never get off the airfield.
We land on the airfield and the ambulance would be out there. I don’t know where they
came from, but they’d bring them off the ambulance and then the nurses and doctors
would check them over. They would have I.V.s in some of them and different things like
that. In addition to that, when I said we flew days and nights, most of the time at night,
we hauled body bags, a lot of them. Two reasons, one because they smelled, two, so not
everybody in the world saw us hauling body bags around. Usually, we would know. It
wasn’t gross and we didn’t have a whole stack of them in the airplane, but we would have
10 or 15. A couple times I would get very nauseous of that. If I knew I was going into
Hue Phu Bai to pick up eight or ten body bags, sometimes I’d just stay in the cockpit. So
would the co-pilot, we’d stay in the cockpit and sit there and have a cup of coffee and be ready to go. We’d go back. Sometimes, we would haul, since we hauled everything, sometimes we would haul, in Vietnam they transported the Army and their families in our airplanes. We would haul stuff. I remember picking up, on a special mission, it must have been a high-ranking person, we picked up a very large coffin at Hue Phu Bai of a Vietnamese official that had died and all their family was there and took it to Saigon. He was so big that they needed a forklift to put it on the airplane. He was all filled full of sand and stuff like that. We took the mourning families with us back to where ever we were going. We did that, not often, but sometimes. That’s about enough on personal stories. I’ll shut up and let you shoot me in whatever directions.

KS: I just want to make a few clarifying questions. Specifics about the C-130. How many people were on those crews? For instance, did you always fly with the same crew or were people rotated in and out?

JN: No. We had a crew of five, usually, sometimes six. With a pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer, navigator and loadmaster. The navigators in Vietnam weren’t really needed. When they’re needed they’re really needed, but they sat there and did nothing much most of the time. The pilots knew where to go. We used the navigators, and I’m not being negative or derogatory, we used the navigators a lot to fill out all the paperwork and keep track of what’s going on and make radio calls. When we flew over water, we needed the navigator. We flew from Vietnam to Guam over this ocean and I didn’t know where I was at. We needed a navigator. We had a crew and generally speaking, they would try to keep the crew together, assigned to you, although you may get substitutions. Your co-pilot maybe going on leave, or maybe he’s sick and you have a substitute co-pilot. Co-pilots generally speaking would be with you for that whole 15 days. They try to keep you all together so you get to know one another pretty well and know each other’s capabilities. In Vietnam lots of times, if you had a day off you may be on standby, which meant if someone else was sick and couldn’t fly, you’d get a moment and then you had to go down and take their mission. Lots of times especially as an aircraft pilot or co-pilot something would happen and someone would be sick and you’d get about 30 minutes notice to go down and join that crew and you were actually in charge. That happened quite a bit. In Vietnam we didn’t have any other duties like writing
reports or anything like that we were just aircrews. Although, we had to help the
maintenance people a lot at night. If you can imagine at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, there’d
be maybe 100 C-130s sitting in there, that’s a lot of airplanes and they were in these big
cement revetments they called them. Where they maybe big concrete walls where you
drive this airplane right in there nose to nose so that if a land mine or a bomb came in it
wouldn’t blow up all his airplanes. They’re all protected. Late at night they had to put a
new engine on an airplane and they always have to have aircrews on standby out there
moving these airplanes around and doing work, so we had to work with maintenance quite
a bit. We got to know the crews real well. I should show you. I brought this along just
for your information. I don’t know if you know what a DD-214 is. We had other people
doing all of our medals and stuff like that and I didn’t even know what I had until I
looked this up. It shows them all on here. A DFC in Air Medal, an Air Medal with a
cluster and National Events Medal, Purple Heart, two or three different commendation
Medals and I guess you guys can look those up and see what they are. You can have that
copy. All the medals and everything there, we had someone back at the Squadron taking
care of all of that for us. We’d turn in our logbooks as to how many hours we flew and
you hear about people getting Air Medals with oak leaf clusters. We had so many oak
leaf clusters because in one day, I’d fly eight or nine missions. The fighter pilots would
fly one mission a day. We had all kinds of medals and I’m not poo-pooing them, I’m just
saying it wasn’t that big of a deal with us. Somebody else took care of all that and then
we got them.

