STEPHEN MAXNER: This is oral history interview #1 with Mr. James Padgett on the 29th of October 1999 at 9:30 AM in the interview room of the Southwest Collections building. Conducting the interview is Steve Maxner, and Mr. Padgett if you would please begin by just telling us briefly about your childhood, where you were born, where you grew up, what your folks did, where you went to high school, and take us to your decision to go into the Marine Corp and go to Vietnam.

JAMES PADGETT: Well I was adopted in Amarillo, Texas and the adopted family...I come from, originated, in [Nye]. My brothers and sisters were scattered to the four winds in foster homes. I was the tailgate, the last one born. Out of those I have three other brothers; one older brother is deceased. Out of those four we have two Korean veterans, and two Vietnam veterans. Harvey, the brother, just older then I, is a non-veteran stationed in Thailand. My other two brothers are Korean veterans. My oldest brother is a Korean veteran and is deceased at this time. I have one in Plainview that’s a highly decorated Korean veteran and a very, very, very kind person and he’s often asked me what’s the difference between ‘Nam and Korea and I say, “Well y’all stopped it at I believe it’s the 26th parallel. We didn’t stop nothing. Fred and Austine Padgett were my folk’s names. Come from pretty poor background, but very blessed, hard working, honest people. Unfortunately, at about age 12 to 13, my folks divorced. So, I did come from a divorcement, on both sides, adopted and the folks that raised me. Between my father and mother, my mother achieved a fifth grade education; my dad went to sixth grade. But as far as managing, my mother ran a tight ship. My dad could do fractions in his head; they were very
hard working, honest people. Most of my life I spent in Lubbock. I was born in Amarillo, and raised as the only child being adopted. Hard working...we didn’t live extravagantly, but we never starved either. I was raised to work from...started working as soon as I rounded the fourth grade. On my time off during the summer, I worked on the farm, my aunt and uncle’s farm, chopping cotton, working farm equipment, cattle, hogs, chicken, rabbits, the whole nine yards. I’m a jack-of-all-trades. My dad passed on and my mother passed on one month after I was discharged from service. My dad lived three years there after. I have a wonderful wife, Charla. We were high school sweethearts. If it hadn’t been for her support, her family support and my mother’s support, and my family’s support, it would have been pretty tough for me through boot camp and the ‘Nam experience. I come from a long line of veterans. My uncle on my dad’s side was a World War I veteran, a [double one]. He was the one who taught me and instilled in me the discipline it took to fire a weapon and how to take care of a rifle and a pistol and he was a squeaky clean person and I thought a lot of him and he instilled in me a lot of patriotism. I wanted to be a lot like my Uncle Frank as far as a GI, and he was a decorated World War I veteran. He’d been gassed and he survived and so that’s the beginning I guess you could say way back with my military history just as to what I will probably be sometimes in my life.

SM: How about your father? Did he serve at all in the military? 

JP: No. My dad was an alcoholic so he told me he was too old; too young for World War I and too old for World War II. We’ll just leave it at that. Somewhere around I would say the seventh grade, I was older than most kids because I flunked twice already so I got my driver’s license first when I was a little bit...my wife says I was really a little bit more mature; looking back I probably was. I was at the library one day, and I’m not much of a reader - I am more now then I was at times previous - but I saw a book in a bookshelf. It said Marines and I had heard about the Marine Corp and I can’t remember if Kennedy had been shot then or not but I picked the book up and I have always loved spit and shine. My mother was well organized. My dad was quite the opposite and my mother kept a squeaky home. I like the spit and shine and the rigidity because I have to have boundaries and so I picked that book up and it was what I wanted to do. I like to be on time. I’m always there, so I started formulating my attitude toward the service and ‘Nam was just becoming an event in ‘63, ‘64, ‘65, ‘66, ‘67, ‘68, I read about everything I can get about Vietnam. In 1968 was when [?] was killed. I had a cousin. He was a Green Beret up near Khe San who lost his life and he was from Kermit, Texas, first veteran. I realize then that
probably that my attitude in school was that I was either going to get drafted or I would enlist because I was not college material. I knew it and I didn’t go to school anyway. So, from the seventh grade until I got in high school, I met my girlfriend then, my wife now…encouraged me and helped me through school and I managed to get out of school and I was twenty when I graduated. I enlisted on my own without my folks’ permission. I came in one day and told my mother that I had to do something to get me away; either I was going to be a momma’s boy or I was going to fly my own kite. So I enlisted in the Marine Corp a hundred and eighty days early while I was still in school and Gunnery Sergeant Booth told me how it was going to be. He said he was going to keep you pissed off and kick your ass 24 hours a day if that’s what you want to be, and I says “That’s what I want to be,” so he says, “Sign here,” so I did.

SM: That was his recruiting pitch?

JP: He said, “I pull no punches,” and they did. What Gunny - Gunny Booth - he told me in downtown was exactly the truth and I have a high respect because he didn’t sugar coat nothing. He told it like it was and it was true. So I enlisted and went in July 1, 1968 and spent July 4th in boot camp. When I went in, you sign up for the draft at 18 and you took a physical in Amarillo and that’s a hoot and all in itself; it’s a hoot.

SM: How so?

JP: The lady that was the head of the draft board here, I forget her name, but we met down on 19th Street where the Lubbock Public School Building is at now and is the headquarters next And Z Transmission at 6 o’clock in the morning. You had to be there and she ran a tight shift; you know in her late sixties, busload of guys. She’d check your name off and she would tolerate no horse playing, and respect; I mean she said quit and you would quit. She’d got on a bus checked our names off and she said, “You want to be back on the bus this evening, and this is what you will do when you get to Amarillo for your processing and physical.” I came back 1A, well, one-ish because I was still in school at the age of twenty, so I enlisted shortly thereafter that physical and went back. I could have gotten out of the service had I wanted because I had symptoms of gout and my family doctor says, “You want to do this?” and I said, “I’m not going to take the easy road for no one.” All he said, “I got to do is sign and you won’t never be enlisted. I’m not going to do that.” So I went on and all them guys went up there and if you didn’t have to take a leak someone did for you; stayed at the old Caprock Hotel. That was after when I went over for my enlistment physical but…oh bologna sandwiches. It was a hoot. I
came back and finished out my school year, got my school life turn around, finished with good
grades. My girlfriend then didn’t want me to go because I knew, in the back of my mind, I knew
where I was going to go; I just had a gut feeling all along that I would end up in ‘Nam. I don’t
know why. But anyhow, I went in at boot camp and we left Amarillo, I would say, one o’clock
in the afternoon, arrived in San Diego, stepped off the airplane and I remember the trip leader or
the guy that picked us up was a corporal, said, “Men, smoke and chew them or whatever your
going to do because when you step on them MCRD soil shits is going to hit the fan.” I will not
use anything much longer, stronger than that.

SM: That’s fine.

