Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Jim Pfister on the 6th of May, the year’s 2000, at approximately 1:30 in the afternoon, Las Vegas, Nevada. All right, Mr. Pfister, would you start please by giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself.

Jim Pfister: I was born June 19, 1948. I spent 14 years at Evansville, Indiana. When I finished grade school I moved up to Indianapolis. I went to high school there. At the end of my junior year of high school I decided to join the Army, which left me one year short of graduating. It was time, I felt, to be on my own and become independent and follow my nose so to speak. I joined the Army. They sent me to Fort Knox, Kentucky in July of 1965. After basic training of eight weeks they sent us home on a 14 day leave. I came back to Fort Knox, Kentucky for AIT, which is Advanced Individual Training. Well they asked me at the induction center what kind of jobs or what did I want to do in the military. I told them infantry or combat engineers. Well, after I finished my leave and reported back to advanced individual training back at Fort Knox, Kentucky again, they sent me to clerical school. This was where, I guess, they had the most shortages so they just started sending people wherever they felt necessary. I went through eight weeks of clerical school learning how to type. To pass you had to type 30 words a minute. I couldn’t even…I was making 14 mistakes a minute, not typing. I told the instructor, I said, “Well I guess this is good training because I learned how to throw the typewriter at the Viet Cong.” It didn’t make me too popular. I finished AIT. I was officially a clerk, 71 alpha ten. We all went out and partied that night, and then the next morning we were lazily drunk on our
beds and the drill sergeant came in or our platoon sergeant and says he needed ten volunteers to
go to extra training in Fort Benning, Georgia. The ten of us, we all sort of knew each other, we
were close friends, we all raised our hand. They processed us off post very quick. We duffel
bag dragged to a bus and little did we know, after we started sobering up, we were on our way to
Fort Benning, Georgia for airborne training. So I damaged my shoulder in the first week, I
pinched the nerves. They disqualified me permanently for airborne training. I went back to Fort
Knox again for permanent party. They put me in personnel. I couldn’t seem to get out of Fort
Knox. They had an opening, my section sergeant came up to me and asked me if I wanted to go
overseas, if I was still interested. I said, “Yes,” and I said, “Where?” and he said, “To a
restricted area overseas,” which was called Vietnam at that time and I said, “Put my name in.
I’m going,” and I reported. I spent 23 days on the ocean going to Vietnam on a ship, General
Simon B. Buckner. I reported in to my unit as a company clerk and boredom just kept piling up
as I went along on my so called three year enlistment or four year enlistment. So, I started
volunteering for shotgun rider on convoys. I started volunteering to get a license for five ton
tractor trailer, hauling ammunition. I couldn’t get out of clerical work and I needed something
else. I needed to do more to contribute to the war effort. It takes roughly 20 personnel to
support one person in the field. You have finance, you have clothing, you have cooks,
everything. The beans and the bullets, your supply sergeant; one person needs all these people to
keep him going out in the field. My buddy and I reenlisted in April of ’67 for the same
helicopter unit. He got his, I didn’t. I’m still stuck as company clerk, so I requested a transfer,
Form 1049, request for transfer, and seven months down the road I finally got it approved and I
was off to the helicopter unit. Briefly, up to January ’68 until I got shot down, that’s basically a
very short, sweet, and simple history of sequence of events that led up to me finally getting my
helicopter transfer.

SM: Let me ask you to clarify a couple of things real quick about, first of all, your basic
training. What did you think of that training? Was it effective? What weapons were you trained
on, and things like that?

JP: We were trained on the M-14. It weighed 11 pounds, lug it around on field
exercises. I was in top physical shape. I thought basic training, at times, was just really boring. I
had a tendency to sort of tick-off the drill sargents. He’d tell me to get down and give him 20
and I’d say, “Can you give me 20 or are you just giving a command?” I said, “I’ll do 50 if you
want. Can you do 50?” So I was sort of, really, I had an attitude. I was a little cocky at 17 years old. You couldn’t tell me anything. I knew everything. I sort of had a really… I was a good person, I just had a cocky attitude and I felt that, if he’s my drill instructor, he ought to be able to do what I can do since he’s putting me through the training. Well I thought basic training, at times, it was a picnic. I mean, it really was. I wasn’t effected by any of this strenuous activity at all, none.

SM: What did you think of the M-14 as a weapon?

JP: I loved it. I don’t think they ever should have switched over to the M-16. A grain of sand will jam up an M-16. You can throw an M-14 in mud, pick it up, and fire the thing. It’s just cumbersome, it’s heavy. But, they went to light weight, you know, and I couldn’t do anything about that but M-14 is a very effective rifle, very effective. It was a good weapon, a very good weapon.

SM: Was anybody ever injured in basic training?

JP: We had one guy break his ankle and they recycled him. He had to start all over again, eight weeks again.

SM: How did he break his ankle, just running or something?

JP: The horizontal bars. Before we went to eat breakfast we had to go through the horizontal bars and he slipped off of them and broke his ankle and that did it. So, they recycled him. eight weeks again.

SM: Was there any physical contact between the drill instructors and the trainees?

JP: No, but we had some close calls. Like I said, I sort of peeved off a couple of them. I challenged them a lot of times. I felt that if they’re in a position to give out this strenuous activity, they should be able to do what I can do and what everybody else can do. My only problem was I’m not a runner. I would never max out the run. I always got close to maxing the PT test, but the run, I’d only get 80 points on the run and not 100. But everything else that required strenuous physical muscle, I was able to do with no problem at all. We had drill instructors that were 135 pounds and six foot two and I said, “My God, can you do this stuff?” So I challenged a lot of them. I really did. They wouldn’t prove it to me, they just said, “Listen, that’s why I’m a drill instructor and you’re a private,” so I accepted that.

SM: Were there any humorous incidents that you remember from basic?

JP: Any what?
SM: Humorous incidents, any bizarre, funny thing or something that might just stick out?

JP: I always stuck out because I had a 27 and ½ inch inseam, okay? I cannot take a 30 inch step. I bob up and down. As we were marching in formation, like in a parade, you’ll see this little guy’s helmet just bobbing up and down. I can’t take a 30 inch step, I’m sorry. My legs just weren’t made for it. So, they always made fun of me. I was the 2nd shortest person in my whole company. Believe it or not, there was another guy, Paul Patrie or Petrie that was just as short as I was and we both had a problem taking a 30 inch step. I can’t take a 20 inch step. We always got jokes about two midgets in the unit, but I didn’t care though because I could out-do most of the people there anyway.

SM: So what about Fort Knox and clerical training? Was that….that was obviously disappointing since you wanted infantry.

JP: It was very, very disappointing, very disappointing. My whole, you know, why did they ask me what I wanted to do, what field I wanted to go into? Why didn’t they just say, “Excuse me, we’re going to send you where we think you need to go depending on the shortage of whatever skill or MOS.” They should not have said, and all of my battery tests that I took I had high scores in Army radio code because I took Morse code in high school. I was mechanically inclined which you can use in combat engineering. I was short but I could do lots of heavy physical lifting. I was strong for my age, but they sent me to clerical school. So, why didn’t they just tell me, “We’re going to send you where we have the bigger shortage, and that’s clerks.” I could have accepted that, but I have a professional sitting in front of me saying, “What would you be interested in,” and I tell him infantry or combat engineers and then turn around and send me to clerical school; why do people even bother asking me, you know? They should have given me the school that I wanted to go to, preferably infantry. My dad was with the OSS in World War II. He flew covert operations, he flew in canvas covered gliders that were only good for like one flight. I mean, he didn’t like flying but that’s what they put him in. So to speak, it shoved right down on top of me. They gave me what they wanted to, and that’s exactly what they did to my dad. So, almost literally, I followed in my dad’s footsteps except he wasn’t a POW.

SM: In the short stay that you had at Fort Benning for airborne training, what happened? How did you get injured?
JP: We were jumping off of an eight foot platform and instead of keeping my waist straight and twisting and rolling on my right arm and then right to my shoulder, I bent at the waist and just ran my shoulder straight in the ground and pinched the nerves in my shoulder and they put me on a casual duty for ten days and they sent me back up to the hospital for x-rays and I damaged all the nerves in my shoulder and they gave me a permanent disqualification. So, that took care of that one. I went right back to Fort Knox again and this time I went into personnel, right back into clerical stuff again. I mean, it never stopped.

SM: And then the trip over to Vietnam on the Buckner, is that right?

JP: General Simon B. Buckner.

SM: General Simon B. Buckner. What was that like? three weeks at sea; what did you guys do?

JP: We played poker, sang, I mean lots of gambling. Had a guy standing in the corner puking his guts out and I told him, I said, “You know, you’re pretty sick, huh?,” and he said, “Yeah,” and I said, “Well I’ll tell you what I’ll do for you,” and he said, “What?” and I said, “I’ll race you around the boat for the big chunks,” and he said, “If I catch you, you’re going swimming out there,” and I said, “You’re not catching me!” I’ve always been sort of like a clown in nature. I have no reason to...I’ve never had a reason to have sorrows for life. I’ve always been a jokester. I like seeing people laugh. I don’t like seeing people sad, I really don’t. If I have to be the idiot to get a laugh out of somebody, I’ll do it. I like to see people in happy moods. I was even happy when I was captured, believe it or not. I had to develop a state to where you couldn’t get in a position of being homesick. I mean, you really had to manage your life; really manage your life because if you didn’t, we were going to bury you. We buried eight anyway, it could have been more. It could have.

SM: So the unit you were assigned to when you first got to Vietnam was the 148th Ordinance Company?

JP: Uh huh.

SM: And that was located at Vung Tau?

JP: Vung Tau, yeah.

SM: And you were assigned to them from December of 1966 until November of ’67?

JP: Yes.

SM: What was that unit like in terms of morale?
JP: Well we had an EM club just 300 feet away and basically we partied every night; got drunk. No action.

SM: Did your base ever come under attack?

JP: No, no. We used to go downtown and pick fights with the Vietnamese. Oh yeah. We used to go to restricted areas in Vung Tau where GI’s weren’t supposed to go just looking for…kicks are really hard to find. That’s what we call it. Kicks are really hard to find here. We have no…we had to fight something, you know?

SM: What were your impressions when you first arrived to Vietnam to Vung Tau?

JP: A cesspool. The first person I saw was dipping down into a garbage can looking for food, filled with garbage; the very first person I saw, a mamason. She had a little basket with her putting food from the garbage can into the basket. The market place downtown reeked of rotten fish. I actually had a friend named Gary Fann from Missouri that actually barfed from one other place to the other when we went down to the marketplace one day. He said, “Pfister, I can’t handle this.” He just got deathly sick. It reeked of rotten fish. Now raw fish is not bad. When the raw fish gets to the rotten stage, it’s some bad stuff. It really reeks.

SM: Well did anything exciting at all happen when you were with the 148th?

JP: Yeah, we went downtown. We went to a bar drinking and a Navy guy walked up to one of my buddies; we were in the Army, and he said, “The Navy does more than the Army here,” and my buddy said, “Well that’s fine. I’m glad to hear it, chief.” We didn’t want any trouble. The guy picked a fight with my friend and one of his Navy guys got ready to come up and hit my buddy and I whacked him over the head with a bottle. Then this guy about 15 feet tall grabbed me and just knocked the holy hell out of me. They called the MPs and we just scattered like ants when you drop a rock in the center of them, you just [makes scattering noise]. I used to break restriction every night. You had to be off the streets by ten o’clock. MPs were chasing me. I’d rent a motorcycle, like a 250 Scrambler, Honda Scrambler. MPs couldn’t even catch me. I just bounced around town. It was one o’clock in the morning, drunk, riding a motorcycle. Kicks were just kicks were hard to find? We’d practice parachuting out of Lambrettas while they’re moving. Lambreta was like a little three wheeled thing that carried people in it, like three people in each side. It had little benches, and they’d be [makes motor noise] down the highway and we’d sort of shuffle to the door and [makes thumping noise] while this thing’s still moving. Next morning we wake up and we can’t even move. We got bumps,
cuts, bruises, I mean knots all over us. We was young and didn’t know any better, but I didn’t mind. I didn’t kill myself. I didn’t have a death wish. It was just something to do.

SM: And then November 1967 your orders finally came through?

JP: Yes.

SM: But this meant a second tour in Vietnam?

JP: It meant at least a six month extension and I agreed to extend my foreign service tour.

SM: Okay.

JP: I said, “Yes sir, let’s do it.”

SM: Now what kind of training had you received up to that point to work in an assault helicopter company?

JP: The only thing I did prior to finally, before my transfer was approved, is I would sign an M-60 out of the supply room almost every day, take it apart, put it back together, take it apart, put it back together, because that was part of the door gunner duties taking care of the door gun. That was it. I went from a clerk straight to 11 bush, 11 B infantry. I got an automatic change over in my MOS. That’s what I wanted from day one. I finally got my 11 B ten MOS.

SM: So what was the morale like at the 71st attack helicopter company?

JP: Comradery-ship. Everyone was like your brother. There were skirmishes sometimes just for, I don’t know, just an indifference between two people, but nothing serious. Nobody wanting to kill each other or anything like this. You had everybody else’s support. But, I got there at night and they asked me when I wanted to start flying and I said, “Tomorrow morning.” They took me out on a test flight, I passed the test flight, and I started at five o’clock the next morning. That’s what I wanted. They said, “How often do you want to fly?” I said, “You put me down on the flight schedule every day. I’ll fly every day. You want me up in the air? I’ll fly it, I’ll do it. Put me with any crew; I’ll be there.”

SM: Now who did you, the next morning, I guess this is November 1967?

JP: Yes.

SM: Your first day of flying. Do you remember who the crew chief was?

JP: No.

SM: Oh, okay.

JP: That’s the problem; I can’t remember names.
SM: Now did you eventually get put in a team that stayed together?
JP: No, I sort of really…if a crew were short a gunner, I flew with maybe three or four different pilots. So, I wasn’t quite yet a member of a four man crew yet.
SM: So you flew with Frank Anton?
JP: Well, he was in the Firebirds.
SM: Oh this is…
JP: Well this is with the Rattlers. I was in the Slicks.
SM: At first you were with the Slicks, okay.
JP: Yes.
SM: How long did you fly with the Rattlers and Slicks?
JP: Just a couple of weeks or so.
SM: Any particular events stick out in your mind as far as going into hot LZs and stuff like that?
JP: We went into hot LZs bringing troops in, delivering rice to villages. Not fun. I mean, there was no excitement. Fly in, fly out. Hauling lieutenant colonels around checking on their men.
SM: Oh that’s right, the C&C missions.
JP: Yeah, command and control. I mean, com si com sa I mean, you pick them up, fly in, they go check it out, take them back.
SM: Right. Now the units that you supported, now this was in the Chu Lai area, correct?
SM: 196th light infantry?
SM: How well did you guys get along with the soldiers that you’d fly around? Did you interact with them much?
JP: If we had to transport them anywhere, usually we were in for…well in the Slicks, we’d have to transport troops every now and then. We got along with them great. We didn’t have any problems. We had problems with the dinks that we sometimes picked up.
SM: So you supported ARVN as well?
JP: Oh yeah.
SM: What kind of problems existed?

JP: Well if we had to go in a hot LZ and they all didn’t jump out, the pilot would hover about ten or 15 feet above a rice paddy and they didn’t want to get out, then you help them out. You throw their ass out.

SM: So the ARVN would sometimes refuse to jump into a hot LZ?

JP: Yes, so you had to help them along the way a little bit which I didn’t have a problem with that, either.

SM: Was that restricted to ten or 15 feet or was it sometimes higher?

JP: Well it wasn’t of any real height. I wouldn’t make them do a ‘show me you got guts’ from 150 feet up, no. But, you know, within ten or 15 feet off a rice paddy and all you’re going to be hitting water and mud? Listen, they’re going to do a Mae West if they don’t get off on their own because I’ll help toss them out. I didn’t mind it. That was part of my duties. It was my duty to make sure that the tail was clear of all obstructions and when we got ready to land, you know, “Clear on the right tail, clear sir,” let the aircraft commander know that it’s okay on the right for them to land. He’s not going to chop off the tail rotor or the main rotor. That was another duty. So, you had to look out for other aircrafts. “Sir, you’ve got an aircraft at ten o’clock.” I mean, well, for me it was one to six, okay? “Sir, you have an aircraft at two o’clock.” “Okay, got it.” Let him know of all other flying aircraft as long as you could see them.