KS: Were their specific ceremonies surrounding these medals when you were
awarded?

JN: Yes. Basically on the medals whenever we were back at our wing, back in
Taiwan. If you happened to be back there when they had what they called a commanders
call. A commander’s call may be to take care of a mandatory safety briefing or
something like that. The commanders call usually was in the officers club and then
whoever was there would get their medal presented there. I have a photograph at home
of a couple different commendations that I have. The oak leaf clusters and the Air
Medals and the Purple Heart, specifically the Purple Heart. Specifically the Purple Heart,
I got a picture of the wing commander pinning that on me. I have the newspaper clipping
from Missoula, Montana. My parents were up there saying, ‘Oh boy. My boy got a
Purple Heart when did he get injured’. I wasn’t injured bad. I didn’t get a leg blown off
or anything like that, but the thought of seeing that in the hometown paper with my
parents reading that they were more worried about the whole deal than I was. The
medals were important. I think the people that get the, I’m not poo-pooing this, I think
every one was earned and the people that get the commendations for bravery and
everyone did brave things, so you get just kind of accustomed to doing that.

KS: You hauled troops, passengers, ammunition, did you do any drops of cargo?
Could you describe that process?

JN: Yes, we did that too. Sure. We dropped cargo at a number of places.
Generally speaking, we would drop cargo for a couple of different reasons. One, if the
weather was crummy and you couldn’t get in there. Or two, if the runway was too short
and you couldn’t land. Or three, if it was under siege. Now, I was not involved in the big
siege at Khe Sanh. I was there later than that, but I was at some other places that were
under fire. We would bring cargo in and for us we would either have a radar sighting of
our destination or they’d have a little beacon on the ground. The ground crew or
whoever was down there would have some kind of a radio beacon. We could fix on that
radio beacon and know where it was at. Regardless of the weather, the train or whatever
else we could home in on that beacon and line ourselves up with a radar and open up the
back and depending on what we were dropping, we could drop fuel or we could drop
stuff in boxes. It could be with parachutes. Give you the example with parachutes we
would come in and come across the drop zone and know exactly when to push the button
in the cockpit to release this mechanism and all the stuff would topple out the back.
We’d drop it on the drop zone, we wouldn’t even land. We’d be gone. Usually, we
didn’t do as much air dropping there because we didn’t have to. If we could get on the
ground it was quicker, safer, faster. We did a lot of missions like hauling fuel out to
remote areas. Everything out in the boondies had to use fuel. A helicopter out here
somewhere has to have fuel. We were kind of like a big gas truck. We would haul fuel
in these big round bladders, I don’t want to be negative, we call them monkey balls, the
great big black things. They were chained on this pallet. We would go into a little strip
that we could land on, there wasn’t anybody there. I call on the radio and there’d be a
Special Forces guy with a jeep that would answer. I would say, ‘I want to make sure I’m landing at the right place. It all looks the same’. He’d say, ‘Yeah. That’s it we see you’. I would never see him. We would come around and this little teeny strip. Usually we’d make a high speed pass, which means we’d crank around and leave the wheels up and go across there about 300 miles an hour. Pull right across there and see whether people were going to shoot at you or not. If they weren’t going to shoot at you we’d make kind of a whopper deal and come back around with gear flaps and come in and land. Then we’d come to the end of the runway, turn around open up the ramp cargo door and the loadmaster in the back would actually release these locks which held everything on these big rollers. We’d back the airplane up, just like you’d back a car up about five or ten miles an hour. Get the momentum going backwards and then we’d hit the throttle forward and this stuff would just come out of the back of the airplane and go plop,plop,plop,plop in a row. We would offload maybe 20,000 pounds of this stuff, ammo, and fuel, and then we’d close the back and get out of there. We didn’t ever see any people sometimes. That’s why the special forces people; they knew what they were doing. It was a high exposure kind of a deal. We did, we got shot at a few times, but not anything severe. The C-130, since you guys will be interviewing a few fighter pilots too, I want to put a plug in for the C-130 pilots. Our nickname was the trash haulers, because we hauled everything. The fighter pilots would live in air-conditioned quarters and they would go on their missions. Some of them dropped their bombs from 10,000 feet in the air and go back to the officers club and they were never in harm’s way. Some of them were. So, I’m being a little facetious on that, but we were exposed all the time. In a typical day we were below 3,000 feet, taking off and landing, taking off and landing in all these remote areas all over the place. We had a lot more exposure to harm than most of the fighter pilots. Most of the fighters that crashed were a lot of them due to pilot error because they were in close proximity to the ground sometimes, not too often from enemy shoot down. Different kind of a deal. We did a lot of things up around the demilitarized zone. That’s probably where I was the most frightened. There’s a place up there called Camp Evans. E-V-A-N-S. I think it was about three or four miles from the DMZ. We would go into Camp Evans and we would come across, we’d leave Da Nang and drop right down on the water. We called it feet wet. We’d be as low to the water as we could
be and then we’d skim across the sand area into Camp Evans at about 200 feet above the ground, which is pretty low. If you went in there high, the surfaced to air missiles from the North could actually shoot you. The C-130’s kind of a sitting duck, big airplane.