Transcribed by: Tammi Mikel

JP: But, you’ve got to use some to get the feeling, and it was exactly that. We got there
somewhere around 4 o’clock California time. About five o’clock I was standing on the staircase
at the position of attention and I stood there until all of our platoon was received, and they started
kicking ass and taking names, right there, literally. I believe in that philosophy today as
much…didn’t understand it then, I believe they way they train us. Some of the techniques I
disagree; you got to break a person before you can move him. From what I see of today’s troops,
I can’t say what they are turning out today. They took everything civilian. You could keep one
photo and your driver’s license in your billfold and then that was it. Everything you put in little
boxes somewhere, scrap material, little boxes you sent home. If you wore glasses you could
keep your glasses until they got prescription glasses for you and your civilian glasses were
stashed away, you could never touch them until you got out of boot camp. Absolutely
everything civilian was gone; socks, drawers, everything, and you was issued Marine Corps and
that’s the way they wanted it to be from your hair…your name was taken away, you was Private
Padgett and that’s how you were referred to. For me, the experiences, the physical
part…probably because I was athletic, but the mental part I had a tough time with. I read a book
that I just finished and I can’t remember the author but I thought some of the things I did nobody
else did. I did go U of A a lot of times. We went to Edson Range and that’s where you go from
Pendleton down, I mean from San Diego down to Pendleton to learn to fire a rifle because you
can’t shoot a rifle in the city limits of San Diego. But anyhow you were there for two weeks and
they dealt us misery because you know there’s no brass and they could take you out in the boon
docks and literally kick your butt, and they did, they did. I’ve learned from a very start if the
D.I. come up and slapped you, and I mean literally slapped, or punched you in the stomach, you took it. You just stood there, and you took a breath, and you took it, and they wouldn’t bother you, but if you bent over, and you made an issue of it, or if you got down on the ground and you cried and squalled and bawled, they just kicked your butt. I’ve seen it happen. But, if you stood there and no matter how much it hurt you just got right back up, and you took it, they would leave you alone. I have a high respect for a drill instructor Joy, a senior drill instructor Justice ran on alcohol and he took it out on us, he stayed drunk. Stride, I never could much figure him out, but Joy, when we got there somewhere around one o’clock in the morning on July the second, we were standing in the position of attention and footsteps, and Joy comes out and introduces himself and he says “I will guarantee you I will not be a Joy in your life.” We had one guy fall over against the curb, he was from Oregon and I can’t remember his name, and knocked all of his front teeth out, literally knocked them all out, and they took him to the infirmary and he never missed a training day, he never quit, he never quit; knocked all of his front teeth out. He had never missed a training day, he got back up, and stood in the footsteps at the position of attention and they hauled him off but he never quit. They had one guy with a battalion, an honors student for losing the most weight. He lost over a hundred pounds. He barely made it into the Marine Corps but he wanted to be a Marine so bad. I remember them kicking that poor boy’s butt on runs. He would get up and go and we’d pick him up, and he would go, and we would pick him up, and he would go. For the first three weeks he lived on salad. When you go in to eat, you never eat until the last man was in, and when they said, “Be quiet,” you were quiet, and when they said eat you’d better dang sure eat because you only had about fifteen minutes to feed a platoon, and that’s fifteen minutes from the first guy in until the last man sits, so you had roughly five to seven minutes to eat and I can eat a full course meal and be gone. We had one example of what Joy did. We had one guy at the end of the table and the table’s set up against the bulkhead, and you went in and you sit at the position of attention until given the command to eat, and we had one guy ask for the salt, and he got caught talking; Joy stepped up on the table walked down the table and we just pulled our trays in, and he never looked up. We pulled our trays back and he put his boots in his chest and he said “I said to shut up,” and he walked back and stepped off the table, and from then on there was no talking. He didn’t hurt the guy, I mean he didn’t kick him; it was more of a shove. He made a point, “When I talk, you dang sure better listen!” But Joy, I think, took an interest in several of us, there’s
some guys I would love to talk with. Michael Davis I would give my eye teeth to see…sniper,
got shot at in Vietnam, from Midland, Texas; his dad was a big executive with Furr’s
Supermarkets in Midland, and we got to be very close, and I saw him here in Lubbock one time.
But Joy came up one time and we was doing dress right dress and I dropped my thumb down,
and I was in the third squad about halfway down. Joy was out there - what they would do to
each other - and I saw him look between the ranks, and I knew I’d had it because my thumb was
down, and he walks back around behind and he didn’t move, he didn’t dare move, and I watched
him as far as I could watch him, and I thought, “Aw, something’s gonna happen,” and he
grabbed my thumb, my right thumb, and he bit it and he looked like he put a blister on my thumb
and I stood there and took it, and he punched me several times; he never slapped me but he
punched me, right here, several times, and I just stood there and take it, and when he bit my
thumb I just went “ssss” and I never moved. But anyhow, Justice, I seen him beat a guy
unconscious, and throw him out. He ran on alcohol, even though we did make honor platoon.
He took it out on us. I seen guys wet their pants, I seen guys crap in their pants because they
couldn’t hold it anymore. Guys would be there one day and gone the next; how they separated
people I don’t know. One day, “What happened to Joe? He ain’t here, he’s gone,” for whatever
reason, we never knew. There was a bunch left; we don’t know why, what for, one day they was
just not here. Food, good food, best anywhere, a kick in the butt. Heard lots of rumors, from
about three to about nine a night. I went in about a hundred and forty pounds, and when I finally
got home through the whole nine yards I weighed about between a hundred and seventy five and
a hundred and eighty pounds. And, but anyhow, after boot camp…

SM: A quick question about boot camp though; your, um, the drill instructor who was so
abusive and drunk, did he ever detract from your training at all?
JP: How you mean?
SM: Well did he make training ineffective because of his…
JP: I think he did.
SM: …behavior, because of his alcoholism…
JP: I think he did.
SM: …and maybe hurt your ability to learn?
JP: He did.
SM: It sounds like there was a lot of physical contact between the D.I.’s and the trainee?
JP: Oh yeah, yeah, a lot. We dug a hole with our mouths, with our hands behind our backs. One thing that was kind of funny is July’s hotter than hell and we’d always wait for the red. If we could get the black flag and a red flag, you know, we wouldn’t have to train, so we were going swimming. We were new, dumb. In the uniforms, you looked dumb. Going swimming, get to cool off, and we went back and San Diego M.C.R.D. runs right parallel to the airport, we got out there and there’s this big pit, we jumped in this sand pile and we literally swam from one side to the other, splashed sand all over each other. That was a swim. When we said we was going swimming it was punishment. I’ve done push ups on pavement and got blisters on my hands it’s so hot. I’ve done push ups with D.I.’s standing on my hands.

SM: So are these parts of the training that you said earlier that you disagree with some of the stuff that they did, you now understand why, but what do you think was totally out of balance, totally out of line?

JP: This is the just of what happened; they got us in the showers not much bigger than this room, the whole platoon, buck naked, and they stopped up the drain, and Stride, and Joy, and Justice - and I think Justice was the ringer in the bunch, and I think that Stride and Joy had kind of a different attitude than Justice did, and Justice was a senior N.C.O - stopped up the drain, and got us down there and told us we were a bunch of hogs and pigs, and we had to oink and stuff like that. Maybe it’s the process of breaking the mental deal down, but some dude took a dump in there and we had to swim around in it. Now what part that played in the training, to me, that was a little bit overboard. But that guy…and it was heck to pay because they saw that turd floating around in there and they wanted to know who it was. Somehow or another they figured out who it was, and he was gone. I don’t know how they did it. But after boot camp we went on to infantry training and I.T.R. and then BITS, I.T.R’s infantry training regimen, BITS was basic infantry training. The obstacle course was down when we was in San Diego, where they do all the climbing and all that stuff it was down, but when we got to infantry training it was a blast. It was a relaxed atmosphere, long hours. I think we were at infantryman training, but when we got up to BITS which was probably in November, we was there some night during the week, and we always fix hot chocolate because it gets pretty cold in California in November, and just before lights out some of us stayed together in the same platoon. Davis was one of them. I don’t think he went off to sniper school yet, and in walks drill instructor Joy. In a minute we snapped to attention and I had made PFC and I had went over the hill in San Diego at Edson Range. They
didn’t do anything to me. In a book that I’d read one guy’d done the same thing, and he was
gone three days, I’s just gone three hours; they never punished me. But for some reason after
that they laid off of me; they never messed with me anymore except for Justice - every chance
he’d get he’d harass me. But after that, they never messed with me. But anyhow, Joy showed up
and he came around and shook hands with us. Some of the guys in the hooch he didn’t know. I
stayed in a tent all but two weeks of my training - boot camp to graduation from ITR I guess.
There’s no housing. The training was cut short because of the demand. I think that’s one thing I
disagree with; I think they should prolong the training in boot camp, not in infantry training, but
I think boot camp should have been longer. But Joy showed up, and what really iced the cake is
he come up to me and I had just made PFC and he shook my hand and he said “Well I’ll be
damned, Padgett, you made PFC,” and he looked at me just like I look at you and he said,
“You’re going to make a damned good Marine, and you’re going to do good”. On my answers
that I reviewed later, and that’s what convinced me I could survive. He took that extra effort to
find some guys and encourage them; now that’s a leader. He’s a black man; black man helped
me more in my military career than a white one ever did. That’s the gospel truth. I got in some
tight jams, and a black man saved my butt. And Joy - I apply that today - is that one bit of
encouragement that he give me, regardless if I already lost a leg or whatever, that I could go on.
And it’s paid off today, because he instilled it in me; that’s a leader. When you come home on
leave from BITS infantry we did get the live .30s fired on the top of us, they don’t do that
anymore. They lost a corpsman to a short round, that’s what got him, a short round. They lost
an instructor, the instructor I think lived, but a troop died, and built a grenade, and that was
during our training.