SM: And when you say one to six you’re talking about direction of travel? 12 o’clock is in front, back is six?

JP: Yes, and then the crew chief had six to 12. Just like an on board traffic controller, except you’re responsible for your side and crew chief’s responsible for his side.

SM: Anything else memorable from your time with the Rattlers?

JP: Just good, very good people to work with, good influence, support.

SM: Yes, speaking of support, did you know 1st Sergeant Hillhouse? Was he the 1st sergeant while you were there?

JP: It sure sounds familiar. It sure sounds familiar.

SM: I think he was a short man, kind of stout.

JP: I think so, yeah.

SM: You never had any problems with him?
JP: I never did, no. The only problem I had with an officer, they gave us our survival knives and the lieutenant says, “In no way, shape, or form do I want to see you throwing these knives like throwing knives.” As soon as he walked around the corner we threw up a big piece of plywood and we were throwing the knives and he walked back around the building and there we are throwing our knives. He said, “Jesus, what did I just tell you stubborn…” I like throwing knives, you know, I’m sorry. I’m not really an expert at it, but I like sticking knives. It solved that until he got out of the way again and then I just…but no, the people, they’re like your family. They really are. They’re like a family that you’ve never had before and they’re there for your support, morale booster, whatever you need. They were there for you. It makes you feel good too, not necessarily being wanted, but they make it known that, “Hey, you need help, we’re here for you.”

SM: What about the mess hall and food and stuff like that?

JP: When everybody’d come back off of a flight like really late, they had hot food waiting for us. You bet. Many times I’d come in, like we’d go on a fire flight mission. That was interesting. I volunteered for my first one and I had no earthly idea what I was getting into. We flew out in the middle of the jungle running the skids through the top of the trees, and all of a sudden the pilot turned on all the lights. We’re going 30 miles an hour and I says, “My God, this guy’s going to get shot!” Well, that’s what we were there for, to draw fire and then they call in artillery or jets and rumble in on a position. He said, “Welcome to fire fly,” and I said, “Ah ha!” But when we got back to the unit they always had hot food and drinks for us when we got back. That was good, that was good. Made sure that you were fed, made sure that you had a hot meal, made sure that you had fluid in your system, yeah. That was every time that I’d come in either very, very early in the morning or very late at night. They were always there for the food.

SM: Now the fire fly missions, that’s what they were called, fire fly?

JP: Uh huh.

SM: Why would they want helicopters to go out to draw fire in the middle of the night?

JP: Well, because it’s hard for a fast mover to hover or to run across the top of the trees. SM: But would this be based on they have information on the enemy in this particular area?

JP: What you do, what you do is you go out there and you’re just running your skids through the top of trees and you turn on all your lights and you want to attract fire. As soon as
you take a pot shot you get the grid coordinates and say, get a hold of one of the fast movers and say, “Yo ho, I need a 250 pounder dropped here. We have enemy activity.” Get the hell out of the area, let him come in and do his thing. Or run a straping, run a straping run or call in artillery and just ruin their whole weekend. I mean, that’s what the fire fly missions were for.

SM: Was there ever any conformation of what you accomplished with those missions as far as someone going to the ground and…

JP: Oh yeah, yeah. Wherever activity, you know, if we received fire it was usually from maybe not a totally infested, like a gazillion dinks or anything, but I mean there were enemy troops in there. Sort of, what kind of activities they were doing, I have no idea but they were in the area, it was not a friendly area. It was a free fire zone, they shot at you, ruined their weekend. That was the name of the game.

SM: Right, but what about on the ground confirmation that you killed anybody or accomplished anything in particular?

JP: Oh I…well, I don’t know. Usually military intelligence analysts were the ones that collect all the data using the word ‘SALUTE’. Did you ever hear of that? That’s where they get all the information from; Size Activity Location Unit Time and Equipment. That’s where they gathered the information. That’s where it all comes together.

SM: And when did you switch over from the Rattlers to the Firebirds? That was in December ’67?

JP: Yeah, December, yeah.

SM: And I guess the position just opened up for a gunner?

JP: They had an opening and I sort of like applied for it orally and they said, “Yeah, Pfister’s okay, we’ll accept Pfister.”

SM: Do you remember who you talked to?

JP: There was like, they had like a little committee and they said, “Yeah, Pfister’s an okay gunner,” and that made my day.

SM: Now did you, once you became a Firebird, did you spend much time on Hill 35?

JP: Quite a few times on Hill 3529. Yeah, quite a few times. I remember a couple of times having to reload the rocket pods, go to the connex box and get an arm full of rockets and screw the warheads on them until you get a little click and then slide them in the pods and make
sure the cannon plugged in before you take off so you get that little bit of one quarter volt to set these things off. Spent a few times up there.

SM: So where did you receive the training to handle the weapons system on the aircraft?
JP: My crew chief Robert Lewis.

SM: Did you work with him almost exclusively in the Firebirds?
JP: No, but he was a good teacher. He was a good crew chief, good crew chief. I got shot down with him.

SM: He was captured with you?
JP: Yes. And he taught me the ins and the outs and the dos and the don’ts and I tried explicitly following his instructions.

SM: What were some of the more interesting missions that you went on while you with the Firebirds?
JP: The most interesting was the night that we went out and we got shot down that night. Everything was like World War III opened up. We got hit with everything; tracers from one end of the place to the other. I think we ran into a regimen of a crack-NVA and I think a regimen’s like eight or 900 people I guess. We went out to support Charlie company, the 196th light infantry brigade and they just got annihilated. I mean, I don’t even think they knew what hit them. That was interesting. Wasn’t even scared. Adrenaline was running so fast through me. I mean, I didn’t really have time to be scared. I didn’t know we were going to be shot down. Maybe I was too stupid to realize it.

SM: So on that aircraft was you, Anton, Frank Anton, Robert Lewis, and Carson?
SM: Frank Carson.
JP: Yes.

SM: And Frank Carson actually escaped?
JP: Yeah, he stumbled into an ARVN compound.
SM: He stumbled into an ARVN compound?
JP: Yeah, from what I understand he took off his clothes, buried his wallet in a rice paddy, and took off running through a rice paddy and crossed a river and stumbled into some ARVNs.

SM: Wow, that’s lucky. But you, Lewis, and Anton were captured?
JP: Yes.
SM: When you got on the ground, well I guess describe the events as they occurred as far as you were in the air, you were going in to support 196th, and all of a sudden you’re taking heavy anti aircraft fire; probably 12.7 machine guns and small arms and all kinds of stuff?
JP: Probably anti aircraft .51 millimeters, I mean, we were just getting hit with everything but the kitchen sink. The lead ship, the lead ship took a bad hit and I remember someone saying, “I want to make one more pass and get those son of a bitches.” Well, about that time Puff, C47 gunship is flying above us dropping flares so they just lit us up, so the enemy had really a nice open target to shoot at. It was like 12 o’clock noon out there after you start dropping flares.
SM: What time was it actually?
JP: Probably about eight, 8:30 at night.
SM: Probably?
JP: It was dark, yeah. Dark thirty already, and this guy starts dropping flares. I’d really like to talk to this pilot, I really would. I don’t think I’d have some very nice things to say to him; where he got his license, out of a Cracker Jack box or Montgomery Wards. We were getting low on fuel, like 400 pounds. When you get down around 400 pounds of fuel it’s time to head to a gas station and refuel because JP four is sort of…when you’re fully on, it’s hard for you to put in the full 1200 pounds of fuel so we usually had to go a little shy like 1000. Sometimes you can stretch it, maybe go 1100 pounds of fuel. But, we were getting low and we needed to head to a gas station and refuel. Well, that didn’t come about so we made one more orbit and Mr. Carson says our controls or our hydraulics are shot out. Now a C model Huey, from what I understand, both of the hydraulic modules are on one side of the helicopter. You’re A, B, D, and H model, you have, I think you have, one on each side. On a C model you have both of them on one side. A round came up and went through both of ours. A one in a million shot. Well, that happened. Carson says, “We don’t have any controls. They’re frozen,” and Anton says, “Yeah.” So Anton took the controls. Mr. Carson sort of, I guess, couldn’t grasp what was really happening at the time. That’s not a fault of anyone. I don’t guess, you can’t expect everyone to react the same when something happens. So Anton took the controls and sort of held back on the cyclic and on the collective. The chopper started nosing over. Well, if that would have kept up we just would have went end over end and we would have been killed. He
just let off of the throttle and just let it go and we hit a rice paddy. The chopper bounced up and then it rolled over on my side and I blacked out for just a split second when we first hit. Had no idea; I mean, I couldn’t even grasp what was going on. I couldn’t even grasp...I lost all sense of time. I can’t even remember how long it took us to smack the ground. I mean, I really couldn’t. It’s just I sort of fired a machine gun until I couldn’t fire it anymore. I didn’t know what to do except just keep shooting the machine gun. We crashed and Carson said, “We’re on fire,” and I think mainly what it was was the hydraulic fluid dripping or running over something that was still hot. It still could have probably ignited but we still had fuel in us, in the chopper, that JP four. It could have ignited but there was no fire. It was just trickling smoke so we all got the hell away from the helicopter and sort of went in different directions.

SM: You didn’t stick together?

JP: Nope. Bones, or Anton, went and dug a hole in the side of a dike. Me and Lewis went off into a tree line and we didn’t even know we crashed by a village. There was a village right there on the edge of the rice paddy. I mean, of all places to drop in, I mean hell, they didn’t have supper for us. Good grief! That’s basically, I mean, that’s what happened that night. Everything was so confusing. Anton kept saying, “Mark your position! Mark your position! Wait one, wait one.”

SM: So you were communicating?

JP: Yeah.

SM: By what means, just voice?


SM: Oh, you had radios?

JP: Yeah. The problem was there was just total chaos down on the ground. They just didn’t have time to mark their position and Anton says, “I don’t care what color smoke, just mark it.” We had mini guns and rockets and we couldn’t use either one because we didn’t want to blow our own people up off the face of the earth with the mini guns and rockets. But needless to say, all we had was just door gun ammo. That’s all we had use of.

SM: So were you armed when you got off the aircraft?

JP: We were armed when we crashed. We had 14 rockets with ten pound warheads on each one and a full load of mini gun ammunition.
SM: No, I mean were you guys personally armed? Like did you have M-16s or anything like that?

JP: Oh, I had an M-14 on the chopper but once we came to a final stop, everything came out. I mean no 60, no rifle, I mean absolutely nothing and I went forward and I had that monkey tail straightened out that I had attached to the transmission wall. That attached to a belt around my waist. It finally tightened up and my head went between my feet and I felt something pop in my back and I later found out I smashed a vertebrae in my back and now which I have osteo-arthritis now. We had no means of defense at all. I mean, we lost everything.

SM: Okay, and what about contact between you guys on the ground and other guys up in the air?

JP: Oh we heard, Right when we went down, I mean our people, our buddies from the unit, they tried coming out and trying to get us. The ceiling was a little low. Most of them were driven away by ground fire. They say they had 20 of these anti aircraft guns lined up, I mean, just blasting every damn thing that got in sight. I sort of believe it. They really had a lot of weaponry and everybody… I heard choppers, I mean a few of them, quite a few of them trying to come in and they just couldn’t come in. Sort of a helpless feeling, I mean it really is. But, I don’t expect those people to sit there and get blown out of the damn air. I really don’t. I appreciate and I commend those guys for trying to come in and get us, but I don’t expect them to sit there and just get blown to bits.

SM: Did you have radio contact with them?

JP: Well, until we got shot down.

SM: No, I mean after you got shot down. When you were on the ground and you guys had scurried and found your positions.

JP: No.

SM: You didn’t have any kind of radio contact with them?

JP: No, but they knew where we were.

SM: Yeah, they knew where you were from the aircraft.

JP: Yes.

SM: So how did you communicate on the ground once you were on the ground? How did you communicate with Anton and Lewis?

JP: Lewis was right next to me.
SM: Okay, so you can talk to him. You didn’t know where Anton was?
SM: How long did you guys stay there on the ground before the Vietnamese came in?
JP: All night, through artillery barrage. Oh, they had artillery come in and I mean lots of it. Bones, I think, was captured about 5:30 and we was captured about six, somewhere around there.
SM: And this was a PAVN unit that captured you or Viet Cong?
JP: NVA.
SM: What kind of weapons were they carrying?
JP: AK-47s and SKSs. Mostly AK-47s.
SM: What kind of uniforms did they wear?
JP: NVA.
SM: The green or the…
JP: Sort of like the grayish, sort of.
SM: Grayish color?
SM: How did they treat you when they found you?
JP: Tied us up with tunnel wire. Hands swelled up, sort of cutting into your skin a little bit and walked us off into the jungle. I turned around during part of the trip and saw a Chinook take off from the fire support base. It was that close.
SM: So you weren’t far from Americans.
JP: We were at sort of like an overgrown path, trail. “Out of sight, out of mind,” so to speak.
SM: What was the first thing you thought when you were captured? Do you remember?
JP: “I can’t believe this actually happened,” or something to that effect. I had always pictured getting wounded, crippled, maimed, killed; never captured. Never even entered my mind. When they tied us up, it’s sort of hard to accept. It was really hard to accept. I was whistling, walking down the trail whistling. Lewis said, “What are you whistling for?” and I said, “I have no earthly idea.”
SM: So they still allowed you to communicate? You could talk to each other?
JP: Well, every now and then they started telling us to be quiet and shut up. I just
couldn’t make heads or tails out of it. My back was sore, my legs were sore. I had a burn on my
leg from the casings on my, you know, the belt of ammunition from my knee all the way up to
my crotch. My back was really hurting for the first few days. It was really out of sorts. I didn’t
know it, I mean I didn’t know what I did, but it was really sore. I didn’t know what to think of
the matter. I kept thinking, “Jesus Christ, where’s everybody at? Where’s everybody at?
They’re supposed to be here!” Well, they’re not really supposed to be there, but I mean where’s
all my buddies at? I felt abandoned but it wasn’t anybody’s fault. It’s just there was no help
anywhere.

SM: Did Anton and Lewis share the same sentiment?

JP: Sort of. It was a disbelief feeling. I could not believe that this was happening, and
this, I even held this the first seven months I was captured. “This ain’t happening.” I got
homesick. I was 19 years old and I got homesick and then I got sick from being homesick and I
said, “This is not the right thing to do here. I cannot sit here and get homesick. You need to
snap out of this crap,” which I did.

SM: So where did they take you first once they captured you? They marched you off,
tied you up with [commul] wire, marched you off. How far did you travel? Do you remember?

JP: 11 days to our first camp. They just walked us in circles, that’s all they did. 11 days.
Just absolutely nowhere.

SM: And how many, when you got to your first camp, how many other prisoners were
there?

JP: six maybe? Let’s see; there was Cushner, Grissett, Ortiz and Agusto. There were at
least….then they had a going away celebration for their release when we got there. They were
Puerto Ricans and they released them. We sent a list home with them on who was there and I
guess they told the authorities but the authorities told them not to tell the families and all that
they had seen us, that we were alive, or anything. We had three people, Americans, that were
released in my camp in 1969 that was told not to tell our families that we were alive. I mean,
you know, I was missing in action for four years and I was held in captivity five years and two
months. I was not listed as a POW until my 5th year. Now, it would seem better sense to me
telling a family that, "Hey, in January ’68 I saw your son alive,” not, “Well, this is April of ’72.
That’s the last time I saw your son.” Well this is already 1973. I don’t know. The government
told our people not to say anything at all because my dad called James Strickland which lives in I think South Carolina, North Carolina. He said, “I’d like to know if you’ve seen my son James Pfister,” and he said, “Sir, I can’t tell you anything.”