We’d scoot in there, pick out where the runway was and we had radar on our airplane so a lot of the runways there had steel on top of sand. So, the sand was on the ground and they put this steel planking for a runway. With the radar that steel would just show up so the pilot or the navigator could look at the scope and they could pick out this steel out there and you knew that’s where the runway was. Then you sneak around, get on the ground and get back out of there. That was probably the most threatening. There was never a threat of another airplane shooting us down like there was in WWII. There was the threat of surface to air missiles. There was a threat of crashing in the jungle and having to survive out there. We were not very equipped to survive very long in the jungle. I wouldn’t like that at all.

KS: Were you briefed on potential problems? For instance if you were flying to an area where things were a little bit more dangerous did you always know to anticipate fire?

JN: No. We knew that. We knew whatever they told us in our briefings. If there was a hostile area, we knew if there was a major attack going on. We were always aware of where the arc light. Arc light, means the B-52s dropping bombs. Because B-52s dropped their bombs from three miles in the air, they’re real high. Sometimes you wouldn’t even see them. If you’re droning along in a C-130 you could actually get hit by a bomb, going down. Usually they coded that arc light. Wherever the arc light strikes were at that was where the action was most of the time. We knew where things were happening because of the casualties and the stuff we were hauling out and the ammunition going in and the movement of the Armies. I’d just like to point out I gained confidence real quick over there. I knew my way around, but it’s kind of like walking in this building. The first time I came to this building, I hate to tell you, I got lost looking for your office. That’s how a lot of the GIs felt when they’d fly in a commercial carrier and land at Bien Hoa Air Force Base and they had all their United States military gear with them. Most of which they would discard when they got there, wear their Army fatigues over there and they didn’t know, they were just lost. They didn’t know where
they were going. Lots of these people we would actually pick them up at Bien Hoa Air
Base. Here I was wearing my combat fatigues of flight suit and some young captain or
lieutenant and getting him on this airplane and giving them a little briefing. We’d be
hauling them off somewhere in Vietnam to hook them up with their unit. Some of them
had never been on a C-130. It was noisy and everything else. They had a lot of fear in
their eyes. They were the soldiers that so many of them were killed and never came
back. It wasn’t really people like us that much. Although, I had three of my classmates
that were killed over there also, in airplane accidents. It happened to us too, but not with
the same degree of repetition that happened to those. These young kids were 18 years
old; nineteen years old and first time away from home and were just definitely frightened.
That’s all I can say. We had a couple other problems with a transport airplane, where
people getting on our airplane had guns and ammunition and grenades and all this stuff.

KS: Were these Vietnamese people?