SM: Which training is that?
JP: Infantry training, after boot camp, and quite rigorous training. Leadership was good;
terrific fights in the mess hall because they always ran out of chow and I always wanted [?] chow
and you don’t mess with the G.I.’s food and mail. If you keep those two, and keep his morale
up, you’ve got a fighter, but if you screw with his mail and his food, particularly food, you’re
ticked off off. You’ve been out all day eating out of a can and you run out of food. Well, the
front of our company was in, then you can imagine three hundred guys going in and a fight broke
out - terrible fights - worst fights I ever seen, even during boot camp and after boot camp, at
other places was fights in the mess hall over food.
SM: How many guys would have to go without food, if they ran out?

JP: The guys who did ate sandwiches; the guys at the front, they got the good stuff.

SM: Oh, okay, so they would just pull out something?

JP: Yeah, some other idiot in another company would mouth off something; fuses were short already.

SM: Oh yeah.

JP: The company came back and got a thirty-day leave, I became engaged and my wife played a tremendous support effort for me. She will not talk about ‘Nam, she wants nothing to do with it. Ah, come back from ‘Nam and went to staging, that’s preliminary training to go to Pendleton… I mean to ‘Nam. We still didn’t know who was going to go to ‘Nam and who wasn’t. My wife tells me today, and still tells me, that because they pick survivors toward the end of the war - before they were sending anyone - she believes, and I think there’s some degree that I agree with her, that they were picking people that could survive rather than a bunch of guys that would go… a bunch of dummies. Not that I am any more intelligent than anyone else but then when I look at it over the years they got guys like that could survive, like the country guys, and the guys had something between their ears because that’s what happened down in my platoon and I don’t know whether they just spun a bottle and said, “He’s going.” I had no idea but you’d look at it over the years and a lot of us guys that had something between the ears went to ‘Nam. A bunch of brown nosers and guys that always looked for the easy ways out, a lot of these guys didn’t go. Percentage wise, in my opinion and some of the guys that I talked to later in the wars agreed. So I got my orders to ‘Nam, and there was a guy that I went to training here with…I won’t mention his name - we don’t get along - rubbed my nose in it, said “You’re going to ‘Nam!”

Transcribed by: Lauri Beth Mikel

JP: And he’s one of these brown-nosers and today have trouble with people like that. I kept my composure, but I knew that I was going to go. Just I had that gut feeling and so we got geared up to go and left and flew to Okinawa and dumped off the guys that was going to the 3rd Marines. And this same guy I remember him like this; got on the back of that deuce and a half there and says, “Ha Ha Ha Ha, you’re going to ‘Nam,” and if the truck hadn’t been driving off I would’ve drug him off and I would have beat the living hell out of him. And the rest of the guys with us and some of the guys on the truck were saying “Shut up, shut up,” because them guys,
we were going to hit him. This was an R&R and they really didn’t care. They, they grabbed him.

Then, we got to ‘Nam.

SM: And before we get your first in-country experiences, let me ask you a couple of questions about leading up to Vietnam in terms of what you understood, what was going on. When you were in the Marine Corps and you were going through your training and you were sitting around talking with other Marines and NCO’s and other people that might have been to Vietnam, would they talk about it? Do you feel that you got at least some kind of information before you got there from people that knew what was happening?

JP: The main thing they emphasized as far as talking one-on-one about the events is you better have your trash together because you won’t leave. That was the main deal, the whole shebang from day one until arriving there. If you don’t have your trash packed, you’ll probably get hurt, get someone hurt, or get yourself killed or get someone else killed. That was the main thing, is to pay attention. Once you got there, basically all your training went out the window.

SM: What about what was actually occurring in the country? Who was fighting whom and why?

JP: That’s what you’re referring to here?

SM: That too, that too. How well do you think that you understood?

JP: I didn’t understand much. I went to ‘Nam not to serve my country but to stop communism. I saw a film by Ronald Reagan back in junior high school and they were executing people that didn’t care much for communism and I thought, “That’s not right. People should have freedom of choice,” and that’s what I went there for is to stop communism. Patriotism. I was the only Marine out of my whole family on both sides. Patriotism, I believe in patriotism, but I went to stop communism, not to serve my country; serve my country secondly. As far as what I just read in the books and magazines like, Look Magazines and newspaper articles and things like that, I was dead set against the anti-war protesters and the SDS and all those other folks. I didn’t catch much flak here at home. Only one guy and my mother got him straight (in a hurry). And I was fortunate in this part of the country, a conservative environment to come home. My wife had put banners up on the house, “Welcome Home, James, Welcome Home, GI,” painted the house up and had a wonderful reception. I had three guys that live here in Lubbock, one of them lives in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area that took off of work to meet me at the airport; they’re special. One of them I talked out of getting in the service, after I came home on
leave I said, “No, don’t do it Gary. I’ll go in your place. You stay home. You don’t need to go. You go on and get an education and I’ll go in your place,” because I guess I could say I kind of had a twinkling of it but I still pretty much (frighteners?). Upon arrival in ‘Nam, I got out of the 747 and my first thought, “Hell, I’m here. It’s hot,” even though it was in January. (Try to go and cast ten years?) Went to the processing barracks and I was assigned to 26 Marines…3-26, the great fighting history; issued all your gear. I don’t remember where we drew our weapons. I think we drew our weapons when we got to the company area. We went out to Hill 55 south and west of Danang out toward…it’s in Arizona Territory. It was there a week or two, I don’t remember how long we were there, not long because the 26 Marines were pulling out and other outfits were taking over those positions. They had 175, 155s, and some 05’s there and I watched my first air strikes and first artillery missions and had first artillery rounds fired over our head from An Hoa cause they had enemy closer to our perimeter, too far for the mortars and too close for the big one, so they would fire from An Hoa over us and that was weird. He said, “Boy I hope we don’t get no short rounds here.”

SM: What kind of training did you get when you first arrived?

JP: None.

SM: Did they give you any introductory training to the country and stuff?

JP: No, that was all. All the shots were dots in I’s and T’s you crossed before you got there for me. None.

SM: So what kind of weapons did they issue you?

JP: M-16.

SM: And what did you think about that since you’d received most of your training in the 14, right?