SM: The other people at the camp, what kind of condition were they in?

JP: Sick. Bones got sick. Me, James Strickland, Willy Watkins, Thomas Davis, Lewis on some of the occasions, we mostly did the heavy work.

SM: What kind of work?

JP: Carry manioc on our back, it’s a potato-like substance. The baskets would hold probably about 60 or 70 pounds worth. Carry these over a five-ten mile track both ways up and down mountains. Carried fire wood for our wood to cook the rice with. I used to carry 16-18 foot logs a half a mile or more back to camp. Now, here we are and I’d already gotten down to about 134 pounds, I was anemic, I’ve had 20 some odd cases of malaria, two cases of dysentery, malnutrition, berry berry, jungle rot, and there were still just a few of us in the camp that had to do the heavy work. Everybody else was not quite as strong as us.

SM: How long did you stay in the first camp? Do you remember?

JP: Oh, just days, just days.

SM: And what did you do there and what were the missions like?

JP: Well, they brought in some POWs there, David Harker and Frank Williams and Francis Cannon. Frank Williams had the back of his hand shot out. Harker was in good condition. Yeah, David Harker also did heavy work also. Francis Cannon got hit with a mortar, had a hole in his neck the size of a silver dollar with maggots coming out of it. Had holes in his back from shrapnel. Somebody mentioned, “Cannon needs a bath. Needs his wounds washed off.” And I said, “Well Cushner,” Cushner was a doctor, I said, “Well?” and he said, “I’m not giving Cannon a bath,” or something to that effect. I said, “Cannon, come with me.” I said, “I’ll give you a bath.” I mean, I gave him a bath, head to foot.

SM: He was physically unable to do it for himself?

JP: He had wounds from one end; I mean, the hole in his neck was that big. Maggots just falling out of it. So, I tried cleaning his neck, tried cleaning the wounds in his back. I gave him a good bath and I said, “Listen, he’s an American soldier that needs help.” I said, “It’s not above my standards here to give this man a bath. He needs a bath.” So I took him down to the water hole and cleaned him up. He was the first guy that died.
SM: The Vietnamese just let you?

JP: I mean, there was a guard down there but I gave him a bath. My first night on a bamboo bed my kidneys broke up and I wet the bed for about five nights in a row. My kidneys couldn’t stand that solid pressure, you know, laying on a wooden bed. Kidneys wouldn’t handle it. It took about a week probably. I wasn’t the first person that had the problem either, and it finally dawned on me that this is not going to be an easy thing here. It’s not going to be easy. That’s when it finally hit me.

SM: What did they feed you?

JP: Rice.

SM: A lot of rice, a little bit of rice?

JP: We had a little chin, a little chin of rice. A chin was like a little bowl that the Asians fixed. It was only about like this and about that deep. We had one of those three times a day. It wasn’t enough to keep a bird alive. But, I’ve eaten rats, toads, frogs, lizards, snakes, bamboo vipers.

SM: So whatever you could catch?

JP: You bet. I killed it. I killed most of the camp’s chickens in the camp. I didn’t care. We killed one of the camp’s cats. Yeah, I’m serious. Meat was meat, I didn’t care. I killed little baby chickens just for the taste of meat. Just for the sake of it. I’ve eaten rats. Now I shared everything that I killed. Nobody took me up on the rat meat. I said, “Well, I offered.” But I said, “Pfister’s going to eat it.” It’s the same as squirrel. As long as you eat strictly the body portion, the meat. No insides, no feet, no head, no tail, none of the things that could carry or scrape diseases. Strictly the meat and you’re good to go.

SM: How would you cook these things?

JP: Open fire, roast it.

SM: And the Vietnamese would just let you?

JP: Uh huh.

SM: What kind of restrictions would they place on you?

JP: We had smoke restrictions. Like we had a smoke…we had to build our own stove. It was earthen. We had to form it out of mud and stuff and it had holes where you sat the pot in. We had bamboo to stick underneath for the fire and the fire would come up and heat the pot with rice. But, we had a smoke tunnel. You just dig a trench, cut bamboo, cover it over the trench,
and then cover that with dirt and that’s to hold down all the smoke because smoke trickles through the jungle and it’s a target for people to find you. So, we had our smoke discipline. We had to cook our own meals. Sure did.

SM: And what about interaction between you and other prisoners? Were there restrictions or controls over that?

JP: Well, 18 of us slept on one bed, one great big long bed. As long as this, probably as long as this whole room here. It got cold at night. We got rained on. The damn roofs would leak. Monsoon seasons were horrible. It got cold. Socks wore out so we just had bare feet and rubber sandals, pajamas that were sheet thin and they gave us a blanket. It probably wasn’t as thick as a sheet. They called it a blanket. No pillow and bamboo bed.

SM: How many guards?

JP: Oh, 15 or 20.

SM: And how many prisoners total?

JP: There were 22 at one time.

SM: And that was the highest number that was ever in the trench with you?

JP: Yeah, yeah.

SM: Where were these other prisoners from?

JP: Well some were Marine Corps. Most of them were out of the 196th or Americal Division. We were the only crew members. All the rest of the people were ground pounders. One guy was driving his jeep and got captured. Robert Sherman was in the Marine Corps. He was a guard standing at the gate and a girl in the village motioned to him to come here, he left his post, walked into the village and voila! They grabbed him. Duh! You don’t leave your post, I mean, I’m sorry. Sherman, one night I had a really bad problem breathing and My God, I was really gasping for air and I woke up and Sherman’s sitting on my chest and I said, “Sherman, what are you doing?” and he said, “Well I’m just trying to make you comfortable, Jim!” and I said, “Not sitting on my chest you’re not!” He just lost it. Mentally he just lost it and we buried him. Francis Cannon was the first that died, Frank Williams.

SM: What did Francis Cannon die of?

JP: All of his wounds.

SM: Infection?
JP: Yeah, malnutrition. God, this guy got down to so thin you could literally count the
103 bones on him and he died right there on the bed. Frank Williams had the back of his hand
blown out and he’d be sitting there at the table; we had a bamboo table that we ate at and his
fingers would be doing like this. There was maggots inside his fingers eating the dead flesh and
his fingers were just moving up and down, up and down. He died of edema. He got a collection
of fluid. His scrotum was almost the size of a volleyball and it just got up into his chest and
suffocated his heart. He was a 1st sergeant, I think, out of California. Bill Port was in the
infantry. He was posthumously awarded the CMH. His children got the award. He got hit with
a mortar and was partially blind. He had fingers and toes that were badly damaged by shrapnel,
powder burns on his face and arms. They walked this guy into our camp. He was from
Pennsylvania. He died. Fredrick J. Burns was 19 years old and couldn’t handle it. He wasn’t
any sicker than I was. He just gave up. Edwin Russell Grissett, Jr.; he was captured two years
before I was. We had an indoctrination class. He was hoping to be released after the
indoctrination class. He wasn’t. He said, “That’s it. I quit.” A month and a half later, two
months, we buried him. We buried eight people in my camp. Joseph Zaltaky, Dennis
Hammond, let’s see, Bill Port, Fredrick J. Burns, Edwin Russell Grissett, Francis Cannon, Robert
Sherman, I know I’m missing somebody. I helped bury all of them. I buried three German
nurses that were completely neutral to the war. They’d capture them anyway.

SM: Did the German nurses speak English?
JP: Yeah.
SM: What was the story behind their capture?
JP: They were out taking pictures of the mountains and scenery and Viet Cong just
decided to capture them. One died on the way to camp from malaria and the other two got sick in
the camp and they died.
SM: How long were they in the camp with you?
JP: Not even a year.
SM: How were they treated by the Vietnamese?
JP: Same as we were, and they were totally neutral to the war. They helped everybody.
They helped treat the enemy!
SM: The German hospital ships were notorious for treating anybody who came to them.
JP: Yeah! They were just out sight seeing. Wrong place, wrong time and they got captured.

SM: Were those the only women you ever saw while in captivity?

JP: Well some of the, I mean, no.

SM: As far as the only women captives, only female captives.

JP: Yes. Reka Courtman and Monica Schwinn. The other girl, I don’t know who she was. Never saw her. She died on the way to camp from malaria. Reka Courtman was a very, very nice person. She got sick and they kept feeding her corn broth, salted, and this just kept adding to the edema. A person with edema, a collection of fluid, you don’t give them anything with salt. They just kept feeding this stuff to her and she just blew up and suffocated her heart and that was the end of it. I mean, unbelievable. And I told, I told one of the guards or I told the interpreter, I said, “Listen,” I said, “You say you’re lenient and humane towards American prisoners.” He said, “Yeah,” and I said, “Well, lenient and humane this; you have GI’s here that are deathly sick. They’re not going to cause you any more harm. They’re not going to pick up arms and come back fighting. Why don’t you make arrangements with the US, drop them off so they can be shipped back, and made well again?” They just let them die.

SM: Now the guards, where were they from?

JP: All over Vietnam, different parts of Vietnam.

SM: Were they…

JP: Yeah, some of them were North Vietnamese, some were Viet Cong that lived down in south Vietnam. We had a mixture of both. Some were sympathetic towards us, some weren't. And I asked the people, I said, “Listen, these people aren’t going to cause you any more damage.” And I said, “If you’re so damn lenient and humane,” I said, “Let the people go.” You know? I said, “You call yourself lenient and humane policy that you give toward American prisoners.” I said, “I haven’t seen it lately.” He said, “We can shoot you,” and I said, “Well fine, go to it.” Then they come back and they say, “Well, we couldn’t quite get the amount of rice rations that we needed because of bombing,” and this that and the other and I said, “Listen, you don’t want to feed me, by God, let me go. You captured me.” I started really developing a defensive attitude towards these people. I sort of knew where I could push them without being shot. I knew they weren’t going to shoot me anyway because Ho Chi Minh gave the order of taking prisoners, their bartering tools here, “Take prisoners,” and I knew just about how far I
could push them before I started getting myself in trouble. But I’d give them the finger, I’d cuss at them, I’d ask them questions contradicting their government’s policies as far as the lenient and humane treatment goes towards POWs. You know, I said, “Listen, you can’t get the food and you don’t want to feed me? Then you let me go. You took me, it’s your responsibility.” The problem is they didn’t sign the Geneva Agreement so it sort of shot that in the foot a little bit but I didn’t care. I made it known that their lenient and humane policy was a crock.

SM: What were the indoctrination sessions like?

JP: That Vietnam is one, not two. There was no parallel, the 38th parallel?

SM: 17th.

JP: The 17th parallel. The 38th parallel, was that…

SM: Korea.

JP: Korea. They’re all one country. I said, “No, there’s actually two people, there’s south and…just like Korea.” They didn’t like that either. US is wrong, US are war mongers, we commit atrocities, we kill women and children. Well, stuff happens in war. Some things are…some things you really don’t think’s going to happen but people get in the way sometimes and people get hurt.

SM: How long would these sessions last?

JP: Oh, this one lasted three weeks, two to three weeks.

SM: Like eight hours a day?

JP: Yes. And Anton had diarrhea and Anton got up off of the bamboo bench that they built for us to go down to the latrine because he had nervous diarrhea. Listen, they threatened to shoot him for not asking for permission to get up and go to the bathroom. They really did.

SM: And they were serious?

JP: Yes, very, very serious. They had a philosopher from Danang named An Ho, high ranking official, schooled, fairly smart person, but he was giving the indoctrination class. They call him An Ho and he was supposed to make us see the light, see the different way of things. We knew what kind of class this was, you know “denounce our government, tell our troops to lay down their arms”. I wasn’t going to tell him any of the above, I’m sorry. I wasn’t going to say anything. Well shoot. They wrote up statements and they told us to sign the statements. I’d sign it. I’d put James L. Pfister, James P. Pfister, not James F. Sometimes I’d put senior, sometimes I wouldn’t put Jr.
SM: Did they catch this?

JP: No. They called me in for an interview when I was first captured and they said, “What unit are you from,” and I said, “1st cav,” and they said, “Wrong, you’re with the 71st assault helicopter company.” I said, “Let me ask you the questions. If you know everything, then let me ask you and I’ll tell you if you’re right or wrong.” They didn’t like that either. So then they said, “Who’s your company commander and who’s your executive officer.” I said, “Clark Kent and Perry White.” Well, you don’t have to stick with name, rank, serial number, and date of birth. Sometimes if you do you’re going to get yourself in a jam. So, make it easier on yourself; answer the information, just don’t give them correct information. Get them off your back and that’s exactly what I did. They wrote it down on a piece of paper and left me alone. I figured what he doesn’t know really isn’t going to hurt this guy.

SM: So did you talk about this kind of stuff with the other prisoners, the purposeful feeding of misinformation to the captors to just get them off your back?

JP: Yeah. Francis Cannon was a gung-ho type individual, the guy with all the wounds.

SM: Yeah, that died.

JP: He was born with sort of no brain, but he was a strong willed person. He stepped on a hot coal one day and developed a hole in the heel of his foot. I mean a hole. Gangrene set in and he’s still walking on it. They called him up for interrogation and you know what they told him? Name, rank, serial number, and date of birth. The next time they called him up; name, rank, serial number, and date of birth. The next time they called him up; name, rank, serial number, and date of birth. We told him, we says, “Cannon, answer their questions just lie to them on the rest of the information. You’re going to get yourself in trouble. They’re going to cut your food rations,” and we all told him, I said, “You can’t afford to have your food ration cut. You can’t afford it, slim. You need to eat,” so he followed our advice. He was the first one that died. He lasted close to nine months, but a strong willed person. They called him up one day to clean his wounds and I took him up and the wound in his neck wasn’t bad but the shrapnel holes in his back, some of them were lined up vertically and I’m standing there and they had a great big sort of bamboo pole that went from the ground up to one of the rafters for the…in the roof and I said, “Well how are they going to clean this guy’s wound from here to here?” Very simple; they got a rifle ramrod, put gauze in it, and literally like they were cleaning out the core in a rifle. Cannon just one blood curdling scream. So they finished, I took Cannon back down to the hut
and he said, “Jim?” and I said, “Yeah,” and he says, “They won’t do that again,” and I said what,
and he said, “Get a sound out of me.” He said, “No more.” There was no more. That man
would go up there and grab that pole, grit his teeth, and say, “Go to it people, but you’re not
going to get a scream out of me,” and he didn’t. The man had tears the size of golf balls coming
out of his eyes. Not a scream, not a whimper, not a sound. You would think that there was
fingerprints in the bamboo pole, honest to God, swear to God. Strongest individual I’ve ever
seen, very strong. So, a few weeks later they said, “Is anybody sick?” Witch doctor, we called
this guy witch doctor. He called himself a medic. He was a witch doctor voodoo type person,
you know? So I said, “Yeah, I’m sick.” My hand was about the size of a catcher’s mitt. See this
finger here? It’s smooth on top right in here. See this finger here where I have an indentation? I
had a bamboo splinter caught in my hand and it sort of festered and got infected and I never
could get the splinter out so my hand swelled up to about that big around. I can literally one of
these numbers and no feeling; just smack it against trees and stuff and no feeling. So, he called
me up there and I put my hand on the bamboo table and he took a scalpel and lanced it. No
novocaine or nothing. He stuck a pair of forceps in the hole and started pulling out stuff. No
novocaine, nothing. He pulled out some of the nerve and some other stuff, so if I hit this thing a
certain way I get a blood-tingling sensation that shoots down my finger. But, I have an
indentation where he pulled some of my finger out of the hole with it. So every since that, every
since he pulled that stunt, any time something went wrong with me he’d say, “Is anybody sick?”
and I’d say, “Nope, nope. I’m feeling fine.” I ran a pungy stick in my leg three and ½ inches. I
was stealing the Montagnard’s peppers from a food run and they had pungy stakes hidden in the
bushes by this pepper bush. I didn’t see the pungy stake, of course that’s why they put them
there, and I walked right into one. It went right in above my kneecap probably about two or
three inches. It left a gaping hole above my knee cap. It took three and ½ months for the hole to
finally close up. I walked stiff legged for two months. I couldn’t bend my knee and I still had to
do heavy wood runs and food runs and gosh! Real harsh, but I was not letting that man, ever
again, let him know that I had a problem. If I had a splinter, I got to where we had abscesses or
what people call boils. A boil, it’s an abscess. It’s from filthy conditions. Anybody can get
them. I got to where I could lance my own boils with a rusty razor. I mean, squeeze it, pull the
core out, and let it heal. It was a walk in the park. Say, “Whoops, there’s another one!” Don’t
even heat the razor blade, nothing. Just lance the damn thing, squeeze until the tears come out of
your eyes so you can get the hard core out of it, and then let it heal. That’s all you can do. They
gave us no medicine, absolutely none. In the same compound we were at there were three or
four Vietnamese prisoners, ARVN soldiers. They were out on a food run one day and a guard
was pot-shoting around and a round hit a tree or a rock or something and ricocheted back and hit
one of the prisoners in the mastoid, right behind his ear and gray matter was hanging out. His
name was Tin, a really nice guy. He was pro-Army. He hated Viet Cong and loved his south
Vietnam heritage. I mean, good guy. Well, we watched, painfully, this guy just dwindle in three
days. He survived three days. Problem was, before he actually died the witch doctor came down
and they would not let Cushner practice medicine.