JN: No. These were GIs, but some of these GIs the story goes that they were
smoking a little pot, doing a few things over there that the aircrews weren’t involved in.
If you can imagine flying an airplane loaded with people in the back that’s got a grenade.
Anyone of them could blow you up. There were stories of disgruntled GIs that were
upset. We had a few problems. We also hauled a couple missions, every six months, we
would haul the soldiers from Thailand into, I think the name of the base was Tay Ninh, I
believe, close to Bien Hoa, but Tay Ninh. We would have several missions hauling the
soldiers that were Thailand, six months back to Thailand to Bangkok, picking up the
fresh ones and bringing them back in. That was a cultural shock, because when all the
soldiers were leaving Thailand all the families were out there on the tarmac wailing and
mourning, thinking these people would all be dead, but some of them were. The other
group would be all happy because these people would come back. We’d haul them into
Vietnam. One other mission we did which was interesting, we hauled a lot of prisoner of
wars in the C-130. They capture all these people up by Da Nang and they wanted to
move them way down south of Saigon out on some little island out there in the ocean.
It’s about 100 miles off the ocean of Saigon. In the cargo ship, on the cargo missions, we
would just have a mission to go into Hue Phu Bai and pick up these people, they may say
prisoners. We’d pull in there and these prisoners of war were sitting out there. They may
have been sitting out there on the ramp six, or seven, or eight, or nine hours waiting for this ride. They were hooked together with barbed wire on their wrists. That was their handcuffs. They were all hooked together with barbed wire. They would be usually two or three Vietnamese guards with rifles that were guarding them and here was my young crew. My 25-year-old loadmaster with a .38 caliber pistol. None of these people could speak English and we couldn’t speak any Vietnamese. I would load all these prisoners on this airplane and haul them to Saigon. In my heart, I didn’t know whether they were Vietnamese or Viet Cong what I was hauling. These were prisoners. Usually one of the Vietnamese officers could speak, if there was an officer there, could speak a little bit of English. We had a real language barrier. Where we were hauling these people around without any way of protecting ourselves if they ever want to riot or something like that. These young kids that were prisoners of war were not much older than my grandson now, whose seven. Some of them were 12, 13, 14, and 16. They were just kids. They were very fearful of getting on that airplane. This big airplane with the back opened up. These guys would poke them with the guns and they’d march on that airplane a lot of them would be vomiting and urinating all over themselves. They thought they were going to go die. Actually, they were in pretty good shape, they were just going to a prisoner camp. We hauled a lot of those, probably several hundred of those, I’m sure.

KS: Were you ever worried about your safety or your crew’s safety?

JN: Then. I was hauling those prisoners I didn’t have a good feel for the security of it. There wasn’t much we could do about it.

KS: I wanted to ask you also, the very beginning you mentioned your wife living in Taiwan, on the base in Taiwan. Could you tell me a little bit about her experiences, her feelings about the situation?

JN: We really had a pretty good time. It was really kind of an exciting time in our lives. We didn’t have much money. The cost of living was cheap. We lived in a nice little house there. The day that my daughter was born, which was December 10, 1969, was the same day that my best friend over there was killed in a training accident on Taiwan, and we were neighbors next door. So, all the joy of bringing in a new baby when our best friend’s husband was just killed. People died over there doing that stuff. There were moments of torment where you knew that someone may die, but we were
always positive about it. We never did live as if our life was threatened all the time. We
were able to buy some nice things, some nice furniture to bring back. We had a little car
and we drove around the island there quite a bit when I was home. We were able to go
to Hong Kong and travel a little bit, that we wouldn’t have been able to. Some of the
domestic things were o.k. We had a little maid that worked for us. They would buy food
off the economy, pork and vegetables were very inexpensive if the Taiwanese were to
buy them. We had to do things like, boil all of our water. We had two little girls; we had
to even boil their bath water. Life was pretty good. Just like it is today. Young people
are pretty optimistic most of the time. If you get 100 people in the room and 80 of them
are optimistic and 20 of them are negative. You’ve just got to learn to live with the 80
that are optimistic. Let the others go on their own way.

KS: You mentioned that you had to convince the military to allow this. Did this
change procedures?