Transcribed by: Tammi Mikel

JP: You see, at boot camp we trained and qualified with the M-14 there at boot camp. We got to BITS and ITR, we got the M-16 so we were well acquainted with the M-16 prior to ‘Nam. They’d already got the bugs worked out and cleaning equipment and everything over there. When we got with the 26th Marines, due to my background, I know how to do a lot of things and we were pulling out and the supply officer - I forget his name - he’s from Pennsylvania, we had a lot in common because he played - they used to have a team - football match up between the South and the North in high school football All American. Anyhow, he
played on a team, he knew some of the guys that I went to school with from Lubbock High -
Onrae Thomas and people like that - and we hit it off. Well, he didn’t know how to load a
trailer, with supplies. I did, so I helped him out. We got packed up and then we moved to another
place back over north of Danang, and I never saw him much anymore because he went to another
supply place. We got over there and that’s where we was going to break up after 26th Marines
pulled out, I mean. We were still with the 26th Marines. I’m sorry. I got issued orders. I got a
picture of the place where I was supposed to have went, a place called Hill 119, or B.P.S. I
believe they called it. I got orders to go there, forget my company, leave my company the next
morning, and I may have it all out of order, it’s been so long. Anyhow, I was supposed to have
went to a line company, and this old boy and I managed to stay together through infantry training
after boot camp, became good friends, and we decided we’d go to Freedom Hill with some
friends. We’re not going to fill sandbags, and we’re not going to cut anymore weed we’re going
to go party. So, after role call and assigned the duties the next morning, at eight o’clock we said
[claps his hands]…we left; and we did it, we left. We went to Danang, and we went to Freedom
Hill, and I don’t drink; I didn’t drink then, I probably count on both hands and feet the beers I’ve
drink in a lifetime. But he got pretty hosed, and we came back at four o’clock for role call, and
the senior staff sergeant caught us, “Where you men been?” Said, “Hey, we been in Danang, and
Freedom Hill.” “What did you do?” “We had fun.” Said, “Did you know you was U.A.?” and I
looked him square in the eye and I said, “Yes sir.” Said, “You can have the stripe. I’m only here
for a year. I’m going to line company tomorrow, at zero six hundred, no biggie. You can have
it.” And that was a lot of my attitude. I was pretty salty, in some ways, and arrogant. He said,
“We’ll fix you up.” There goes my stripe, so at six o’clock that evening, or somewhere just
before dusk, the same sergeant comes in and calls out my name and this guy with me. Said “The
first shirt wants to see you now,” and I believe to this day and my wife tells me that this was
answers to prayer, cause I was a Christian then, and I’m a Christian now, but the prayers at
home, God took care of this. It took years to understand, and lots and lots of counseling, to wash
everything out as to why from then to eight years ago, how every thing fit in place. I did go to
the grunts. They called us in there, and they made a clerk out of him, and they made a company
driver out of me. They had busted a clerk and a company driver for drugs. Just like that, I was
made company driver, and the first shirt asked me, said, “They knew quite a bit about you
somehow or another,” said “You was raised on a farm, ain’t you?” and I said, “No sir I wasn’t
raised on a farm, I spent a lot of time on a farm,” Said “You’re a country boy,” and I said, “No sir, I was raised in the city but I know how to get around.” “You can drive in the mud?” and I said, “Yes sir,” and he said, “You’re the company driver,” and that’s what he did. Said, “Just start training in the morning. Get your trash and go.” And the other guy had took accounting in high school, some accounting classes and typing classes, and they made a clerk out of him, and I said, “But I don’t want to be,” and the first shirt says, “You will do what you’re told,” and that is what I went to ‘Nam to do as what I was told to do. I caught a lot of flack over it. A lot of the guys would kid me, cut up. Well, I drove a captain around; he was a lieutenant then, fixing to make captain, and that’s where I started learning true, true leadership. We had a full bird colonel that took care of his troops and ran a tight ship, squared away area; food, pretty good, but he would come down on Friday nights and he would drink beer and eat popcorn every Friday night with the enlisted men and watch a movie, and get up and tell jokes. To me, that’s a leader. I can’t tell you his name - I have lost a lot of names - but I would go to war for that guy. He cared about us, and the X.O. was the same way. My duties as a driver for the first few months that I was there was to drive the X.O. anywhere he wanted, and to drive the first shirt and the company gunny to the whore house every Sunday morning, and do whatever they wanted me to do and keep my mouth shut as to whatever I saw. I did that. If they wanted me to take them over to headquarters for a big party after hours in the jeep, I did that and kept my mouth shut. I saw no evil, spoke no evil, and they trusted me, and they did a lot of stuff that they weren’t supposed to do. I’m talking about the first shirt and the company gunny, they were rowdy! But they took care of people; I didn’t brown nose. I did what they told me, and we did a lot. But I take them to China Beach, to the U.S. sponsored whore house on Sunday mornings at zero nine hundreds every Sunday morning I took them, and I would sit and read or write letters and they would go do their thing and come back. The first shirt one day said, “I’ll pay for it,” and I said, “Sir, no Sir” and I said, “Thank you sir. I don’t do that.” The captain took care of people; I know he’d give me a mischief. The first time I took him out, we went to an Air Force mess hall and they wouldn’t let you take a weapon in and the Air Force had fabulous food - the C.B.’s even better - and we went to all the mess halls; he had friends everywhere, and usually on weekends, Saturdays, we would tour them. Derail from that; tell you what kind of leader he was; spit and shine to the ultimate degree. We was going out to Hill 119. There was the mother of all mud holes, and an old ’51 A-1 Jeep is, is a narrow Jeep, and it’s as useless as tits on a boar hot. It’s
too top heavy, I’ve seen them turn over, and I almost turned one over. I saw a guy get crushed by one at Camp Lejune. Anyhow, well you go out there and there’s this mud hole. We come up on it and we’re out here in the middle of nowhere, and I said, “Sir, this Jeep’s not going through that.” Because tanks, you could see the tanks tracks go out on the other side. “Sir this won’t go through there.” And he said, “Well we’re dang sure not going to drive around it, we’re going through it.” And I said, “Well I’ll center this thing not in the tracks, but in the center of the track. Maybe it’ll be smooth.” So I put it in four-wheel drive, and drove out there and we got to the middle, and it damn sure wouldn’t. Mud come up in the floorboard. I can’t tell you the captain’s name; I’ve lost too many names. I said, “Sir we’re stuck, I’ll walk for help.” And it was about, I would say less than a half a mile up to the company position, they was positioned. He looked at me square in the eye and says, “I told you to drive into it, I’ll walk for help.” He steps out in the mud, this deep, and he goes and gets help. And when he comes back, the guy on the tank says, “I’ll hook it up to the Jeep.” He says, “I will walk in the mud and I will hook it up and you will pull it out.” That’s a leader. He told me, he says, I was a lance corporal then, he says, “Lance Corporal Padgett, I told you to drive into it, I will go get the help.” That’s a leader. He could have said, “You go get your butt out there,” but he, I had a high respect for him. That’s where I learned leadership, and military style. I’ve had as many bad leaders as I did good ones. The 26th Marines pulled back, and I went to headquarters company 1st Marines. I was with the 26th Marines, I was with the headquarters service company, and H and S company, and then I went to headquarters company 1st Marines, and they put us on perimeter standing lines, and living up in a bunker up on the ridge there, I showed you my scrapbook. That was our life. Can’t remember how long. It seems like I was there a week, maybe two weeks. I can’t put the time frame in as to how long. We got resupplies Tuesdays and Thursdays, mostly chow and water, and diesel fuel to burn the crappers. That was the last man’s job every morning on watch, regardless of ranks, to burn the crapper every morning with diesel fuel. Usually we’d take a handloom and throw it in. We had a sandbag bunker we’d pull the crapper into. You dumped in a hat; there was a two holed and you dumped into a half of a five gallon barrel, a 50 gallon barrel and it had about this much diesel fuel it. You dragged that out and burnt it, every morning. You can imagine the stink. But we put it in the sandbag bunker, and usually we’d take a frag, a handloom to throw in there to light it. We had one dude who grabbed a regular frag and threw it in there, he didn’t pay attention. It was a green hand, and it blew the crapper up. We had a water bull, that’s the
portable water tank, get shot up by a sniper, shot one hole in it, that was up on the jungles on top of the hill. Beautiful, beautiful country, but one Tuesday or Thursday, we called for resupply. I believe this again is an answer to a prayer. We were allowed two men out of each squad, a seven man squad, plus a radioman, which would be a total of eight, to go down to the rear to shower and shave, two men a day. That would be once a week, because you was up there seven days at a time, and then we would rotate the platoon, and then the other half would go up and the other half would go down and stand in lines with the company perimeter. You rotated. Well Sergeant...this Mexican guy from San Antonio, I can’t remember his name, I’ve got it in my scrapbook, super-good Marine, fired an M-60 off him, and hit; a single shot on an automatic off of arms this big; big, tall Mexican guy, good man, good spotter. Called for resupply, and the chopper was to land at our place on its first drop, and then he would make the others. And we were to receive diesel fuel and I think a couple of cases of frags, and we call them jag hospiters, the illumination devices. The chopper took off the ground and we was already radio contact with the chopper now. We’re looking from mountain, probably, I think the figures six hundred feet or tall at the top and on the ridge where we were at, three or four hundred feet out, I don’t know. By the way the bird flies about a mile, a mile and a half from the LZ looking down. The radioman got contact and we were looking with the naked eye - I had a histomatic camera that I had bought - for the chopper to take off. Well he took off and, to gain altitude, and he got thirty or forty feet off the ground, and he was overloaded. Hot, dry day, no lift. I didn’t understand that theory until then. You got to have some air to lift. He had, I don’t know how many barrels of diesel fuel and all that stuff plus eleven Marines plus the crew, plus a full load of fuel. The ‘ol 46 just couldn’t pick it up. He said, “Well, I’m in trouble,” so he tried to get back to the LZ. She went down, turned on her side, and we lost two men out of our squad that I’d had breakfast with that morning. We didn’t hear them but the radioman could hear them. The crew got out, all totaled there were five men; we lost three that died, two hurt pretty bad. There was a guy from first shore party that got a Navy Cross out of the deal. He literally ran through the [constant tent] in order to get out there and drag some guys out, and he caught on fire to drag them out. The guys that were on the perimeter told me it’s horrible to listen to guys burn. They couldn’t get out. Even though we were up here I’m just saying we didn’t find a clue that them guys had died, and I just ate breakfast with them and the next thing, they’re gone. But I have learned to stuff it. That’s the way war is. You just stuff it. You put it in the computer and then you just turn around
and you just stuff it. They died, and I did more stuffing than I thought I did, that year I did a lot more stuffing, and later the stuffings came out. Even though I was a non-com, in the rear with the gear, I saw a lot. So, that evening we had to double up, stood guard all night, and I remember going in the bunker that morning, and it was cool, and I very seldom sat in the bunker because of the damn rats. They’re huge. I just got into one of those sleeps, and the squad leader came in and said, “Padgett, pack your trash.” Said, “They want you down there now.” I said, “I just got to sleep. I haven’t been asleep an hour.” He said, “They want to see you now.” So I packed my trash and I went down. The First Sergeant, this black guy, a Korean veteran - I can’t tell you his name - called me in and said “You’re going to be platoon supply NCO.” He said, “You will be the Radar and Klinger of Company [?]. You will take care of all their needs, the men’s needs for the whole platoon. When you’re up there with chow, anything you need that you can beg, borrow or steal or anything I tell you to get, you get.” So that’s what I did for the rest of my hitch in ‘Nam was secure the platoon there, drop and ride as a courier. I would ride shotgun for courier that would carry classified information. So again I got a lot of freedom. We lost one of my first duties after that. I was assigned to chaser. It’s a terminology to chase a prisoner. This guy was assigned to me, I wasn’t assigned to him. He tried to frag our First Sergeant. He tried to kill him with a frag. He threw it up on top of a hooch. It rolled off and went down and broke and blew up, and they withheld him for the inquiry and the first Shirt comes in there and this is before I made corporal I made corporal, he said, “Padgett, are you trying to kill my ass?” I said “No Sir.” He said, “I knew that.” He said, “We just got to go through the strokes.” “No, sir, but we know who did.” “Get your ass out of here!” They caught the guy, and I’ve got him in scrapbook. He was a Hell’s Angel - so he said - before he came to Vietnam. So, they caught the guy and the First Sergeant called me in again and this is before I made corporal. This dude was sitting in this chair. I can’t remember his name I’ve got it in this scrapbook some place. He said “Corporal Padgett!” I said “Yes Sir,” He said “You will be this guy’s chaser for two weeks. You’ve been taken off all duties for the next two weeks. He will go where you go. He will go to the crapper and you will with him; anywhere you want to go for the next two weeks and he will go with you anywhere you want to go. You’re relieved of duties for two weeks, 14 days.” He got a dishonorable discharge, and they decided not to prosecute.