SM: Who was Cushner?
JP: He was a bonafide…he was an M.D. He was a doctor.
SM: How did he get captured?
JP: He flew into the side of a mountain, the pilot that he was flying with. The pilot flew
into the side of a mountain after Cushner just gave a safety class. Pilot got killed. So the witch
doctor came down and he was going to perform a trach on Tin, give him a breathing passage, and
he cut right straight into the thyroid and you heard a pshhhhhhh and that was it. Tin was gone.
That was it. I said, “Jesus, where do these people get these…I’m glad I’m not one of their
soldiers and got seriously wounded and I have to have a trach cut. No way.” This guy’s going to
cut your thyroid, man! You cut your thyroid with a scalpel, you’re history. You’re a number, a
statistic. That’s’ the kind of sort of medicine type thing that we had to put up with.

SM: Did they treat the ARVN prisoners any differently from the American prisoners?
JP: No.
SM: They didn’t treat them more harshly.
JP: No, sometimes they treated us more harshly.
SM: How so?
JP: Because we were the aggressors.
SM: In what ways did they treat you more harshly?
JP: Their attitude, just the overall attitude of the people. You can tell a Jekyll and Hyde
performance if they went over and talked to the Vietnamese and then all of a sudden come over
to us. Not all the guards. The hardcore guards, yeah. They hated the Americans. They hated
us. If they could have shot us, they would. They would have taken us out, strapped us to trees,
and just got rid of us. Some of the guards were sort of sympathetic but they were still very
cautious of us. I don’t know. They were a mixed breed. The Montagnards, they were told by
the NVA that, “If you don’t help us, your family is history, your crops are history, everything
that you’ve worked for your whole life is. That’s it. You have no more,” so they were sort of
between a place and a rock. Help, you know, help people in the daytime and shoot at people at
night. Jekyl and Hyde type war type thing, so it was really sort of hard to fight a war when
people are playing both side of the fences. People you’d hire to come on posts and fill sandbags
and build bunkers? Some of them were Viet Cong just gathering data for their files. Some of the
Vietnamese had a better record filing system than we had; strength, ammunition, vehicles, you
name it. They had an up to date file system just as good as Personnel did. They may not have
known your name, but as far as information about the unit? Oh yeah. You bet. Their analysts,
their military analyst people get you an ID card, go in on post, help them do work around, look,
take pictures with your mind, see what’s going on, count. “You can count, count things and
report back to us. US will never know.” Well, they’re exactly right.

SM: Were there ever any incidents where you came across a Vietnamese person who
you knew worked in a base area but saw them as a captive and knew then that they were playing
both sides of that fence?

JP: Not that I observed, no. I saw Americans that played that role.

SM: Yeah, Mr. Garwood, is that right?


SM: Why don’t you go ahead and talk about the circumstances surrounding your first
introduction to him?

JP: 1968, roughly around July or August, I was on a food run with Edwin Russell
Grissett and another gentleman, which died also, Grissett died. I actually observed Garwood.
We came up to a Montagnard village for a rest. It was about a mile and ½, two miles from our
camp. We made our final rest before we started our last little trek up into the camp. I looked
over on the ground and there were five new prisoners coming into our camp and Grissett says,
“Hey Jim, come over here. I want you to meet somebody.” Well I thought, “Who in the hell is
he wanting me to meet out here in the absolute middle of nowhere,” and he took me over and he
says, “I want you to meet Bobby Garwood,” and I looked over at this thing and I saw an
American over there in an NVA uniform. He had a pistol belt with [chicom] grenades and he
was carrying an SKS rifle and he was part of a guard detail bringing in prisoners to my camp, which in turn I think that’s what you call bearing arms against American prisoners. I have first hand knowledge of this. Anton brings this up in his book. Listen, that’s gospel, but Anton did not observe what I did. I physically saw Garwood at this Montagnard village buddying and chumming around with NVA guards. He was with them and he was brandishing a rifle.

SM: He could speak Vietnamese?

JP: Oh fluently, fluently. Later I heard he accepted the rank of lieutenant in the NVA Army. They used him for propaganda purposes. Now he would come down to our compound and I would talk to him and use him, too, to get us more tobacco for the people that smoked and paper. I used him just like a tool. But, I’d call him a commie and I said, “I have nothing…” I talked to him very cautiously. I did not let him know how I felt about my enemy because he did inform on a couple of people and later on when he came back in May of 1979 he later on wrote a book called, “Conversations with the enemy.” I’m mentioned in that book as being like a radical, and I said, “That’s what I was supposed to do.” But I said, “Him, he’s a traitor.” I don’t make threats but I make promises. I hope I never see him again for his sake, not mine, for his sake.

SM: Do you have the specific incidents where you know he turned people in?

JP: Yeah, during the indoctrination class and when I saw him, I think it was before the indoctrination class, which was in June. I may have been wrong about July. It may have been about May or somewhere around there. It was around the same time frame that this indoctrination class came about but he was there. It may have been March or April of ’68, close to when indoctrination class…but that’s when the other people of five came into our camp. Oh yeah, he did all of the above. He would tell Americans to lay down their arms. He ate and slept with the enemy; literally ate and slept with the enemy.

SM: But what would he get from prisoners that he could use against them and turn them in on?

JP: Well just information about how we felt with the guards and Vietnamese and things like that. I mean, listen, when he came down to the compound we had to watch what we said and mostly what people talked about was what they did before they joined the service or girlfriends that they had or fast cars that they drove. You didn’t get into war stuff, into detail, with this guy because it would sure get back to the people that he ate and slept with. But in May
of '79 when I was in Hawaii he comes back. The Vietnamese are done with him. They had no use for him anymore after 13 years or so. He makes a little statement that, “I cherish America, I cherish the American ideology,” and I said, “You communist piece of garbage.” So I call up the news room in Honolulu and I said, “I’m Sergeant Pfister.” I said, “I personally know Garwood,” and I said, “Do you want to know about this guy?” I says, “He’s actually a traitor.” I says, “If you’d like to know about this guy I’ll be more than glad to tell you.” Let me tell you something; 45 minutes later I was down at the post commander’s office of Scolfield barracks, 25th infantry division, a general’s office and he’s saying, “Sergeant Pfister, what the hell’s going on here? I’ve got reporters knocking my door down.” And I said, “Sir, I know Garwood. The guy crossed over. He bared arms against American prisoners.” He said, “Are you sure?” I said, “Trust me, just trust me on this.” My commanding officer, captain, he said, “Pfister, what in the hell are you doing to me?” I mean, I was dragging him into it. He had to report to the general. The general said, “Listen sir,” or captain, he said, “You got a damn sergeant down there that’s rocking this world here!” and then the captain comes out and says, “Pfister, what in the hell are you doing here?” “What, what?” I mean, I blew Garwood’s boat right out of the water and I’m glad and I’m going to until I run out of breath. I’m going to let him know that I’m right behind him and I’m going to let the people know, “Don’t get snowballed by this jerk.” Whatever he says, not politically correct, I know better, I know better, and when Bones mentions to him, or Anton mentions to him in his book, it’s gospel. It’s gospel, trust me.


JP: Well he basically says the same thing about Garwood but I haven’t come out with a book. I don’t have the patience and tolerance to sit down. It’s easier for me to do an interview than it is to sit down and start from day one. See, I feel more comfortable bouncing back and forth. It’s probably not the most correct way to do an interview, but at least I sort of don’t forget events. Maybe the sequence, yes, but not the main events, though. My order may be out just a little bit. I may be a bad person to interview but I try to cover everything but I may bounce back a year or so or a month or three. But my information, I told this to my debriefing officer when I got back in ’73 and he says, “Are you sure?” and it’s like, “My God,” you know? Were you grilling me or what? And I mentioned the eight people that died and he said, “Were you sure?” I gave him names, their hometowns, the month and year they died and I said, “Do you really, honestly think, major, that I’m just making this shit up?” I went through debriefing four hours a
day for 11 days at Fort Knox after I got back. four grueling hours of brain picking, sequence of events in order, chronological, sequence of events four hours a day for 11 days.

SM: Covering your entire captivity?

JP: Everything start to finish. Start to finish and everything else in between. And I mean listen, it was not fun. Not fun. And the reason they did that was because you got this stuff fresh. You’re right out of it, it’s fresh. I’ve still got it fresh. I may get the chronological order screwed up a little bit after 32 years, but the contents is correct. I don’t B.S. anyone. I like to joke around and stuff like that, but I will give direct and correct information. Garwood is a wolf in sheep skin, and all he got out of this thing was dishonorable discharge and forfeiture of all paid allowances and he feels that he was cheated? Listen, he could have been made an Eddie Slovak from World War II and Eddie Slovak didn’t even hardly want to…I don’t even think Eddie Slovak carried a rifle. He was put as a cook, a clerk, he screwed that up. Eisenhower made him…was it Eisenhower? Macarthur or Patton? Was it Patton? Well, they made an example. They were going to make and example that this is what happens if you desert or you refuse to “blah, blah, blah,” so they executed him by firing squad. Garwood should be very fortunate. This was in time of war; not declared war, but rounds were being fired back and forth, people were dying, so technically, not literally, but technically we were in a war conflict. I wasn’t even called to the trial.

SM: You weren’t even called as a witness at the Garwood trial?

JP: No, the attorneys made sure that I was not called, from what I understand.

SM: Were any of the other prisoners who saw Garwood...

JP: Oh, Anton was. Sure was.

SM: And Anton never saw him bear weapons against other prisoners?

JP: Not like I did. Isaiah Macmillan, I think, was called to the trial in New Jersey.

Anton was. But, when this first happened, I immediately got on the phone, called the news room, and I started the snowball going and then it really snowballed. But, I was one of the first people that got his snowball rolling and I started getting Garwood’s boat out of the water little by little to where he had no ground to stand on and I opened both barrels and let the public have it. Listen, I wasn’t afraid of ruining my career. I was advised not to say too much in the hopes of, “Don’t ruin the trial process,” because what happens sometimes, when you know too much information and you go ahead and spill it out, you’re actually trying to convict a person before
he’s even convicted and sometimes that’s sort of like it’s bad tuning. You don’t want the cart
pulling the horse, so to speak. So I sort of watched it, but I did say he wore an NVA uniform, he
did bear arms against American prisoners, which I did personally witness, so I did mention that.
I had a whole conference room filled with reporters over in Hawaii in a matter of an hour and ½.
Shit really started hitting the fan, and I feel good about it because I’m getting tired of him
snowballing people, you know? He’s trying to make people, “Hey, I’m a victim…” no, no, no
you’re not. You’re not a victim. You made your bed, you just don’t want to sleep in it. You
chose to cross over. You chose to believe them that, “Hey, you do this for us for a year and we’ll
let you go.” Now if you’re really…listen Garwood, I can probably sell you ocean front in
Phoenix, Arizona. If you believe that spiel, then let me sell you some ocean front.

SM: So he was captured?
SM: And then he turned?
JP: He was in infantry. He was captured driving his jeep someplace and then they offer
him something I guess and he fell for it, but he had the option of changing his mind. He was just
too chicken crap to do it. So, you probably didn’t care enough about your troops or country or
anything to do something about it. So you just believe them and say, “Well hell, I’ll get released
sometime.” Sure, 13 years later, yeah, you will. Why? Because they got tired. They can’t use
you anymore. We don’t have any troops over anymore, what are they going to use you for?
They don’t want you here anymore, Garwood. You’re excess baggage. You know, think about
it Garwood. These are not hard questions. The answers aren’t even hard either. Very easy to
figure this all out. So we chose to stay in a compound, people chose to die.

SM: Is that how you guys saw it?
JP: Huh?
SM: Is that how you saw it, that people were losing the will to live, that they were
choosing to die?
JP: Only in two or three of them. The rest of them literally died because they were sick.
Fredrick J. Burns was from New York and I guess he was from a well to do family which I don’t
have anything against anyone. The thing is, he wasn’t as sick as I was. He was even newly
captured. “I don’t want to play no more.” That was his philosophy. They said, “Listen Fred,
you can’t do this. You have to eat.” He said, “No, I don’t have to.” He chose, and we couldn’t
force feed this guy. We tried to make him eat and he would not do it. His system got down and it was too late and two and ½, three months later that was it. There went another one. Another one in the ground. Edwin Russell Grissett, he was captured two years before me and when he wasn’t chosen to be released after indoctrination class he said, “Jim, I don’t want to play no more. That’s it. I quit.” And he did, he quit. He literally sat down and did absolutely nothing and we buried him. So, it’s very easy. When you lose the will to survive nothing can be said or nothing can be done to change, turn the table in a different direction. By the time you do get the table turned in a different direction, it’s somewhat too late. Damage has already been done and it’s not reversible. It’s a done deal, you know. I hate to say that, but after…I was 19 years old when I was captured. I learned at a very quick age that I don’t take anything for granted anymore. I don’t buy the theory of peer pressure. I don’t buy the ideology of making a decision and having other people live it for me. I’m a grown person. I learned the hard way. Maybe sometimes it helped, maybe it didn’t. I think it did. I suffered PTSD from it. It comes with the territory. So do other people in the unit that they don’t know, but I make a decision, I don’t even expect my wife to live it. I live it. I lived with all of my other ones. If I were to blame anyone, I’d blame me. I don’t blame myself on any decisions that I’ve ever made, not even volunteering for a helicopter. It comes with the territory, okay. It’s something that you may have to give up, it’s something that you may have to die for, it’s something I believed in. I don’t feel that way, well even now, not knowing what I know now. I have 58,000 reasons why I feel like we didn’t need to be there. I have 58,000 reasons why and they’re all in Washington. But being young and naïve and didn’t care about politics and took everything for granted and lackadaisical attitude and cocky attitude didn’t care about squat; I care about squat now. I care about my decisions. I think my decisions out. I still have to live by my decisions. That’s what life’s all about, decision making. Be happy with what you’re doing. Like what you’re doing. At that time, I liked what I was doing. I loved it. I enjoyed it. It was the thrill of it all, the rush, the surge. I wanted to contribute to the war effort. That’s what I called it, contribute more to the war effort. That was my answer. “Why do you want to do this, Pfister? Go home!” “Uh-uh. I want to contribute more to the war effort. Typing on a typewriter is not good enough. We have people dying out here every day. This isn’t good enough. I have to do more,” so it was a need to do this. It was a priority in my life. I needed to do it because other people were dying for it, for what they believed in or what they were told. The average age over there was 22 years old or
less. So, did the average person over there really...were they politically minded bound? I mean, no. They fell into the same lackadaisical category that I did. Do your time and get the hell out of there, for the US. The RA, the regular Army, I enlisted for it. The US, hey, “I want to do my time and go home. That’s it, okay?” But they still, they didn’t run. They didn’t shirk the duty. They went. Some died and didn’t make it back. I don’t know.