JN: We did that. It was good for the military because what the problem was they
needed aircraft commanders that knew what was going on that were very experienced to
do all these missions in Vietnam. What was happening as soon as someone really knew
their way around and was a very good pilot, knew the whole country it was time for them
to go back to the States. So, they passed somehow or other through the Air Force, this
was not a national decision it was just the Air Force decision PACAF, Pacific Air Force
decision. The commander on that base probably filed a couple of letters or did whatever
and said, ‘look, these people will stay an extra nine months if we just give them an
accompanied trip back home’. See at other bases like Clark Air Base in the Philippines,
they were already accompanied there. All the C-130s like I flew, they had 100 of them
there also, that was an accompanied tour, so all the wives go to go with them anyhow.
Also, the people that were living in Okinawa had a big C-130 unit there. The wives got
to go there also. At CCK Air Base they just didn’t have the infrastructure to permit it.
That was really the reason. So, when the people went ahead and did it anyhow, the
military said o.k. Before that we did a lot of things, we’d go on a trip to Clark Air Base
in the Philippines, whoever had that out and back run that day would buy all the food and
supplies for four or five families. We got it all worked out.
KS: I was going to ask you, talking about your training before, compared to your experiences in Vietnam, did you have to make any modifications to the way you did things in training in the United States procedures or tactics did you have to adapt to certain situations in Vietnam that were different than United States?

JN: Yes. I would just say in the states we were probably more safety conscious and everything all the time, more concerned about flying violations and things like that. In Southeast Asia things were a little looser than that. Consequently, what I had to adapt to in Southeast Asia was to be able to put up with the monotony of everything and still be alert and not be a sloppy pilot. You could do anything you wanted to over there. You could do some dangerous things too, which could result in getting killed or the airplane lost or whatever else. It required a lot more self-discipline, because there was not nearly the supervision in Vietnam as there was anywhere else. You were just expected to do your thing. In Vietnam the Colonel that was really ultimately in charge of me there in Vietnam didn’t even know me. I was just a number to him. My boss was back at CCK. All these crews from these different units around the Pacific came in there and all they just knew were these were the crews. All the crews were pretty much equal. There wasn’t a good crew and a bad crew. They tried to give the inexperienced crew the easier missions. They were pretty much filled in a square.

KS: What about contact with the Vietnamese Air Force, any other pilots?

JN: We didn’t have any, walking around the bases there we talked to them on the radio and stuff like that. We didn’t have any contact with them at all. We would meet them occasionally and then we could go to the Vietnamese, we called it the VNAF, the Vietnamese Air Force Officers Club. We’d go over there and we’d have a drink and we’d visit with them a little bit because they liked to practice speaking English. We had no contact with them. We had more contact with the little old ladies that were cleaning the hooches and in the barracks and washing your clothes and your laundry and stuff like that. Like you see in the movies, most of them had sucked on this stuff we would call Beetle juice, Beetle juice we would call them. Because they got that nicotine or whatever it was from somebody. Most of the old people were missing teeth. They were all friendly to us. I might mention something in Vietnam on the food you just ate wherever you could find food. It wasn’t an organized deal. The military may have had a chow hall
that I could have got up and gone to, but I didn’t even know where it was at. Most of the
flight crews would just fend for themselves and eat at a snack bar kind of a deal all the
time.

KS: Off-base?

JN: Usually when you’re working along the road everywhere you stopped most
of the time on all these different bases or something they had a little flea market beside it
where you could get a sandwich or something like that. Usually we eat one good meal a
day, usually dinner. Sometime you get something for breakfast and something for lunch
always on the go. A lot of the aircrews would get dysentery over there because they
weren’t used to it. That was real difficult in an airplane. We also had in our airplane we
had a lot of comfort that some of them didn’t have. We had a coffee pot and we’d have a
cup of coffee. We always had C-rations. We could always eat because we get them from
the people we’re hauling. They had all kinds of C-rations. C-rations are the big cases of
meals. Maybe we’d be hauling 25,000 pounds of C-rations somewhere. We’d just grab
one and we’d keep it in the airplane you know to eat it, so we never went hungry. We
were eating junk food the whole time.