Transcribed by: Sabrina Frizzell

SM: Did you ever find out why he tried to frag the First Sergeant?
JP: It was just one of them deals. It went on quite often.

SM: Did it happen a lot in your unit?

Transcribed by: Tammi Mikel

JP: Let me finish. So, I did for two weeks. So, I took him down to processing when weeks and he will go with you anywhere you want to go. You’re relieved with the 26th Marines, we had two Marines, and whoever sees this, I don’t mean anything racially. We did have racial problems big time. In the bush, it was a different story. But in our situation perhaps in the bush, and in all wars, you did have problems. I helped haul off two guys. One killed a staff sergeant and one killed a lieutenant, one with a 45 and one with a frag. I took them to the brig there at the 1st Marine Brig for life sentences at Leavenworth. One of them, the first one we hauled off, he didn’t give much problem. He was glad to leave. But the second one, he wasn’t too happy about going to Leavenworth. Lt. Benning was with us then, the driver and myself; I was the chaser. This guy, this second guy, we was going to Danang. We were going to the 1st Marine Brig, and we stopped at Three Corners in Da Nang and this guy wanted to jump out, and Benning gets out of the jeep and steps over him and he says - I can’t use the language he used - he says, “Let him out!” He told me, he says, “Padgett, if you don’t get him, I will.” He told him, he says, “Get out.” Said, “We’ll save the U.S. government some money. We’ll kill you right here on the spot,” and we could do it, if he tried to leave. He made a move to it and Benning just pulled the seat, “Get your ass out and go.” Said, “We’ll kill you right here on the spot, because if Lance Corporal Padgett doesn’t get you, I will.” So that’s two. Well, back to headquarters company 1st Marines. We haul this guy off, and we had one kid who came over who was 17, I need to tell this, he signed a waiver to come over, we called him [Davy son], by the time we left he was a full blown alcoholic. We had one Indian, and to me they’re not Native Americans, they’re Americans, and he got drunk one evening and threatened to blow us all away and I had to take a rifle away from him. It was locked and loaded with a full magazine, chamber pointing straight at me; I took his rifle away, talked him out of it. Then we had two black on black crimes - the one was a guy got killed - a guy from 1st radio, didn’t go with the flow; a scholarly guy. They beat him plumb to death, black on black, beat him plumb to death, but he lived. I stood guard over one guy as a Captain beat this guy to death. Nothing ever happened.

SM: Why did they beat him to death?
JP: He was a non-conformist. He didn’t go for the knuckle busting, and he was there to serve his time, come home, go to school on the GI bill, and that was it. He was a fine Marine. He just didn’t go for that crap, and they didn’t like him. Five Marines beat him to death, caught him right behind the [?].