SM: As a prisoner, you spent three years in the south and then two years in the north?
JP: 37 months in South Vietnam and then they walked us almost 42 days to North Vietnam.

SM: In the south, how often would you change camps?
JP: 1968 I got to my very first camp where Ortiz and Augusto was released. That camp was history after a few days while they were building and finishing up the other camp. We went to the other camp probably in February ’68, stayed there until a year maybe, moved to the 3rd camp. That was in 1969. That’s where we first saw the German nurses. I also observed Robert Garwood, when Ho Chi Minh died, he was sporting a black arm band mourning the death of Ho Chi Minh. I observed that one. Then after that we moved to another camp. That’s when the aircraft helicopters found our camp, spotted our camp, and then a few days right after that then they marched us up to North Vietnam.

SM: Okay, this is, where the helicopter spotted your camp, is the one where Anton in his book says he made eye contact with the guy in the Loch?
JP: I made eye contact with him, also. Looked right up at the guy sitting in the doorway of the Loch.

SM: About 40 feet up?
JP: Yeah, door wide open. two Medevac ships and I think two or three Cobras, at least two Cobras. No ground troops, none. Not a one. Really botched up operation, really botched it. Really bad. Whoever did this was just trying to go through the motions. And like Bones said, we had high ranking officials, NVA, that were captured so in order to do really good bartering, the Vietnamese would trade high ranking US prisoners for the same or equivalent Vietnamese prisoners. We didn’t have enough rank. Stands to reason; information vs. information. What you know because of your rank, you know? We just didn’t have the clout our rank on the collar that they were looking for.

SM: Did you guys talk about this much after it happened?
JP: No, we mainly talked about what the hell happened on this operation here.
SM: That’s what I mean.
JP: Oh yes.
SM: About the fact that here are these choppers, obviously they’re supposed to be trying
to rescue you but there’s no ground troops. What the hell is going on?
JP: And then you know what happened? In five or ten minutes we heard the blap, blap,
blap, blap off in the distance and slowly fading and that was the end of it. No return, I mean
nothing. That was the end of it. Like, “Here they are. We got them. Que Sera.” And they were
gone.
SM: What did that do to your morale?
JP: I didn’t really feel happy about who was conducting the operation here. I mean, if
this was supposed to be a rescue operation, somebody really got their Ps and Qs all mixed up on
what was required for a rescue mission. You can’t do it just with aircraft. I mean, you need
somebody to get out of the aircraft and get on the ground and force these yo-yos back into the
jungle so we can get on the aircraft and go. Just didn’t…no ground troops. They had the fire
power; not one round fired. Not a one. They didn’t even take a pot shot at any choppers,
nothing. Our choppers made no attempt to land, no troops, but they went through the trouble of
a LOH, Medevac ships, and Cobras and that was the end of the mission.
SM: Did anything like that ever happen again?
JP: Huh uh. Son Tay raid, North Vietnam, only to find empty cells and I think their
intelligence was more up to date than ours was. They knew ahead of time what was going to
happen naturally so they beat us to the door. It makes you really stop and think; these people
paid to sit down and they go to war school. They learn tactics, maneuvers, they learn…this is a
war college. They learn to do this stuff. You usually don’t plan for something that’s going to be
a total failure before it even happens. Before you even get the choppers off the ground you
know it’s going to fail right off the bat before they even fire the choppers up. Just go through the
motions.
SM: In the south, what was your average day like? What did you do?
JP: Tell the same stories over and over and over, laugh, joke, do exercises in the morning
to stay active, and figure out what we’ve got to do that day for survival like go get wood, go get
SM: Why would you carry elephant grass?

JP: For the thatched roofs, repairs so they wouldn’t leak so bad. This elephant grass was like razor blades. I had cuts from head to toe, and then trying to figure out how to walk in those rubber sandals. My Goodyear sandals. The straps would pop out and I’d end up going barefooted. It was like trying to walk all over again; just trying to adapt to a jungle environment. Hell, I felt like Lewis and Clark out there, charting new ground. I really did.

SM: What was the hardest thing to cope with?

JP: Living, thinking, “Who’s next? Who is going to be buried next?” We actually…we did not plan to live tomorrow. We hoped to make it through that day. We’d been in artillery barrages, we been in strafings, we had B-52s do carpet bombing 1500 meters from the camp. I mean, that’s too close, too close. We been through all of the above, all of the above. So our greatest…it wasn’t a fear, it was our greatest thing that really hounded me the most was, “Who in the hell’s next on the chopping block?” That dwelled on me really bad. Even though I was sort of active and I would get malaria and stuff…malaria’s a killer. They have Vivax, [Falcipian], and malaria E. [Falcipian] is very, it will sort of do you in. Vivax isn’t a good type of malaria, either. Once you have it, you can never get rid of it. You can’t give blood either. But, malaria’s a killer. Dysentery is really a killer. 30 some odd times a day, you have absolutely no energy. It starts out with regular runny stool, it goes to a mucus, and then it goes to blood and pus. Then you’re down to strictly intestine; raw intestine I guess. Your whole intestines are totally infected. I had it twice. I was going up 36 times a day. I mean, it was energy draining. At the end of the day you’re just [makes noise] and then you say, “My God, what the hell’s tomorrow? What’s tomorrow going to bring?” Same thing, 34-36 times going to the bathroom the next day, the next day after that, the next day after that for about a week or so. I mean, not fun, not fun.

SM: What kind of water supply did you have access to?

JP: We had a stream that ran by the camp but what we’d do is we’d take bamboo, split it down the middle, bust the ridges out of the seams in it so you had a flow through, tap in off of the stream, do little X supports, and run a water line down into our compound. But after going to pick manioc or heavy loads of food and wood and stuff like that I needed a cold drink so I would
drink cold water from the stream. I had ten inch parasites in me when I got back and I had eight
different type of parasite. They gave me some stuff like milk of magnesia when I got back to kill
two or three different types of parasites. It put me on the stool for four hours and when I looked
inside I had parasites almost a foot long and I got just sick. Not puking, but literally just, “My
God, what the hell did I live through?” I mean, they were living in me and I had eight different
types of parasites. I said, “What’s this medication going to do? What’s the side effects?” and
they said, “We have no idea, we’ve never had to give this out before.” I says, “I thank you a lot.
I appreciate your information.” They said, “Sarge, I’m serious. I have no earthly idea what the
side effects are. We’ve never had to give this stuff to anybody before.” And I said, “My God I’m
in trouble.” I’ve taken pills that were like that. This milk of magnesia stuff, that stuff ripped me
up. I mean, had no idea where I was at. I just went into total outer space. I didn’t know people
around me, triple vision. It was just milk of magnesia, but boy I tell you what, it sure got the hell
rid of parasites. Those great big horse pills they give me, I said, “What’s this do?” and they said,
“I have no earthly idea.” I took those, nothing. No side effects, nothing. It gave me a little bit
of diarrhea and that was about it. Got rid of the parasites. That milk of magnesia stuff, bad
medicine. Bad brew, boy. I mean, whoever brewed this stuff up…I think Mr. Magoo sort of
maybe got a hold of the wrong bottle when he started mixing this stuff up. I make a joke of a lot
of it, but I appreciate the people’s concern trying to get us back into shape again. They did a
bang up job, they really did. I had no idea things were, you know, that much was wrong with
me. I knew some things were but God Almighty, not that! Jesus Criminey.

SM: What happened when you made your 40…I’m sorry, how many days did it take to
get to Hanoi?

JP: Close to 42 days.

SM: 42 day trek to Hanoi. What was that like?

JP: Walking up and down mountains 12 and 1300 feet elevation, forting rivers, and
carrying 30 pounds of rice on my back. My knees are sort of fried. I can, I’ll hobble when I get
out of this chair. I can’t sit for long periods of time. My knees…I can squat down on the floor
and I can get myself back up if I can hold on to this table with support. Its really hard for me to
self support myself with legs and knees and push myself back up. The damage on my knees just
from walking that long sort of took its toll on my kneecaps. I’ve never had knee surgery, no
kneecap replacement, but my knees are bad. Anton didn’t quite make it. They had to sort of
mostly carry him the rest of the way. Like I said, he stayed in a sick mode most of the time. He was not as strong. Just some people’s systems didn’t handle it as good as others and that’s, you know, he kept his spirits up and stuff like that and that’s commendable. I don’t have any problems with the sicker people not being able to do the heavy work. I didn’t expect them to. We all had to help each other, mind and spirit and the physical, doing the physical work. This was where really comradeship really helped because if one person started getting down in the dumps you had the other person who’d try to, “Hey, come on man, let’s snap out of it.” I got on Bones a little bit to get up off his butt and do some exercises, whatever he could do. I didn’t care if it was stand there and just, not jumping jacks, but just raise his arms in the air ten times and then quit and then try a little bit more the next day. But, staying active was sort of a key. You really had to, really had to. It was a must. You couldn’t lay down and say, “Well that’s it. I’ll survive.” No you won’t, no you won’t. I know better. But, the trip up there, once we got up to North Vietnam we had to stay over at this little [Ahh!] 180 miles south of Hanoi they put us on a train car and the night before they put us on this box car they put us in this hooch and they put handcuffs on me which didn’t quite fit. My wrists were just a smidgen too…they put them on me anyway. In the morning when I woke up my hands were…bang them up against walls again; no feeling, nothing. They put us on a box car. Inside the boxcar was about 180 south Vietnamese soldiers and there was four of us, four Americans. One Vietnamese said something and I sort of really, really, really got peeved at him and I motioned like I was going to just knock the hell out of him and my buddy said, “Yo, there’s a whole boxcar full of these people Jim!” I was so pissed.

SM: Do you remember what he said?

JP: No, I don’t. It was some type of mockery of US soldiers and it just didn’t quite set with me real well and I didn’t give a damn who I was getting ready to smack. But, my buddy sort of made it aware that we’re sort of really, really outnumbered here.

SM: And these were…

JP: South Vietnamese soldiers, ARVNs.

SM: ARVNs captured?

JP: That they were bringing up to North Vietnam.

SM: They were taking them to North Vietnam?
JP: Yeah. That was the first transportation we got, about the last 180 miles, or 100 miles or 80 miles, somewhere around there.
SM: And what happened when you arrived in Hanoi?
JP: They took us to plantation gardens, threw us in a room, ten of us to a room.
SM: How big was the room?
JP: Almost the size of your room here.
SM: So about 15 by 20?
JP: ten of us and they had wooden pallets on the floor. That’s where we slept, hot. Two blocks down the road we had a Sam sight. After a while there they made us dig a bomb shelter in our room, dig through six inches of concrete with a pick for air raids. On December the 18th, 1972, Nixon says, “People, I’m going to bomb you into the stone age.” I’m going to tell you a little secret; for 18 hours he flew...he had US troops, not ground troops, but I mean in the air, they flew over 2500 sorties. A sortie is one attack by one aircraft. 18 hours straight. He bombed the dog crap out of that place. But, two blocks down the street you can hear a Sam, “Pow!” By Geneva Convention you’re not supposed to have Sam sights or any artillery or anything next to POW camps or close to POW camps. Well that goes to say that they didn’t sign the damn thing. They kept us in a room like this and they had one little slide door where they brought our cigarettes in the morning and then they brought in our food; sugar rice on Sunday and pumpkin soup the rest of the days, boiled pumpkin soup and a loaf of French bread with, still had the coal in it that they used for cooking, and sugar rice on Sunday. I think I would have rather had just dry rice.
SM: And what did you do during the day when you were in Hanoi?
JP: Absolutely nothing. They started letting us outside for 40 minutes a day. We had the peace committee just two doors down from us. They didn’t fair well with me either. Not well at all. John Young told one of the guards one day, he was standing outside my room, John Young told one of the guards, he said, “You know, if I had a weapon I’d help you shoot the aircraft attacking Hanoi.”
SM: They didn’t believe him?
JP: And I think Cabanol, Cabanol when he got home committed suicide so I sort of wish the rest of them would have followed suit. The peace committee. Fredrick Elbert, his name was...he went by the name of John Peter Johnson. He wore a shirt said, “John Peter Johnson.”
We later found out that somewhere along the line they had fragged his sergeant or lieutenant or
captain or somebody. They didn’t like the guy, they started up a jeep and drove away or
whatever and a pin pulled on a grenade and no more Johnson, so Fredrick Elbert wore his shirt.
We didn’t find out he was Fredrick Elbert until, hell, later. He went by John Peter Johnson.
Flake, total flake. He joined the peace committee. Riati, Genovich, God what a jerk. Cabanol,
of course he committed suicide. There was eight of them, oh, James Daly. He was in my camp
in the south. He joined the peace committee. Jesus, the peace committee? They’re going to get
the Americans to just lay down their arms and quit and go back home? eight people? Nah.
Chances are, no. So, there was another group there who sort of fell for party lining so to speak.

SM: What was the most important thing in your coping with captivity?
JP: Coping with…
SM: Being a prisoner. What helped you through this ordeal?
JP: Survival, survival. You had to live day by day. It was survival when you woke up
and survival when you went to bed. Everyday was a matter of survival; literally survival.
SM: Just maintaining that will to live?
JP: Yes, yes focus on survival. I do that today. I go through days that it’s a survival day
for me. I mean, I can’t sit still. My wife and I bought a 20 foot trailer, took my grandson
camping for his first time; nice 100 acre lake, pine trees. I woke up Saturday morning and Karen
fixed me breakfast, fixed Jay, my grandson, breakfast and I told Karen I said, “I’ll be back pretty
soon,” and she said, “Where are you going?” and I said, “I’m going to go home and cut the
grass.” 12 miles away is ours from the lake. She says, “What?” I said, “I need to go home and
cut the grass, it’s that day to cut the grass,” and I live on an acre lot. I went home, spent two and
½ hours cutting the grass, and then went back camping. I do this all the time. This is my first
vacation since October of ’92. This is my first time flying since 1980. It took a lot, a lot for me
to get up in that jet. It really did. If my back wasn’t so messed up, I would have drove. I really
would have. But, I do things on impulse, I do things on survival. It’s still like a survival day to
me. In the summer time, I’ll stay outside and do things until I literally run out of dark, I mean
light. I will work literally until its dark and I can’t see anymore. I do this, I’ll wear myself
literally out. I’ll just go, go, go until I just physically can’t go anymore. I’m probably going to
have a stroke or a heart attack one of these days doing it, but I’m stuck with it. I mean, I can’t sit
down in places for a long time. I’ve got to move. It’s something’s going to happen, I mean
survival; if I don’t get the hell out of here. Nobody’s going to hurt me, but I can’t tell myself that and they don’t tell you this is going to happen. You don’t have to be a POW to get this, either. Post traumatic stress, you can be in high school and have your friend in a drag race next to you flip over and get killed and you suffer post traumatic stress for the rest of your life because you saw your best friend get in a car accident and die. Anything that’s traumatic that can cause a trauma to you does not have to be an injury. People don’t realize this. You can get post traumatic stress disorder from just about anything, just about anything and you’ll be stuck with it the rest of your natural born days. Sometimes the severity of it is worse. Mine is...I’m at 70% VA disabled for PTSD. I just recently got my 100% disability in March. I got the increase on my back. My back got a little worse, so they told me that I warrant 100% so I’m 100% disabled. But, I can still work. As long as you’re not 100% disabled for PTSD. Then they label you unemployable and then you have to worry about being awarded social security disability income. But, the next step past 70% on PTSD is 100%. There is no 80 and 90% disability for PTSD. 70% is it. So I had to go for the increase on my back which I had documentation on doctor’s visits and emergency room and cortisone shots so I can straighten back up on my back and that got me the increase on the disability on my back. But once you have PTSD there is no cure for it. There is relief, there is help like counseling with the vet centers and VA regional offices. There’s help, but there’s not a cure for it and I’m not going to B.S. anybody. There is not a cure for it. I quit going to counseling because I got tired of talking about Vietnam because it always led me back to the same place that I started out going to counseling for; the people that died in my camp. I never have, I never had dreams of flying and shooting and getting shot at. It’s burying eight people in my camp. No, actually 11 people; eight GI’s and three Germans. Or two Germans.