KS: When you mentioned you would eat the food. Would it be western style
food or Vietnamese style food?

JN: Western. I never got into eating Eastern food. I didn’t like it. It was there.
Some people did, I just didn’t. In Thailand, I ate some Thai food. Vietnamese food I just
didn’t like how it smelled. I didn’t like anything about it. I didn’t like its lack of texture.

KS: Did you pick up any Vietnamese as far as to communicate? I know you
mentioned that there was a problem with language barrier.

JN: A very few words. I picked up more Taiwanese words because we lived
there in Taiwan. I didn’t pick up much Vietnamese at all. I’ll give you one other
example. We had a lot of problem with language. When we were flying out of Tan Son
Nhut. Tan Son Nhut is the biggest air base in Vietnam. Of course, we were a 24-hour a
day operation we were flying all over the country all the time. In Tan Son Nhut they had
maybe 200 airplanes that were going tot take off at 8:00 in the morning. A lot of these
units that just operated during the day time, a lot of the Vietnamese pilots that were going
on some little mission or some little training, they’d all start up there engines and all
wanting to go at the same time. You get ready to leave Tan Son Nhut at seven or eight or
nine ‘o clock in the morning it was just a traffic jam. It was awful. All these airplanes
would be out there and the air traffic controllers were Vietnamese. They were pretty
good at speaking English, but they were still Vietnamese and they were in training. They
would try to get all this stuff going and that thing would get so congested that finally then
the G.I. controllers would take over because they were training. Say, ‘o.k. all you C-130s
take off and get out of here’. And he’d clear everything all out of here again. But we just
didn’t have much time to get involved with the local customs at all. Everything was
pretty much Western. I want to comment on, we got to listen to on the radio all the time,
Armed Forces network. Kind of like in Good Morning, Vietnam. You could tune that in
the airplane also. And the Stars and Stripes even though it was military biased we really
like to get it. It was very exciting to read things you heard. A lot of times, like in my
logbook, I was saying we’d make all these little missions back and forth and back and
forth. Maybe I would go from Saigon out to this small little field five or six times in one
day. These soldiers out there, they were there the whole time and they knew it. A lot of
these would come down and meet the aircrews and ask if we could bring them stuff. We
got back into Saigon we’d send one of our crewmembers over and get a whole list of
stuff for these people out there. Then on the next missions they would be out there
waiting for us to get their stuff. Possessions weren’t of value. They may give you a jeep
or an M-16, but you couldn’t use any of that stuff, so you didn’t want it. Then the other
thing was kind of humorous. Due to our mission number one of those missions everyday
was a mail missions. We hauled all the GIs mail. The controllers knew that that was a
mail mission. The people on the ground knew that that was the mail mission. So,
everybody knew that that plane had the mail. Lots of times we’d be going in at 3:00 or
4:00 in the morning into a place where the weather was just awful. On the ground they
wanted you to land so bad they couldn’t stand it, because they knew you had the mail on
board. You had to be real careful you didn’t get coaxed into something that was
dangerous because people wanted their mail. The GIs were inherently friendly. It didn’t
matter on the color or where they came from or what unit they were in. None of that
seemed to matter. It was really a team effort.
KS: You mentioned about the air traffic controllers at Tan Son Nhut. How were the missions scheduled? Was it a computerized system at that point?

JN: No. I really couldn’t answer that. All I know is that somewhere up in headquarters they would have all the mission planners somewhere that would decide where everybody was going. That wasn’t me. Then it would get down to our unit. There was one organization that was in charge of our transports all over the country. They would assign us the missions. There were other airplanes that were doing similar jobs, different units. There was the Caribou, which is a C-7A, a little airplane over there, was a smaller airplane, they could go in some fields and they couldn’t. It was used for more remote assignments than we were. They did a lot of stuff. The C-123 was an old airplane, but it was also from short field. We didn’t get involved in any if the planning. I don’t know where it came from. All I knew is when it came down that’s what we did. We just got our missions one day at a time.

KS: Did you fly any missions over Laos or the Caribbean?