SM: And they never prosecuted the other Marines for killing him?

JP: No. I stood guard two days on it. The first sergeant, the black first sergeant from Korea, put me in charge of this guy. I don’t know today why they picked me.

SM: They trusted you?

JP: I really don’t know. Our platoon commander ran on alcohol, stayed drunk all the time, saw him maybe once or twice a week. Our senior NCO, Bennett, former drill instructor ran a tight ship; he had no drugs underneath him.

SM: But where did they get the alcohol, and what kind of alcohol did they drink mostly?

JP: This is an officer, he could get anything he wanted; any Bicardi.

SM: That’s what he ran on, Bicardi?


SM: Now did the fact that he was drunk all the time, that never created any kind of serious problems?

JP: I had we assumed he’d be gone. I had one run in with him; I had one run in with him. I am highly respective of officers. I believe you’re a former officer. I may not like you, but I’m going to respect anybody who should. Ah, I don’t care much for Clinton. He’s the President of this country and I will stand tall in front of him, and I’ll give him his due respect; for the office of the presidency or whatever. I respected Bennett. He was first Lieutenant. He called me in one day and he says, “Padgett, go get me some cigarettes.” He was about half drunk. And I said, “No sir. I will not do that sir.” And I always respect him with sir. I said, “No sir.” He said, “You go get me some cigarettes,” and I said, “No sir.” We had an understanding there; I’ll do what’d within Marine Corps manual, but if he wants to go get his own cigarettes, well then there you go. And that’s the way it was. But, Bennett ran a tight ship. As far as I know we had no drug abusers in our platoon. Bennett just ran a tight ship.

SM: And the lieutenant never got in trouble with the company commander?

JP: As far as I know, we never saw him. Bennett ran the ship, and ah…

SM: Was there similar alcohol problems with any of the senior NCO’s in your platoon?
JP: Everybody had an alcohol problem, just about everybody; hosed down just about everybody. Guys - and I don’t know why - guys always want to stand watch with me. If they had a choice, I’m not trying to build myself up, and this is hard for me not to sound like it, they wanted to stand guard with me. I kept my mouth shut. They’d tell me their problems back home, and folks will never know how important mail is, or “Dear John,” what it does to a guy. It knocks the crap out of a guy to get a “Dear John” letter. I’d just as soon a woman just not write. But I see what it does, and I remember the mail strike ticked us off.

SM: What year was that?

JP: ‘70. The guys who wanted to stand lines with me, I made some tremendous friends standing lines, in the incident, standing lines, and they wouldn’t let us shoot the enemy. To me they were right out there and you couldn’t do squat; shootings the no. I stood guard over a POW about 16 years old, it was an all-night hitch. Instead of a three-hour watch or a four-hour watch, it was a 12 to 6 the next morning, or 6:30; I stood guard on this guy. He cried, and he cried, and he cried; and somewhere just before sunrise I went in and shook the magazine, locked and load it, took it off safety and put the rifle up next to his head and said, “I’ll kill you myself if you don’t shut up.” I had had all I could take, and I told that for many, many, many years. I still have trouble listening to people cry, or children cry. It still bothers me, and what I did to that guy - I mean, he’s going to die anyhow - he’s going to be executed, he was a Viet Cong. We turned him over to the ARVN’s and the ARVN’s tortured him and killed him. And after RS1 got through with him, our intelligence department, we turned him over to the ARVN’s and they tortured and killed him. Those people were ruthless, and they played both sides of the street.

SM: Did you have a lot of interaction with ARVN?

JP: Bennett, if Bennett caught an ARVN in our perimeter - he would sometimes – he’d literally, physically throw them out. He would not tolerate them. I had some dealers in Korea and he tried to get me to buy him a TV; he had a hundred dollars cash and he said, “You buy me a TV? You can get it.” I said, “Dude,” and he could speak English, pretty well, and I said, “I’m not buying you no TV; no way. You go find some other jar-head to buy you a TV, I’m not going to do it.”

SM: This is a Korean. Did you have interactions with a lot of Koreans or other allies?
JP: That was the only one. I met an Aussie; boy, he talked. When he talked it was like a chainsaw (makes chainsaw noises). But, the Vietnamese, Bennett would not tolerate them.

SM: What about Vietnamese civilians?

JP: I worked with those in the mess halls for my last hitch, last month in the country. They gave me a choice, the first shirt did, he says, “Padgett, you can either stand lines or you can run the mess hall, the enlisted side of the mess hall.” And when I say run, I was in charge of the Marines and the civilian personnel that cleaned up; all the guys that was on the shit list, 11 of them plus…I think there was eight or 10 civilians, to run the enlisted areas and the officers side of the mess hall, cleaning up. I was just a supervisor. So, I did interact with them, and gee, there’s just so much to tell about. The civilian women were really nice. We had one work in our hooch a mamason, Miss Bo we called her, an older lady. She did all of our laundry. We raised a hissy because all the staff and all the officers have mamasons. So we just said…we pushed the envelope to see if we can’t get it for enlisted men, I mean, you know, NCO’s. So we did. They agreed. If we would chip in the $7.50 a week that they would pay them to do our laundry, and that’s a buck. They don’t wear skivvies, they don’t have bras, they don’t have panties. All of our walls were pasted with Playboy’s fold-outs, and she says, “American mamason no wear clothes?” and we said, “These don’t! These number one! They’re grade A, number one mamasons.” We ordered her some skivvies. She was an old gal. I don’t know what she did with the bra - not that I ever looked, you could see - anyhow, she never wore it. She liked the skivvies, and we’d give her Kool-Aid and stuff, and finally she ticked us off, though; she got to where she got to be choosy about what we’d give her, Kool-Aid and she’s say, “Mamason don’t like this,” and she’d throw it back and one day said, “You just don’t get any.” I’ll tell you about the crosstie incident. We had a brand new cross tie that we’d use for building bunkers, a regular sized cross tie like they use, real rubber, I don’t know how much they weighed but they’re heavy. It was laying out there and been there for a long time. We had this one popason, I got a picture of it, not much bigger than that thermos jug over there, long goatee, and about as bald as I’m getting. Old Popason, he burned the crappers for us. He walked with a shuffle; no shirt, cut-off khakis, weathered as the day is long, looked like a piece of leather; his hide looked like leather. Everyday he’d walk by there. We was with security, and he’d say, “Popason can have?” “No.” Everyday, “Popason can have?” “No.” So finally one day we said, “Yeah, you can have the dang thing.” Said, “Here’s the deal,” and it was about a quarter of a mile where it was at from
the gate, and names, I just have problems with names. Me and Henry was at the gate, [?], said, “We’re gonna let Popason have this, if he can carry it out without putting it down.” Said, “We’re gonna make some money on this!” So the wager started, so we got everybody lined up and we called them to the gate and said, “Let him out,” and this is during the summer time, it was hot. He took that crosstie, drug it up on the road, and it’s a gravel road and it’s kind of down hill, a little bit, and then it levels out. He’s got to walk, I know, a quarter of a mile, and this thing is well over a hundred pounds; I know it’s at least a hundred. He stood it up on its end, and we said, “You pick up, you put down, no get.” “I carry it,” he said. So he sized it up, he squats down, leans it against his shoulder, props it back up; he wanted to get his center of gravity right the first go around because he knew we probably wouldn’t let him have it. He picks that dude up, and never put it down. Those people would kill over cigarettes. We had no problem with drugs but the guys and their VD problems. We had one guy called Dog, he kept VD all the time. Another thing that I had problems with is I caught one of the gals that worked at the PX, she was Vietnamese, a French Cross, gorgeous girl, I mean gorgeous; her and the corporal had a thing going on the black market. She was selling cigarettes, he was smuggling bottles in her C-bag. She would carry the laundry out on a Honda, like that one you saw, that gal pushing on it, she would ride hers out. She’d put that laundry bag, that C-bag, on the back of her Honda, and go out the gate. Well I got to looking one day and the bottom of the C-bag was square, it wasn’t round. So I called the gate and they caught her smuggling cigarettes out. Well the Marine up there - they did an investigation - he had been messing around with her and they had a thing going, and he was doing pretty well. They busted him, and she went to RS1, we did what we’s gonna do, and then she was turned over to the Vietnamese and most likely executed; raped and executed cause those people weren’t merciful. We had a fire fight break out outside of our perimeter just right over there one night and man, all heck broke loose. Frags going off, tracer rounds going everywhere, and it was the Vietnamese fighting over control of a village. I mean, what would they fight them for? Well the Vietnamese riggers pulled out, and they left a void on the whorehouse. Well, the cops moved in, the ARVN cops moved in. Well they control the red light district. Well, when these other guys rotated back, they wanted their turf back. They blew up a jeep, killed two or three guys; they got their turf back.