SM: When you buried them, were you allowed to have ceremonies?

JP: Yes. We made bamboo coffins, carried them like a tiger in the jungle on a big pole and the coffin underneath made out of bamboo and we had a little grave sight thing and that was it.

SM: What kind of preparation would you undergo in terms of the actual body, the person’s body?

JP: I made sure that I would change their clothes and bury them in clean pajamas.

Joseph Zaltaky was next to the last person that died. He was from Utica, New York; Marine
Corps. His last days, he called me down where he was sleeping at down at the end of the bed and he says, “I’m dying ain’t I, Jim?” I says, “Yeah,” and he said, “Will you do me a favor?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Wake me when it’s over.” I said, “Okay,” which means his remains come back. I had to break his arms almost to put a…when he died he stiffened up, rigor mortis set in, and I had to almost literally break his arms to change his pajama top. God! I dream about this all the time. I have nightmares, sometimes seven times a week to this day. Continuously, it never stops. I take bupropoin, it’s an anti depression. I take 100 milligrams and take 150 milligrams when I walk in the door from coming back home from work. 250 milligrams a day of bupropoin, it’s another anti depressant like Prozac, Paxil, things of this nature, to help people cope with PTSD. Different medicines work different ways on different people. They have different side effects. Some don’t have any side effects. Some do, some don’t. You have to sort of process of elimination, you know, see what works and what doesn’t. But this was like my 4th medication and it seems to be faring itself pretty good, so it works.

SM: What did you think of the decision in 1975 not to provide anymore support for the Vietnamese? You had come back in 1973, you had been back in the United States almost a year and a half.

JP: First impression was, “Well, we lost this one because it’s going to fold right under,” which it did. I knew from past experience that the majority of the ARVN’s were not really dedicated fighters. They leave you holding the bag in a heartbeat. When things got rough, they were behind you running. I mean, all their weapons were laying on the ground and they were gone and I knew that all the time, effort, lives, materials, was just all in vain which it was.

SM: The five years you spent as a prisoner?

JP: No, that wasn’t in vain. The commitment to go to Vietnam was in vain. My time as a POW, I guess I was destined. I don’t know. I’m not a very religious person, but was this meant? I mean, it was meant for somebody. Is it a test? I don’t know.

SM: What was the bravest thing you saw as a POW?

JP: Bravest thing as a POW? The people that died that chose to die and not cross over, to change their course in life. They chose to go that way. That took guts. It took guts to give up. Those are my heroes, not the guy walking around with this congressional medal of honor. Somewhere anybody can get a congressional medal of honor in a war zone. Somebody’s going to. People that die, those are my heroes. They gave everything, I mean literally everything,
without a squabble, with out no complaints, without reservations about anything. They went, they served, and they died right along with 58,000 people. I went to the Moving Wall. I haven’t been to the one in Washington yet. We’re on a really, really touchy subject now. This is where I start to maybe stammer at times. I went to the Moving Wall twice; one was in Fairfield, Illinois. I really didn’t know what to expect. I really didn’t. I knew that it was a Moving Wall, half the size, and it had 58,000 names from the east to the west. That’s all I knew. And Fairfield, Illinois is like 26 miles from where I live in Carmi, Illinois so Karen says, “You want to go to the moving Wall?” and I said, “Yeah, let’s do it.” Well, my dad went with us so my dad’s sitting down on a park bench because he had the COP, that chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, so I walked up to the Wall. Now Dennis Hammond remains is the only remains that did not come back from Vietnam. They could not find them. He was buried ten feet or 15 feet form Zaltaky, which his remains came back. But over the years with the monsoon seasons, everything just started a little higher and higher and higher and it got to where it was improbable just to dig down that far. Well anyway, so I walked up to the Wall. No, actually I walked up to the tent where they had the registrar’s at with all the people’s names, their panel, and line number. The first name I got to was Dennis Hammond. That was it. So I started quivering a little bit and Karen says, “You okay?” and I said, “Yeah, I’m fine.” So Karen says, “He was a POW, can somebody help him scribble the names on the paper from the Wall?” and they said, “Yeah, we’ll help him.” The first name we got to was Dennis Hammond. His remains had never got back. That was it. I was out of there. 15 minutes I turned my back and would not even face the Wall. Wouldn’t even face it. It took me about 15 minutes to get myself back together and then I was okay. Then they asked me to give a speech that night at a candlelight ceremony and I said, “Oh shit.” But, since I was asked, I was not going to refuse. Well that was it. So time went by. Last year the moving Wall, ¾ sized scale, came to Alexandra Cemetery in Evansville. Karen couldn’t go, she wasn’t feeling too great but she said, “But you really need to go,” so I said, “Okay.” So I knew some people there from the vet center that was going to be there; Sarah Paul, which was my counselor and other people, so I have a fatigue shirt that I have all fixed up with all my 13 hash marks. You get one for every six months overseas in a combat zone. All my ribbons, my awards and decorations, my service bars, unit citations. So, I’m walking up the long hill and I got about half way and I just parked and this veteran behind me, he parked about three feet to my side. He says, “You a Vietnam vet?” I said, “Yes sir.” I said, “You?” he says, “Yeah.” He says,
“You know anybody on the Wall?” and I said, “Yeah, eight people.” I said, “I helped bury them. I was a POW and they died in my camp.” He said, “Jesus Christ.” We hugged each other and just fell apart right there, halfway up. We sort of like, not literally held each other’s hand but we were there for each one of us’ support until we got right up to the Wall and that did it. I fell all over the place. So Sarah Paul met me. She walked in the tent, she gave me some soda to drink or something. I sort of got my grips back. She said, “Do you want me to help you etch the names on the paper from the Wall?” and I said, “Yeah,” but we get out to the first name and I’ll be go to hell if it isn’t Dennis Hammond. I said, “man, man!” That was it. 25 minutes later I’m sitting there and I’m literally coming apart, just literally. My nerves, they’re shot. I’m on end. I’m on needles and if you would have come up to me and said something to me and looked at me cross eyed, I could probably shoot somebody. I would go hunting, I don’t shoot at anything anymore. I go fishing. I will not…I refuse to buy any weapons because I don’t know if I’d really use it on somebody or not. I don’t know if I’d have it in me, much less to kill a deer or something. I don’t kill anything anymore. But, it took me a good 25 minutes just to get my composure back but during that 25 minutes I couldn’t write or print legibly and I mean my nerves were just totally shot but I keep going. Every time they have the Moving Wall that comes close, I keep going. Now this healing process, what they call a healing process, I have no idea. It’s not a glutton for punishment. I keep saying it’s to pay my respects for everybody that died up there but during the course of it, that’s probably the worst day of the whole year that I go through. Not a worst day in a bad sense of speaking. Feeling-wise, it’s the worst day that I can possibly go through. It’s very hard for me to bear getting up. The second time around, when I made that visit, the first 25 minutes or half hour is…that’s a big hurdle. I have a problem getting over that first jump; a real bad problem. After that, I’m sort of good to go as long as I don’t touch on anything real sensitive. I’m sort of good to go. After I get back home, I’m as cool, calm, collected. I mean, no problems. Then I’ll have a nightmare that night. I had a nightmare every night since I been here since Thursday night just for the reunion. People weren’t even captured with me, but just talking about things that happened. I’ll probably have a nightmare tonight. I wouldn’t doubt it. But it helps me, though. Not remembering, that’s not the…I don’t have a problem remembering anything. Like I said, the sequence may be a little out of whack a little bit, but the information is the best of my ability but I feel that people have a right to know. I mean, literally a right to know because too much has been held back from the general public over
this mess. Even to this day, they’re not going to tell you things that happened. There’s certain
things in the Kennedy Files that even haven’t been released. Why? Because the CIA shot this
man. He was shot from the front, not the back! How in the hell do you shoot someone from the
back and the back of their head blows out? It just don’t happen like that. If you get shot from
the front, the entering is the small part and the back side is sort of the zoom lens type. Don’t pee
on my foot and tell me it’s raining, people. I mean, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. That’s the way I
feel, you know? If you want to pee on my foot, then tell me you’re pee ing on my foot and by
God, that’s fine. But don’t tell me something else and I know different. I was very young when I
went to Vietnam. I had ideals and beliefs and I believed in apple pies, Chevrolet, and never
knew my mom. My Mother abandoned me when I was six months old. My Grandmother took
me. I lived with my Grandmother and Grandfather for 14 years in Evansville, Indiana. My Dad
would visit periodically. He worked out of town. He was a sheet metal worker. My real
Mother, in March of ’73 called me up. In Evansville they let me stay at the Executive Inn for
two weeks free, no charge, and they had floor shows for me every night, free meals, everything,
and I really, really appreciated the hospitality. I got a phone call and I say, “Hello?” “Yeah, this
is your mother.” I said, “What?” “Can I come and see you?” and I said, “I don’t care.” It’s the
first time I’ve ever seen my mother since I was six months old. Now what do I say to her?
“Hello, how are you doing?” It’s like a dialogue that I’m reading because I’ve never met this
person. This is new, this is a new transcript, this is a new scene in this movie and you have to
rehearse these lines, Jim, you know, because we’ve never had to do this movie before. So in
order to do this, I have to have the producers and the directors. They’ve got to write my lines for
me because I don’t know what to say to this lady. So, she says, “How have you been?” I said,
“How I been? I just got back from Vietnam, I’m almost 25 years old, and you’re asking me how
have I been?” She said, “Can you come out to supper tonight at the house?” and I said, “Yeah,
I’ll be there.” So then she says, “I want you to meet your half brothers and sisters, all four of
them,” and I went [laughs]. I says, “Can you, like, clue me in on what I’m supposed to say to
these people?” I said, “Why do you even bother now?” It got to the point during the
conversation that I had to ask that. I said, “Why are you bothering me with this now? If you
didn’t care before, at all before, why do you care now after the fact?” I said, “Why? Because I
stand out now and I’m a sour apple out of the barrel and it’s labeled a POW. Now you associate
your son with being a POW. You never associated me as a son before at all. You left me and
dad, I was six months old, and you walked out the door.” Well she didn’t have an answer. But you know what? Jimmy cracked corn and I don’t care. I really didn’t care if she had an answer for it. I knew she didn’t and I knew she wasn’t going to answer. I never seen her before, but I sort of knew what to ask her to put her on the spot. Why I wanted to do that? Well, I just felt I had to. But, it’s like a Ferrari; I can’t afford one, so I really don’t miss it. I’ve seen my mother one time in my entire life and I’ll be 52 years old next month. I don’t miss it. I really don’t have a desire to find out anymore. I live right now for my wife. My responsibilities in life are what I’ve got to do to have a sort of a comfortable and easy life and enjoy life and sit back and enjoy my grandkids. That’s all I care about anymore. I don’t care about anything else. I care about people. I don’t care about myself. That’s my problem. I care too much about other people than I do myself, my own health; I don’t care what happens to me. I’m not afraid of dying. I will not wear my seatbelt. I’m sorry, I cannot be confined. I’d rather eat the steering wheel and eat half of the dash and the windshield instead of being confined with a strap across my waist and one coming diagonally across the front of me, and I don’t have the access to move at will. I can’t handle that and I told Karen, “So be it. If I run into something that’s just not moveable and it just doesn’t want to move and I end up eating the whole front of the truck, then you have a nice life. I have insurance, you enjoy yourself, but I’m not wearing this damn seatbelt.” If I’m stopped I will kindly tell them exactly why I’m not wearing my seatbelt. I have nothing to hide from the police and what I’ll tell them is exactly the way it is. It’s the truth; that’s why I don’t wear my seatbelt. I can’t handle being confined; it’s a confinement. I been locked up, I been in leg irons, I been in handcuffs, I been tied up with [comma] wire and now you want me to travel across the [straights] wearing a freaking seatbelt? No. That’s a death wish for me. I mean, that’s burying me before I want to be buried. I can’t handle that.

SM: What would you say is the most important lesson we should take away from the Vietnam war?

JP: What should we…

SM: The most important lesson for posterity, for future generations. When they look back on the war, what should be the most important lesson they take away?

JP: Don’t take off to Canada or Sweden. If your country asks you and they have a draft, accept the responsibilities. Do what you have to do. If you have to do two years and get out, then fine; do it. But, own up to America. Pay your dues. I mean, I don’t feel sorry for these
people that deserted and took off to Sweden and Canada. They should have stayed there. I would have never let them back in the United States, never. We have a soft government. Public changed the war, public changed the government, public changed the rules and regulations. I just feel the lesson that I brought back from Vietnam and I learned, I learned responsibility. I learned to take control of my actions. I learned to accept my actions. I learned to accept my decisions and the process of making decisions. I was young, naïve, didn’t care about anything. I learned to care about everything. I learned to care about things that affect me, that affect others. We have that power. It may not work when people get in office when we elect them, it’s like a sales pitch, but you have to weigh out everything. I learned to be a better person coming out of the war. It didn’t take being a POW. I’ve talked to other people in this reunion that were sort of cocky little people when they went in there but when they got home they sort of did a little change over on how they do things. So, it affected everyone on

SM: This is CD two of the interview with Mr. Pfister. Sir, would you go ahead and tell the stories, when you got to Hanoi, about being put into solitary confinement?

JP: Well, the first time I went into solitary I threatened to whip a guard’s behind. It was sort of in the wrong type of environment, you know I’m behind the bars and he’s in control. But they put me in a little room and they hit me with rifle butts and kicked me a little bit and after five days they opened up the doors and said, “You can go back to your room, but are you going to break the camp rules again?” and I said, “Well there’s probably a good chance I probably will.” It wasn’t a month later I was taking a shower; actually it was a tub filled with water and you just take a bucket and pour water over your head, and I was whistling and the guard told me not to whistle and I said, “It’s like a jet flying over’s going to hear me whistling?” So he walked back out and I started whistling again. He told me to stay quiet, I started whistling again and he opened up the door and I threw my fist at him and I motioned at him to come a little closer because I was going to knock the hell out of him. Well, 15 minutes later I’m in a room, this time except they put me in leg irons and kept me in leg irons for five days. I couldn’t move my feet in and out on the bar. The bar was stationary that went behind my back on the Achilles’ tendon and I had U bolts that went over the top of my feet that connected to the bar in the back but I could not slide my feet back and forth. So when I turned over on the bed, my feet were like two feet apart and I had to move them in that order. Well at the end of five days they opened up the door and they said, “We’re taking you back to your room,” and they took off the leg irons and I stood