JN: We flew some right along the border over there. We would fly over Laos going to Thailand. We’d be up about 20,000 feet. If we were up at Da Nang and you want to go to Thailand you’d have to go across or go all the way back down and around, Cambodia and Laos and that area. Specifically we didn’t really have any legal missions that we were flying in there, just along the perimeters. We were pretty much support. We flew a lot of missions over around and this is one thing where we had some of the biggest problems we had as a C-130 pilot. A lot of the helicopters, I mean there were just thousands of helicopters. They had a very good job to do, but a lot of them were young kids. They didn’t have to go to college to be helicopter pilots. They were maybe four or five years younger than we were. We were pretty gutsy ourselves. Lots of times, the warrant officers flying helicopters, you’d be coming in to land real heavy and you were not very maneuverable. Helicopters would just appear out of nowhere right in front of you. The Air Force didn’t have a very opinion of all the helicopter pilots. We did of the Jolly Greens and the ones that were Air Force, but not the Army. Most of the Army ones were kind of a nuisance to us, I guess. Although they had a great missions, but to us they were a nuisance. We also hauled a lot of vegetables.

KS: Where would you pick those up?
JN: At a place called Da Lat. D-A L-A-T. Da Lat was up in the highlands and we would haul vegetables from Da Lat, haul them into Saigon or haul them to Cam Ranh Bay. They would load them all up and say you’re going to take 20,000 pounds of vegetables, but the Papa Sans that were watching these vegetables, they would sit out there ad water them all night long. So when you picked them up it may 30,000 or 35,000 pounds. You had to be very careful or you’d be way overweight. Da Lat was very beautiful. A lot of Vietnam was very pretty.

KS: Earlier you mentioned that you pretty much stayed close to base. Did you have a chance to venture out off base?

JN: Could have, but we just didn’t. Most of the bases if you stayed within the perimeter you were safe. We weren’t decked out in combat gear, so that wasn’t our deal to go out and around. The people that were living like at Da Nang or Saigon or somewhere for a year, they may have known more about where to go and where it was safe and where it wasn’t safe. We just didn’t. Most of the aircrews just stayed close to the base.

KS: Is there anything else you’d like to add about your time in Vietnam?

JN: I don’t think so. I think I’ve covered most of it. I would like to say, that I have had probably 15 interviews, primarily the V.A. and different things. Everyone is looking at the Vietnam vets as ‘what’s wrong with you? How did effect you? That was such a God awful terrible thing’. I look at them like,’ everyone’s got an excuse for different things in life. I don’t think that Vietnam is one of them’. I think Vietnam wasn’t pleasant if you didn’t want it to be pleasant. It wouldn’t be pleasant if you were out there living in a foxhole for a year, but everyone didn’t come back from Vietnam all warped out of shape. There was a lot of successful people there that have been there, so that was fine. Our generation when we were there weren’t as bent out of shape about the politics of it as people are now. Now, everyone knows what’s going on and they’re second-guessing every move the military makes. In Vietnam I was more concerned about the politics involved in why didn’t they let the bombers finish the job and all that kind of stuff. But I couldn’t change that. I had a lot of confidence in our leadership in the Air Force. I didn’t know who was above that. I didn’t know who the Secretary of the Air Force was or do I care. I was more bent on survival and doing my thing and being
done. So, I would just like to say a lot of people in every walk of life have handicaps and a lot of them want to blame it on something. A lot of them blame it on Vietnam. Some of it’s right, most of it’s wrong. It certainly wasn’t an enjoyable experience, but it was not unbearable either. I always kid people when I moved from Vietnam to Laredo, Texas it was like moving from one foreign country to another. I think that’s about it. I got back to Laredo and was there for a couple years, then at Reese. I got out of the service when I was 30. Elected to stay here in Lubbock, got in the insurance and real estate business, what I do. Didn’t go to work with the airlines, although I’m still a current pilot, still have all my ratings. I would certainly say this, in the last election when Bill Clinton was elected my mother from Montana was going to vote for Bill Clinton and I told her if she voted for Bill Clinton I wouldn’t come back home ever. Because when I was in Vietnam he was running off somewhere else. So, I would say this to younger people. I’m just so proud that I can look my grandkids in the eye and say this came along and I was of that age, and I did it. When you come along and we have a national conflict you’ll do it. Yeah. I like that.