SM: So these were South Vietnamese…

JP: Fighting amongst themselves…
SM: And then the Army, I mean, Army police and Army infantry fighting it out

JP: For control of a village…

SM: …because they have a house of prostitution?

JP: Oh yeah, on the black market.

SM: On the black market? Now as a supply sergeant, supply NCO, did you run into a lot
of black marketeering, a lot of that kind of stuff? And like a lot of people approached you too,
maybe you started doing some of it?

JP: I did anything I could; if I needed lumber and if I had a big bar of steel, I got it. If
they give me camouflage fatigues to trade with the Air Force to get this, I did. If I could beg
from the CB’s in the Army, quite to the contrary, the Army was more apt to help us than our
fellow Marines when it comes to scrounging stuff, probably because the Army had more. I went
to several of the Army supply places when I needed clothing supplies. “Hey!” I’d go to the
Marines and, “Stick you, man.” “Hey! I’m your brother!” “Oh, you ain’t got paper work.” But
I traded for herbicide, Agent Orange, that’s why I got on my hands and feet. I’d trade C-rations
for barrels of herbicide to spray our fruit, with herbicide rather than burn it because we almost
got a guy killed when a frag went off. We lost a guy from San Anton’ to a claymore mine; he
had five days left to do in country. Also the guy that was beat to death had five days left to do in
country. We lost Mace to a claymore mine, and put fuel out there and lit it up, and was standing
there watching and a claymore went off and got killed. I figured it up, in my hitch in ‘Nam in
non-combat situation, seven men were lost. We had from 1st shore party, we had one guy shoot
himself with a ’45; from 1st radio, we had one guy shoot himself in the thigh with a ’45 to go
home in non-combat situations. We lost seven men to injuries and deaths; five deaths and
two…shootings.

SM: So why don’t you go ahead and tell us about that?

JP: Back to the chopper crash, that’s one of the hardest things, I guess the hardest thing I’ve ever
been through at that time - the other stuff added up over a period of time - was inventorying a
dead man’s gear. That’s the only time I saw Bennett ever do what he was supposed to do. He
had to have an officer, a senior NCO; well, he had to have an officer and two NCO’s to
inventory a dead man’s gear and we went into their C-bag and all their personal gear, off of their
body that they had collected, and we inventoried every stinking piece of stuff they had right
down to the stamps and we checked it off; that was hard. That was real hard to inventory it. The
pictures and that’s going home to their folks, particularly the guy that I knew, and you look at his
momma and his girlfriend, and they ask us to write a short note and that was hard to do. I don’t
remember what I wrote. That was really hard, but they read them. Seeing women during boot
camp - it’s different now - we didn’t even see women. They had some WM’s coming in, women
Marines, but very few, very few. We didn’t see any until graduation. That’s a long time to go
without catching a hankering, I mean long time. You go a year in ‘Nam and whooo! But seeing
a round-eyed gal, that was a treat.

SM: Now you mention in some of your answers to the questionnaire that that was part of
recreation was getting someplace and you’d be able to go someplace that was part of….  
JP: Yeah, Freedom Hill; Freedom Hill was the recreation area for the Danang area; you
could go to the flick and get hosed down, go to the USO show. I saw the Bob Hope show in ’70,
and saw it through a telephoto lens, and he was about that big, and they cut quite a bit out, you
know, what they show on national TV. Its just pretty risqué. They have to edit it for TV. Of
course they wouldn’t edit it for today’s TV but back then they did. But, he puts on a good show.
But then again, I thought it went to waste. If you look you’ll see some pictures of some guys
who just said crap on it, they just went to sleep on the hoods of their truck. I wanted to go for the
experience, just to say I did it. Hotter than heck, up on the hill side but you could go to Freedom
Hill, and go to the USO, and the girls would talk to you, just to go look at women. The folders,
they don’t do anything for you, you know, they’re still pictures, but these, they move, truthfully,
and they had an R&R at China Beach, you could go down; as much as we needed R&R you
could go down. Some people called it [refit], you could go down on the beach and play, get
drunk, write home, whatever you want to do, and it was no bars…you could do just about…they
just let you run around. They didn’t tolerate fighting too much. All and all, my hitch was a
skate. If you look at it, as to what I did compared to the other guys. When we got together to
come back, we gathered up into the same barracks that we processed out of going into the
country, there in Danang airport. Texas, I think, was playing Notre Dame in the Cotton Bowl. I
think that’s right, if I’m not mistaken. We picked it up on armed forces radio. Of course those
guys from Texas were hootin’ up and guys from up north, they might not have been a Notre
Dame fan, but we just listened to that; a good solid comrodary. You’re a former GI. We’re
going home, and get on the plane, and we sat there on the runway forever and a day; probably 45
minutes, but it was a cloudy overcast day and they let the guys that was flying missions come in
first before we can leave; fine with me. 707, old ladies took us over, I think it was the same ones
that took us over and brought us back home. Got on the plane when I left and I said, “Well I’m
done.” Got on there and the women were ugly – no respect to them - and they said, after we got
off, said, “Do you think they’re going to put young women on these planes? You’re crazy,” and
rightfully so. And came back, landed in Los Angeles, and the pilot tilted the plane for us,
because you could see just all the way up the beach. It was a crystal clear night, and it just
looked like broken glass, oh it was just gorgeous, and he turned the plane so both sides could see.
We landed in Hawaii and I volunteered to get bunched in Hawaii, and they said, “We got any
volunteers, anyone who wants to stay in Hawaii, unattached, for eight days?” Boy my hand went
up. I was engaged and I thought this is a once in a lifetime,” Yeah, I’ll stay for eight days! If
somebody needs to get bump me, I’ll volunteer.” Well they got four, and didn’t give it to me. I
was number six or seven on the list. I didn’t tell my wife that till way…when we were married.
Anyhow, I come back and landed at someplace in California, El Torro or someplace, Marine air
wing, whatever. We got there, must have been close to 2:00 in the morning, 2:30, jet lagged, and
we got all our C-bags, went to customs and all that crap, and just crapped out everywhere. This
officer that was in charge comes in and says, “Gang, they’re gonna screw with us,” said,
“They’re not going to process your orders until 08:00 hours.” Well we would miss all the flights
out of Los Angeles; everybody’s mad. But it lasted about that (snap) long. Everybody said,
literally, “Well shit! What can we do?” And that was the attitude, you could just feel like, it
don’t do no good that you’re here. What do we do? And that was the attitude, everybody said,
“Well hell. We’re here.” And about an hour later the same guy came back in and said, “Senior
officers here, senior staff here, and down the rank structure, line up.” Somebody got mad.
Somewhere along the line, somebody got mad. Crap rolled uphill. So we got our orders then, but
back before we came over, in Okinawa, research has shown, and I’ve read this in books, and I’ve
talked to some World War II Veterans, my wife has one, that the difference between a ‘Nam
veteran and a lot of the other veterans is that the time span comes upon us. It makes a difference.
So they left us in Okinawa for seven days down the line, and they got to doing some research as
to why so many non-veterans were having problems coming home was because literally they
were coming from the bush and the next day they were eating supper, and it didn’t wash. They
did some research, that lag time on a ship to unwind makes a world of difference. Well that
seven days in Okinawa, I never left the base. A lot of the guys, they really gave me a hard time,
I said, “I stayed loyal to my fiancée for a year, if I get outside this fence, I’m in trouble. I made a commitment.” I never got outside the line. I said, “I can’t do it.” I just knew my limits, gone too long, you don’t mix gasoline and gunpowder. I said, “Naw.” So I stayed in there the whole seven days. The last night before we went home, all of us guys who went to boot camp together that we could round up, we started putting a pencil to it and we got hosed. That’s the only time that I’ve ever been just…hosed down in my entire life. I loved every minute of it. And we got together and it’s great. It’s a bond that you just don’t got. And I don’t have it today, I don’t. There’s just very few people…it’s a bond. We knew we was not gonna…we figured it up, and there was somewhere around twenty, and we knew many had got killed or wounded, and the guys that went on out to leave a company, I never saw them again until they rotated back; we got together at the table, there must have been ten or twelve of us, that gal must have made two hundred dollars in tips because they know the drunker you get, the more your gonna tip. Before we got hosed, we were really serious, we did some serious talking, and they said, “Padgett, you went to drive a Jeep,” and I says, “Yeah...” and one of the ol’ boys says, “Man, I’d have traded places with you.” And I said, “Well, I didn’t like it,” and he says, “That’s alright. That’s alright.” And that felt great, and a lot of them did that. It’s a bond.