46
up and because of the pressure of that bar on my Achilles’ tendon for five days, I mean I fell
over. I took one step and that was it. So, the buddies from my room had to come over and carry
me over back to my room and by a couple of days later I could start walking again. But they
brought in one day our shaving equipment; a bowl with some water and like a Bic razor and a
little, bitty bar of soap to sort of lather up with and they wouldn’t let you grow any hair on your
face. Well, I got tired of their rules and we had to shave about once every, I don’t know, five-six
days and I mean that was just too long to go in between shaves. Well I had sort of a little
moustache and this, I think it was like an NVA private equivalent to a private, he looked at me
and he said, “Oh Pfister,” he says, “You have moustache.” He said, “Shave,” and I said, “I don’t
think I’m going to shave my moustache today, I think I’m going to let it grow.” Well he walked
out of my room and went and got like a corporal. The corporal came in and you know, had a
little bit more pull than a private, and he says in so many words like, “You need to get rid of
your moustache here. Its not allowed,” and I said, “I don’t think so. I’m going to grow my
moustache.” He went out and got a sergeant, NVA Army. He come in furious; of course I was
always known to give them a little bit of heartache everyday and he was screaming. He said,
“Shave your moustache.” He said, “You’re going to go back into solitary,” and I said, “I don’t
think I’m going to shave my moustache today, or the next time, or the next time,” and that was it.
He went and got the lieutenant. We call this guy, lieutenant, “Meep, Meep.” He walked around;
he sort of didn’t bend his knees all the way when he walked and he had on the old time, in the
‘60s, the beetle boots? He’d clomp around in these things. He didn’t know how to walk in these
things, like trying to be Joe Cool. We called him Meep Meep. Well he went to go get Meep
Meep over in the chateau. We called it the chateau. Here he come. Well, from the time the
sergeant left to go get the lieutenant, I reached underneath the bed and pulled out a razor and dry
shaved my moustache off and tossed the razor out the back window. Man those doors flew open
in a rage and he pointed to me and said, “Pfister!” and looked at me and I was clean shaven. He
screamed at the guard for bothering him. Those were my ways of resisting. I did the very best I
could to really piss these people off and I did. I mean, hell, in March of ’73 they were glad to get
rid of me and I did this in south Vietnam too. Let me tell you what I did in south Vietnam. I’ll
say this on tape. It was raining and outside our gate we had like a woven fence around our
compound and we had an opening in the front where our main gate was and right ten feet out
from that was like a little guard shack all made out of bamboo and they had a little place of shelf
where they could lay their rifle and read their propaganda. So it was raining. Well, he was out there masturbating so I like crawled up to the gate and the word for, “What are you doing,” in Vietnamese is lum yai and I jumped up and screamed, “Lum yai!” and took him by surprise. His weapon fell in the mud and let me tell you something; if he could have shot me, I’d have never made it my full POW time. He’d have blew my brains out. I just ruined his whole evening. None of the guard personnel or anybody liked me at all. The camp commander came down and said, “I’m sorry, we can’t feed you your full ration of rice on the supply run,” and I said, “Fine. You don’t want to feed me, chief, you can let me the hell go. You caught me!” But April of ’70 rolled around, remember earlier I told you I reenlisted for three years in April of ’67? April of ’70 comes around, my three year tour was up. Now they don’t know about involuntary extension but I says, “Hey, yo!” and the commander says, “Anybody have any questions?” and I said, “Yeah, I do.” He said, “What?” and I said, “I’m officially out of the Army today, chief. You can let me go.” He said, “What?” I said, “My tour is up.” I ragged this guy. I said, “Hey, you can’t keep me. I’m not in the Army anymore.” Nothing worked that I said to these people but they got the ideas that this guy is not a progressive prisoner. They called me an unprogressive prisoner and I said, “Yes.” And Meep Meep, that day of the moustache incident in North Vietnam, he looked at me and pointed his finger at me and he said, “You know, you’re my enemy,” and I stood at him and looked at him, like bored a hole right through him with my eyes and I says, “And you know what? You’re my damn enemy,” and I says, “If I see you in the States, you’re a statistic.” I said, “You think about this, chief. Don’t let me see you walking around. Don’t ever let me see you walking around. My truck’s going to lose its steering mechanism, frontward and backwards and sideways possibly if I decide to go 50 miles an hour, hit the brakes, and turn the wheel and just sort of like side swipe you that way, we can do that too. We’ll make sure we sort of grind it in a little bit.” No, I told him, I said, “And you’re my enemy. Don’t forget that.” And I told him basically, “If a chance, I’ll shoot you. Give me the chance back on active duty and put me back in choppers and I see you out there in a rice paddy, you’re history. You’re history. That’s the name of the game, bud. It’s either you or me, one of the two. There is no called stalemates with me. We stare each other and we’re enemies and we know it, but we both have families? No, it don’t work like that. You’re my enemy. I’m going to get you before you get me. I don’t feel sorry for nobody in this war.
SM: Did other prisoners do these types of things?

JP: No.

SM: To resist?

JP: Oh, one of the camp rules over in North Vietnam was bring no foreign objects into the room, i.e. bricks, metal, sticks, I mean, whatever. The rules in between the rooms were sort of semi plasterous type material, like paper machet except a little bit heavier, a little bit more solid. So, I brought in a piece of wire. I made a hand drill out of the wire and I got it going through the wall and I could drill me a little hole right through this sort of porous wall and I could knock on the wall and tell them to put your ear up to the wall and we can talk and the voice will carry through that little hole. Well, the guard caught me and he opened up the door and he says, “Pfister, what are you doing?” and I looked at him and I said, “Jesus Christ, what the hell do you think I’m doing? I’m drilling a hole through the wall. What’s it look like?” I said, “Is this hard to figure out what I’m doing?” I just let him have it. I got tired of these people. I was really getting fed up, so I said, “That’s fine, enemy. You ask me a stupid question, by God you’re going to get one hell of a stupid answer.” So that was my way of getting back at them because I knew escape was virtually improbable without underground help like Major Row. Major Row was later killed; actually assassinated chances are.

SM: What were the repercussions of you drilling the hole? Were you punished?

JP: No, but they threatened me with solitary again. I said, “Well, it’s really nothing different is it?” I said, “Hell, I been there twice already. I’m sort of getting used to it. All the quietness!” Hell, I did like the old prison movies; I’d take a something and scratch a great, big mark in the wall, I mean like a foot and a half high just to mark my days. Not this small stuff, none of this small scale stuff. Oh no. I made sure I marred the holy hell out of the walls. I just gouged the walls. They said, “What are you doing?” I said, “This is the number of days I been in here.” I knew how many days I was in there, hell. That was my way of just really pissing them off and I did a good job of that. We had three guys in my camp in 1969 when Garwood was wearing a black arm band mourning the death of Ho Chi Minh, three guys were released. They were called progressive prisoners. They followed the rules like it was clockwork. Never gave the guards a lick of problem or anything. Me, on the other hand, it was my nature to do it. I had
to do it. It was something I had to do because I knew without help I wasn’t getting out of that place. Earlier, in 1966, they had two people that escaped. They were gone five days and it took the guards three and \( \frac{1}{2} \) hours to bring them back. 1968 Dennis Hammond and Earl Clyde Weatherman tried to escape. Earl Clyde Weatherman was shot in the head and Dennis Hammond was brought back with a shot in the calf of his leg. He was put in bamboo type stocks for 60 days, food ration cut, bamboo stocks like the old Pilgrim days. Laid down, pulled the thing down on you with the groove cut like that, your feet fit in it, and lock it in and that’s where you park for 60 days. So, without underground help, it’s virtually improbable. Not impossible, but its improbable. We were in places where double canopy, triple canopy, forged rivers with some with strong currents, some with medium type current, Montagnard villages from one end of the damn place to the other, a bamboo gong system to alert other villages that, “Hey, there’s a prisoner on the loose.” Oh yeah, all of the above, all of the above, and we were probably out 40 miles or so from the beach or from the coast, South China Sea, at least, in dense jungle. That’s where we stayed for 37 months before we went up to North Vietnam. So did I learn anything from my experiences? Yeah, yeah I did. Yeah I did. I don’t take life for granted anymore. Sometimes I make rash decisions and really don’t think about certain things. Sometimes I ponder over decisions. Sometimes it’s hard to even make a decision; do I really want to do this? Do I really want to buy this? Do I really need it? And I end up not even going to get it. I’ll think about it, seriously, I’ll think about it for four days. It’ll just fry my brain thinking about it and then I end up not even getting it. Then if I do get something, I don’t even like it. Not satisfied with it. I’m still in decision processing even to this day. Sometimes it’s difficult to make a decision just because of the past. Sometimes things sort of carved its own way into my decision thinking process and made it sometimes more difficult for me to come upon a decision, sometimes a little bit more difficult than other times. It just depends on the situation and the mood I’m in. I’m not a real moody person. I’m a happy person. I don’t get mad at people a lot of times. Most of the time I don’t. I’m courteous to people, even kids that come out of the military now, “Yes sir, no mam.” I call them with respect, “Mr. Davis.” If someone says, “Please call me Sam, please call me Tom,” then I do so. Unless they tell me…I gave pep talks to the high school in Grayville, Illinois to the high school students, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grades, junior high and high school one time, and I says, “I will answer all questions. No questions are barred. You will receive an answer on all of your questions. But,” I says, “Don’t
be surprised and don’t be offended if I say ‘yes mam’ and ‘no sir’ or ‘no mam’ and ‘yes sir’.” I said, “You’re my future.” I said, “I’m going to give you that respect. I owe it to you.” So if a girl raises her hand, I said, “Yes mam? What question do you have?” she said, “You don’t have to call me mam,” and I said, “Yes I do. Yes I do.” So to this day, if I go to give a class or a pep talk or whatever kind of title you want to throw on it, I give them all due respect. I don’t care what their age is. There’s no rules that said I can’t call a 7th grader, ‘yes sir’ or ‘no mam’. There’s no rules that said I can’t do that. Its just respect. They’re there, they want to know, they ask the principle if they can get me there, they have a yearning for information that they have never heard before, so if they have enough sense and education to ask the principle for this that and the other, then they sure have…they’re sure going to get the respect from me that they’re due. They’re there to learn something, information, history, and I let them…I give them the information and I do not say, “Well that’s a little sensitive. I can’t talk about that.” I don’t do that. The kid said, “Have you ever killed anybody?” and I said, “Yes.” Now there may be a little thing called discretion, but I don’t think its any worse than watching a bang-bang, shoot ‘em up on television or R rated or a sci-fi with blood, guts, and tears and teeth hanging all over the windshield and stuff like that. What’s the difference? What’s the difference from sci-fi or reality? What is the difference; just the titles, but the special effects are there and it gives you the impression that this is what happened versus realism. There’s not much of a difference. If kids are willing to watch it, then they’re willing to listen. That’s the way I feel. I may be wrong. If I am wrong, if I stand corrected, I appreciate the person telling me, “I think you’re wrong.” That’s their opinion. If everybody thought the same it would be a boring place to live, wouldn’t it?

SM: Anything else you’d like to talk about?
JP: I don’t know of any other questions. I conduct the interviews by question and answer. It’s very…it’s uncomfortable, it’s not difficult, its uncomfortable to start from day one and finish with the very last day. I may have information or details that may not have been asked, but until part of that subject comes around into focus I can remember back and then expand on maybe what you’ve been asking me but if it doesn’t sort of hit a little, some type of point around there, then its sort of hard for me to jiggle brain and engage memory here. There’s so many things. I can go on for I think literally days. If I sat down and really, really taxed my brain really well I could start from day one and finish in sequence of events, in chronological order.
SM: Well let me ask you this; have you read Frank Anton’s book?

JP: Yes.

SM: What did you think of it?

JP: Gospel. Well written. Not to be taken lightly. And I signed one of the books to Valerie, that is a student. I can’t remember who gave it to me to sign, but I put, “To Valerie,” and I said, “Frank’s information contained in his book here, I said “you can kindly take it to gospel” because I was with Anton the entire time of captivity and everything that he witnessed I witnessed also. I may have witnessed things that he didn’t even see, but it is gospel and please don’t take this…it’s not to be taken lightly.” It’s not to be taken to where it’s not to be in belief because it is true what Anton said.

SM: Someone mentioned to me this weekend that one of the things that Anton used to do to cope was he’d cover himself with a poncho or something?

JP: A blanket.

SM: A blanket? But literally for days he’d cover his head.

JP: He’d sit on the bed, pull his knees up, and cover up. It’s sometimes not a way to cope. Its sometimes trying to hide from what’s actually going on; shut yourself out. The thing with PTSD, this doesn't have anything to do with pulling a blanket over your head and sheltering yourself from the so-called outside, and forget about things. It may be more into coping with what’s going on. When a person first steps foot in country, and it does not have to be a helicopter unit or crewman, it does not have to be a ground pounder, it does not have to be a tanker, it does not have to be an artillery man or a mortar man, it can be a clerk, but if a clerk’s going to be in a sensitive environment i.e. due to artillery or mortar attack from the enemy, they start building a brick wall around themselves. It’s a defense mechanism and everyone has it. It does not have to be related to war but it happens especially in war. So, this is where your defense mode kicks in and you start…you can’t let anything get close to you. You build a little…the brick keeps going over your head and all you do is keep an eyelet out for each eye. You can’t let anything in, though, because that will destroy your defense mechanism and you don’t want to do that because the thing is this was all survival, every day survival and you’re building up your bricks and you’ve got a moat so nobody can get across the moat and attack your defense. Well, problem is it works for you for your tour. Then when you get home you have no compassion. You don’t even want your wife to get close to you anymore; not like you used to.
before you went. This is still defending yourself. Now it’s hard for you to tear the wall down.
You got it all built up, and now you don’t know how to get it back down. That’s where
everything starts kicking in and you can’t figure out, “It wasn’t like this before I went over. Why
am I doing this now? What’s happening to me?” So if no one brings this up, you’re going to go
through the rest of your life not figuring out what the hell is going on and I knew. I sought help
and they told me I had PTSD and I said, “Duh, what the hell’s that?” It’s a fancy name for shell
shock or battle fatigue is basically what it is. Symptoms are the same, prettier name. As the
years go by they throw fancier names to the same symptoms, okay? Did a Ph.D. figure this thing
out? Yeah, where did this come from? But, it came about so that’s what they called it. It’s not a
problem with our people and I don’t fault the people that come out of Vietnam that this is
happening to. It’s not their fault. They chose to go, yeah. Our government said, “You’re
going,” they went, but no one tells you, even in the World War’s I and II, Korean War, they
don’t tell you this is going to happen. There’s no forewarning, there’s no after warning, there’s
no after help unless you seek it, unless you apply. Now that’s a damn shame. It really is. It’s a
crying shame and the government knows this and most of our politicians up there have never
been in the service. That’s what fries me and yes, I have a really bad problem with trying to
figure out things on what our politicians do and they cut back this and they cut back that but
they’ll give themselves a 30,000 dollar a year raise because they make the rules. Well, it just
don’t sit with me real well. There’s people out there that need help and we’re out supporting the
rest of the entire world and we can’t even take care of our own people in house. That’s bad, and
why does our government think that our people have an attitude problem? Well my God, sit
back and think about this, people! Not our people, the people up in Washington. Sit down and
really ponder about this stuff. Take it to heart; take it to heart what people are saying to you.
Listen to the people. Just don’t say, “Yes,” just to get elected. My God, I don’t like politics. I
never have, I never will. Yes I vote; you might as well go vote for a car salesman and listen to
the best…who’s going to give me the best sales pitch and the biggest discount and rebate on a
vehicle. That’s what it boils down to. So I find myself fighting this system that I have
absolutely no control over. If you vote them into office you have no control over them once they
get into office. They can’t promise you a damn thing. “You vote for me and I’ll make…” no
you ain’t going to make sure this happens! If the house, senate, or congress doesn’t want it to
happen, slim, it ain’t going to happen. It just don’t work like that. I’ve learned a gob of stuff
since I’ve been out of Vietnam, and like I said, I spent six and ½ years there. I make a pun about
March of ’73 rolling around and I know we’re going home.