KS: Backing up real quick. Did you have any knowledge of the bigger picture? I know you said you weren’t necessarily involved in the politics while you were involved in Vietnam, what about LBJ’s decision not to run for re-election, any thoughts on that? Were you even concerned with that at that time?

JN: No. Matter of fact, we didn’t even know that America launched a man to the moon at the time. We were really kind of remote. I never personally liked Mr. Johnson, but I didn’t even know him. I didn’t know him and I wasn’t much into politics. I knew from my military training a lot of the military generals and the Chief of Staff and those type things, but I wasn’t much of a politician. Today, everybody knows so much more from watching CNN and everything like that. So, we didn’t know any of that.

KS: Right now are you involved in any Veteran’s groups or anything?

JN: Not really. I went to the VFW a couple times and found out that the bars are full of people sitting there drinking and not doing anything productively. That didn’t interest me, so I didn’t go there. I’m involved in a civic organization called Rotary. Which we help under privilidged children and things of that nature and do reading programs for schools. Since, I got out of the service, I didn’t have any disabilities, so I
didn’t get any kind of a pension or anything like that. But since, I got a Purple Heart in combat they pay for any medical things that I may have in the future. Fortunately, I don’t have anything wrong with me so that’d be fine. I really don’t do that much with the military organizations. I do support them, but most of the active military organizations are kind of a social deal. I’ve gone off on other things and different businesses. I rent a lot of properties from old Vietnam vets that are down on luck for a different thing or other, from time to time. I have some sympathy for them, but not as much as they would like. I think people need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps and go on about their business. All the war movies that I’ve seen. Different people when they have a movie like Full Metal Jacket or something like this, I wonder how true all they are. Some of them are factual and some of them are not. I came to one, you probably know who it is. This general that was here about a month ago that spoke out at the International Center. I came to hear what he had to say. I didn’t like it at all. I was tired of hearing him toot his horn. I was sitting there watching all these young Texas Tech students in R.O.T.C. and I would like to have had a chance to tell them the positive things about the military and flying and becoming an officer instead of some of the stuff he was talking about. Add anything up, I always tried to be positive.

KS: Real quick. How were you received once you came back to the United States?

JN: No problem.

KS: No problems. Did you travel back with your family?

JN: I did I came back into McCord Air Force Base in Washington on a civilian liner. My family all met us out there, kind of a hero in our community, I suppose. I was still on active duty so we had to go back to work. At that time, everybody I knew was a Vietnam vet. When I got back to Laredo and was a jet instructor, everybody else was a Vietnam vet too. Everybody was a college graduate, everyone was a good pilot, everybody was a Vietnam vet. All that’s just taken for granted. Now it’s not that way anymore. When you’re around people that have done the same things you are, you take it all for granted. Now, at a Rotary meeting or something like that, if they say, ‘how many people in here are veterans’? Well, there are two or three. All the old people are dead. The middle-aged people, like myself, there’s not as many that have been even in combat.
I would just say I got out of the military when I was 30. I loved it. I liked it a lot. I wanted to work for myself and be my own boss. Wanted to go to work for the airlines and they weren’t hiring at the time. So, I got into a different business, but I don’t despise, the military, has done a very good job. I’ve got another good friend I’d like to give you his name and number and let you contact him. He retired here as a full colonel, stayed in the service. He’ll give you a different slant on Vietnam than I will. He was a forward observer. Yeah, good guy. I think most pilots that I’ve ever met and been in Vietnam kind of feel like I feel. Most people, I’m not saying this negatively, most people that were grunts that were in Vietnam have a big load of stuff to carry. I mean a big burden. That’s how it is. I live here in Lubbock. We like it. It’s been a nice place to raise kids and grandkids. I hope the Vietnam Center works out well.

KS: Any last thoughts?

JN: I don’t think so.

KS: This ends the interview with Mr. John Nelson. Thank you very much.