SM: Why don’t you discuss that, when you found out you were going home?
JP: We found out around January that we were going home in February and they broke
us down into groups. Well February rolled around and my group of 32 or 34 people, we found
out that we sort of welched on this. I think the south Vietnamese government sort of welched on
the peace agreement deals, fell through, so they cancelled our release date. I was supposed to
come home in February, yes sir, February. It didn’t happen until March, March the 5th. They
say that it was because the south Vietnamese welched on the agreements. Party line again, it
goes back to party line. But, I make a joke of my release because I had been there; I went over in
November ’66 and I leave in March of ’73, six and ½ years later without stepping foot on the
CONUS, continental United States, and I say, “Jesus Christ, all I needed was six more months
and I could have applied for citizenship!” I sort of, I joke about a lot of things so that I don’t
have to cry about it. I got too much to cry about so I joke about it. Crying doesn’t do any good;
laughing helps me get over it. That’s my therapy, my own in-house. I confront my own
problems in my own way and I hide it very well from people. Now you know my secrets. A lot
of people don’t. A lot of people say, “Jesus Christ, you deal with this pretty good!” No I don’t,
no I don’t. I deal with it sometimes in a really bad, really bad fashion; not with people. Its just
dealing with everything that has happened; the deaths, the burying, the ‘wake me when it’s over,’
the enemy not releasing the people when they’re not going to cause anymore harm to anyone
else. “Let them go. Let the German nurses go. They’re neutral to everyone. Let them go.
They’re not going to pick up a damn mortar or a hand grenade and blow your ass up. Let them
go! They’re sick! They’re not capable of conducting a war against you anymore, let them go.”
And they let them die for what? They let them die. I have a really rough time handling this,
really, really bad time. When I go out here to this, my first reunion, I’m really, really glad that I
made this. I think it really helped me. I talk to people and I B.S. and I laugh and stuff and I
don’t bring up stuff because why? I’m not asked to and I’m not going to force information on
people that they don’t want to hear. I don’t do that. I’m not a celebrity, I’m a number out of 782
or 781. I’m a number. It happened, I got caught up in it, I was a victim of circumstance. It
happens in every war. Its nothing new, it just happened in a very unpopular damn war. But if
I…Bill Reynolds says, “Hey, why don’t you get with the gentleman here and tell him you want
an interview?” I said, “I don’t work like that, Bill. I can’t do that.” I said, “If he wants to ask me for one I’ll be very more than glad to answer anything that gentleman asks me but I will not in no way, shape, or form throw this at anyone without them personally asking me. I don’t work like that.” I’m not a hero, I’m just a little ordinary infantryman, PFC, that got wrong place at the wrong time…no, the wrong place at the right time. We went out there to support the infantry. It was just sort of the wrong place. There were too many damn people and too many weapons out there that shot us down. But, I don’t regret it happening. It helped me be a stronger person sometimes, it really does.

SM: How did you guys cope with some of the physical problems; things like mosquitoes? I heard horror stories about mosquitoes even with netting, let alone out in the open.

JP: I’ve had 21 cases I guess, 23 cases of malaria. They gave us quinine tablets every now and then if you had malaria already. They didn’t go for the preventive giving you quinine tablets. They gave you quinine tablets after you already got the attack. That’s that cart pulling the horse again. In Vietnam, before everything monthly, you had to take quinine tablets. Supposed to, okay, they passed out quinine tablets on a monthly basis to hopefully ward off…

SM: Prophylactic use.

JP: …the anapolese mosquito, which is the carrier of…it’s the female mosquito. This was after the fact, after you already got the attack then they come down with quinine tablets so they’re sort of a little bit primitive in their medicine ways. Any other disease that came along, we were susceptible. We were so anemic. Usually you can tell if you’re anemic if you pull down your bottom eyelid and if it’s real red, you’re healthy. If it’s sort of a light pink you’re short on vitamin deficiency, you’re short on just about all sorts of deficiencies. They call it anemia, anemic. Then we had the problem of edema. When edema starts collecting in, it’s a collection of fluid, you have to lay off of salt. If you don’t, you’re going to blow up with fluid which we had a person die of that. One day we had a fluke infection come through. Everyone got pustules on the palms of their hands, their fingers. Now there was this selected few of us in the camp who had to use curved knives to go chop wood. We had to go chop wood with rags wrapped around our hands. We could hardly hold on to the handle of the knives to chop wood but that was our livelihood. We had to have wood to cook our rice. Let me tell you something; our hands would bleed. We couldn’t even make a fist. I couldn’t even pick a spoon up off of a table. I could just about drag a pencil across a table if I had to, but trying to pick up something?
Couldn’t handle it. There were pustules from one end of your hand to the other; fingers, in
between, palms of your hands. Not on top. So they gave us a sulfur type mixture heated with
another herb. It made like a pumice type of texture and we’d rub that all over our hands. One
day they just, I mean after about a week or so, just went away. Just [poof noise]. Left scars on
some people, but it went away. That was the last time we ever had it.

SM: Did the guards suffer it too?

JP: No. But we had to fight…well we all had intestines naturally. We had the filthy
conditions, we had the abscesses or whatever people call boils. These were like common things,
daily things. Just a normal, everyday, run of the mill, catch every damn thing that comes through
the air because we had no…our antibodies were just shot down to a very minimal, or minimum,
nothing to fight off anything.

SM: Did you guys ever get over flown by some of the aircraft that were either using…

JP: Defoliants?

SM: …defoliants or the insecticides to kill mosquitoes?

JP: Not over our camps, no, but we flew into areas that defoliants had been dropped.

SM: When? After or before you were captured?

JP: Yeah, but while I was in camp, no. Not that I know of. We didn’t have anything
coming over the top of us spraying that literally fell on top of us.

SM: Did you ever have to traverse through defoliated areas?

JP: No, because they were too open. Most of the areas we went through were thick
foliage. Sometimes, you know, the old saying, ‘they had to pump the sunlight through?’ I’ve
been in areas where they almost had to pump sunlight through. Triple canopy, dense; the stuff is
thick. I mean, sunlight is far and few between. Other places it was double canopy, sort of open
spots between the trees and stuff like that so your smoke discipline, when we were cooking,
really, really, had to be down to a minimum and they tried to enforce that. How in the hell
you…the ground dries up, it cracks. Ground is not going to stay moist forever to where you can
keep molding it into a nice, packed, no pores in it for anything for it to leak out of. Duh! I
mean, stuff’s going to dry out and crack and stuff’s going to leak out. “Hey, you got smoke,”
well duh, no joke! So we have to go get more dirt. But defoliants, no.

SM: Or insecticides?

JP: No.
SM: A lot of aircraft otherwise going over head or near you?
JP: Yeah, we could hear a lot of activity off in the distance and sometimes close by. Sometimes the strafings by jets were fairly close, like 1500 to 2000 meters or something. That’s fairly close dropping bombs and stuff. I wouldn’t want it any closer. They were one time though, by a B-52. Damn near dropped it right on top of us. 1000 meters away, that’s close.
SM: This is in south Vietnam?
JP: Yeah. Real close. When you hear the boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, and the ground shaking below you, that’s close; real close and trees are cracking from shrapnel, that’s close. They’re running you through the jungle in no earthly damn direction to run you. Just running you just for the hell of it, just for the sake of it.
SM: So the Vietnamese were scared, too?
JP: Oh yeah, yeah. I said to myself, I said, “Well ain’t this a kicker? I’m going to get killed by my own people here before I even get out of Vietnam.” That’s what I thought, really. I thought we were going to get caught in one of these carpet bombing runs and that was going to be it. In a carpet bombing they may have three or four 52s staggered and wherever the bombs leave off from the first one, the second one picks up and right down the line and wherever the second one stops the third one picks up and so forth and I mean literally, they’d start carpet bombing. Stuff in its way is gone. I mean, it’s gone and its like they drop a gazillion, I mean a gazillion. You hear a [knocking repeatedly] that much that quick. They’re coming out by the 100s. Oh man, it’s an awesome sound, awesome. Its something that you’ve never, you’d know it if you ever heard it. I mean its just like [knocks repeatedly] just like that. They’ve got this stuff down pat just like a sheet of music when they do these carpet bombings. Just like Chopin wrote the whole thing for them, just [makes noise].
SM: Did anybody ever try to take advantage of those opportunities to escape?
JP: No. Where were we going to go?
SM: If you were running and the Vietnamese were running at the same time and they’re panicking and they’re not able to watch everybody and keep up.
JP: That’s right, but when it’s all over and they see one person missing, the bamboo gongs start and you better dig you a damn hole somewhere. They’d be gone for seven or eight days and it would take an hour and ½ to bring you back and then you’ve got to be punished as soon as they bring you back.
SM: Well how did they punish them usually when they brought them back when people try to escape?

JP: Stocks.

SM: The stocks?

JP: Sometimes the Montagnards get a hold of you. They’ll shoot you before the guards get you.

SM: The Montagnards would?

JP: Yes. The Montagnards were pushed out of the plains because they were sort of like inferiority or inferior breed of people or society of people. So, the plains people pushed them up into the mountains. Well, the Viet Cong and NVA said, “Listen, you don’t want to help us, you’re history. You’re not going to have a family, you’re not going to have crops, you’re not going to have squat.” Well they were caught in a rock and a hard place. They get a hold of you before the guards get to you, you’re history. They’ll shoot you. Either cross bows, spear, or they’ll shoot you with a rifle, one of the three. Or, you may hit a trap, a pungy pit or something. And, so you see the sun coming up. So what. How far do you think you’re going to go in 40 miles of damn jungle? It’s a long way, long way. A very long way. It could take you months to go. What if you had ten miles to go in the jungle but you had to forge rivers, you had to climb mountains? ten miles is going to be like 150. If you don’t know which route to take that’s not booby trapped or which route to take that’s not lined up with Montagnard villages or guard posts along the way, where do you go? You’re just going to run around the jungle in circles.

SM: And then you’ve got wildlife?

JP: Yes.

SM: Were there many problems with wildlife in the camps?

JP: Hell, I ran into a 70 pound leopard. I was sitting on the bed talking to one of my buddies and I said, “Jesus Crimeny,” and he said, “What was that?” and I said, “Well, I thought I saw a chicken go by,” and we had a trail that went down to our two hole latrine, but off to the left about 20 feet, 25 feet down there was a little small bamboo growth. The center of it was sort of like open and I kept saying, “Jesus Crimeny” and then he says, “What is it?” and this is the second time around there and I says, “I really don’t know, but I’ll tell you what. You wait right here and I’ll be right back and I’ll tell you.” So here Pfister goes tip toeing down the trail and I walk right inside this bamboo grove, like an idiot, and I’m face to face, less than the distance
between me and you, less than three feet away from a 70-80 pound leopard and I said, “Pfister, you’re history. This thing’s going to rip you to pieces,” and I guess I startled it and it startled the hell out of me and it went one way and I just about ripped bamboo trees down, ripe bamboo trees. You don’t rip down a ripe bamboo tree. I mean, these things were stronger than nails. Let me tell you something, I slithered my way through these like I mowed right over them. Well, Isaiah Macmillan, black guy, he was out in front of his hooch and I ran around the back side real quick and just so nonchalantly and very calm I says, “Hey Mac,” he says, “Yeah?” and says, “If you look to your left you’re going to see a leopard running towards you.” I didn’t raise my voice, nothing. He went, “Shit!” I swear to God he jumped five feet off the ground on a bamboo tree and just hung there. Then, the guard’s coming down brandishing their rifles pointing them everywhere and he said, “Jesus Christ, the guards are going to kill us!” They come down here, rifles pointing everywhere trying to get a line on this leopard to kill it. I said, “My God!” there were three or four of them down in our compound just waving rifles all over the place and I said, “My God,” but Macmillan says, “Jesus Christ, Pfister! Why didn’t you tell me a leopard’s coming?” I said, “Mac? I don’t need to yell and scream. You’re three feet from me. All I got to say is ‘excuse me, there’s a leopard coming’” and he turned around and I swear to God he turned snow white. Another time, they kept the five black guys separate from our camp because they heard in the United States that the black people were a suppressed society and they were not given the opportunities that the other people were getting, so they expounded on that end of it. The guard came down one day and woke us up and said, “Pfister, go over there and wake the other guys up.” I said, “Alright,” so I walked in and stood at the end of their bed and I looked up and all the way across the beam, the bamboo beam, in the back was a damn constrictor, 17-18 feet long. So I grabbed each one’s foot and said, “Hey, yo, time to wake up. Nap time’s over. Hey! Let’s wake up dudes. Nap time’s over.” And I got all five of them up and I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you’ll kindly look to your rear you’ll see a snake just as long as the damn bed is, or as wide as the bed is,” and all five of these black guys looked up and saw this damn constrictor and let me tell you something; the front wall, they had a little bamboo wall here, an aisle way, and then the end of their bed. All five of them ran through this wall, a five foot wall that was standing. They said, “God Pfister, why didn’t you let us know?” I said, “I did let you know! There was a damn snake longer than the damn bed up above you,” and they’re all deathly afraid of snakes but I made it like, “Well ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be landing at Dulles Air
SM: So they kept whites and blacks separate?
JP: Yes.
SM: But that was for sleeping. Did you have interaction with them in other contexts as far as during the day did you interact with them?
JP: Sure, sure, yeah. So they took off on what they heard in the US and they sort of expanded on that little area there as far as black race, white race.
SM: But was there any racial tension amongst the prisoners?
JP: No. I didn’t like one of them, but it was my own personal… I got along with everybody except one but I didn’t cause any waves. We were in a bad enough position the way it was, much less causing any fights or any animosities that you may have. Keep your feelings to yourself, just get through this stuff. Let’s do this as a team instead of, so. But I had my own…and to this day I feel, I’m for everyone and all providing they can show me they’re willing to help themselves. When someone comes up to me and says, “Give me,” and “You owe me,” no. It doesn’t work. I have never had anybody give me anything. I have worked hard, diligently, for everything I have, everything to include my marriage. This is my 4th one. She’s a pot of gold. She’s my support. She’s there when I need her and I wouldn’t have it any other way. The other three just didn’t work out, so if you want to you keep on going until it does work out or stay at that status quo at ground level and don’t get out, don’t proceed out of square one. That’s your choice. I don’t like being single. I like having someone to come home to and enjoy life with. It makes it very pleasurable. I’m sure you know.
SM: Do you think that it was the experiences that you endured that had a negative effect on your marriages?
JP: No. Not really. My first marriage I was married to before I went to Vietnam. I got home, she said she wanted to start a family, I got her pregnant, and she took off. So I called her up and I said, “Excuse me, if you want to come back, that’s fine. If you don’t, fine, let me know because I’m not sitting here waiting on anything.” She said, “Well I’m not sure,” I said, “Sign the papers when you get them in the mail.” Now she was pregnant. I didn’t see my son until he was 17. She held that against me because she kept wanting to remarry me and I said, “I’m sorry,
I don’t do exes.” My son and I get along fantastic. My grandson, my granddaughter, they’re priceless. We call him...well he’s James Frederick Pfister IV, we call him Jay. He loves Paw Paw. We’re buddies. I’ve already taken him fishing and boating with me and camping and we just get together like two peas in a pod. Second marriage, lasted 11 and ½ years. I had a step daughter that died of drug overdose at 22. She was seven years old or so when I started...when I got married. Her little boy was three years old, going on four. Lauri got in trouble at 13 years old, started doing drugs. I had to go out early in the morning, while I was in the military and go find her and I had to report for duty at 4:30-5:30 in the morning and I’m out looking for her daughter. I got no support from her in 11 and ½ years so I said, “That’s it. I quit. You win.” I filed for divorce. My 3rd marriage was on rebound. I was 37, she was 20. I ended up babysitting and I says, “Not going to work out.” Couldn’t balance a checkbook, couldn’t even buy groceries, wanted to party all the time, and I told her, I says, “Do not use drugs.” She used drugs and I said, “That’s it.” I said, “The other stuff, I could handle. The drug stuff, you promised me. No.” I filed for divorce and I said, “That’s it. Once you use drugs, you’re always going to use it,” so I filed for divorce and I met Karen. April 23rd was our 7th wedding anniversary. Been with her ever since and love her to death. We work as a team, we think as a team, we plan as a team, and I think that’s the way it’s supposed to be. She has her business. I work in Evansville. She always has supper for me when I get home. I mean, she’s there for me. When I have a bad day, she’s “What’s wrong?” She has a daughter that graduated from a law school. She is now assistant district attorney in New Orleans. My son’s a fireman in Evansville, Indiana. I like life now. I like it. No disturbances, no tidal waves, no volcanoes bursting. I sort of go ballistic and make rash decisions, but they’ve turned out to be the best decisions. You know, like after 11 and ½ years do I want to give up a marriage? You bet your booties. So I haven’t suffered from any of the decisions or had any major setbacks. It’s turned out good, so I’m glad things have sort of been programmed for me my entire life because I’m actually now in a very happy stage of my life and I plan on staying this way, I really do, I really do.

SM: That’s a good note to end the interview on. Have anything else you want to add?

JP: No, everyone have a nice life. I appreciate your time and effort and the people that’s going to be reading this or be listening to it, you have a nice life and nice talking to you.

SM: Alright, well thank you Mr. Pfister. This ends the interview.