SM: These are the men you went in country with initially, these are the guys you flew over with?

JP: All the way through training.

SM: All the way through training? And then you came home together?

JP: We rotated almost to the hour, almost to the hour of departure. I’m not kidding.

SM: That must have felt...

JP: We got together and we figured it up, and guy, they made a lifeguard out of him. Just like they grabbed me, because he had been taken to first grade and they made a lifeguard out of him. He said, “I was a lifeguard.” We laughed and laughed and laughed. But a bunch of them, a guy who got snatched, some of them stayed in the bushes the whole damn tour. We got together and we had a blowout. One that I would...I would love to see drill instructor Joy and Michael Davis. I get to see Joe Rose every five or six years, but I would give my eye teeth to see Michael Davis because we had so much in common. Last count I heard he was in Arizona. He was a Marine sniper, Purple Heart, and I got to see him for a short time here in Lubbock before I left to go to work. Though if I could see those guys...
SM: How about Mr. Rose, Joe Rose? Did you see him after he got out of the Marine Corps?

JP: Yeah, yeah. He was much the same way. He still is. He’s still got stuff to work through.

SM: How much time did you have left on your hitch when you came back?

JP: I had a year and a half to do. So my orders were stamped to be in the 5th MAV, the 5th Marine Amphibious [?] and to Camp [?], California. Now I was engaged when I went over there, and I came home, and my wife didn’t know when I was going to be home. So after we got our papers processed, these cab drivers, and ran into one of them here in Lubbock who used to repair carpet for us, says “Ah yeah, I used to hire you jar heads and all you guys down in L.A. all the time.” He drove a cab! And we got to talking about it, and he says, “Yeah, we knew when the flights would come in.” So there were four of us, no seven of us, and we said we’re going to stick together until we get to Los Angeles. And we had to pass the hat for one guy because he spent all his money [?] women we saw in Okinawa, and we literally had to pass the hat to get him a ticket home. I chipped in twenty bucks or ten bucks. Cabs were out there. First one out grab a cab, so we grabbed a cab, and they can only haul six; crap, and the driver says, “Put the seventh one in.” So this time you know, he says, “Don’t spare no horses going to L.A., we gotta get there.” He’d heard that story thousands of times over the years, but he did it. He got us there to Los Angeles International where we could get a flight home. Me and every one of them tipped him ten dollars apiece. That’s not bad.

SM: Not at all, and that’s some good driving, too!

JP: And he didn’t spare no horses; seventy-five and eighty, sometimes faster. So we got on the plane and at one o’clock I landed here in Lubbock somewhere around the 7th or the 8th or the 9th, I don’t remember, of January, sand blowing, cold blistering day. I had three men that I had went to school with, had known for years, and my wife, and my mother, and my wife’s brother show up at the airport. To see those three guys there really made my coming home special, it really did. I walked right by a colonel from out here at Reese, Terry said. I walked right by that guy, and I was in uniform. I went by him and he said he spun on his heels like he was fixing to give me a reaming out. He’s a full-blown colonel, and to this day I don’t remember none of it. If Terry said that guy spun around and he saw what was going on, and I guess he realized I was just getting home, and he said, “I knew you was fixing to get an ass chewing for not saluting.”
because I don’t remember. Anyway, I got a very special homecoming. I couldn’t eat the food. My momma fixed a huge meal, but I told momma…she fixed me a big lunch, and I kissed and hugged on my wife until I just couldn’t no more, and I said, “I’ve gotta [?]. I’ve just got to. I’ve got to [?].” I was dead. So around four o’clock in the afternoon, that’s three hours after I got home, I said, “I can’t bear it. I just can’t [?]” and I went in my bedroom that I’d stayed in all these years, 20 years living on 3rd street, right over here, and I went to sleep and I slept well into the evening and I woke up and momma and I got to spend some time together. Breaking family ties is hard. I got to spend some time with my momma, and of course my folks were divorced then, and I went and got my wife, my fiancée, and we stayed up late, and I still couldn’t eat the food. I still have trouble with sounds sometimes. Some sounds…choppers, and then jets…I’ve still got them. If I hear a chopper, I’ve got to go see it, I’ve got to go see it. These mech choppers don’t, but if it’s a Huey or a pop pop pop pop pop pop, I’ve got to go see it. I’ve just got to go see it, and if it’s a jet, even when we lived over at [?], I’ve just got to see it. I’ve just got to see. When I look up it’s an F-16, but when I looked up in ‘Nam it was an F-4, or something else, an A-6, and I’ve seen them work out. Some smells…I can look at these pictures, and I can smell, and I was in a restaurant, I think I told you, something went off and it sounded just so much like a frag, I was headed for the floor and my wife grabbed me.

SM: How long after you got back was that?
JP: Still today.
SM: To this day?
JP: Still to this day. Things go off, and I take a breath. It’s not as bad. But, I just take a second. A sudden burst from out from a fire, or pistol range or something, I tuck up. You just never get rid of it.

SM: What did you think about your service in Vietnam when you got back; that you, like you said, you came home to a conservative place, a place where patriotism, support for the war, tended to run high for the duration, and when you came back did you start questioning…did the questioning about what Americans were doing in Vietnam start while you were there, what we were doing there?
JP: No, the deal…what really started the wheel turning was when we had the gooks outside the wire and couldn’t do nothing about it. That’s when I started thinking about it. Am I missing something in this picture? What’s the deal?
SM: So what were the rules of engagement as they were explained to you?

JP: Fired upon, you could fire back. Some areas were free fire zones. Where we were at was no free fire zones. Where we were at the wire was to keep us in, and them out. That’s the way I felt. When I came home, I stuffed it. There was one guy who was going to school here at Tech who used to live in our apartment, we had an apartment on the back of our house, and was giving it to me down country, he didn’t give it to me face to face. But my momma got him ironed out. I have never been called a baby killer. I caught more…I wouldn’t say flack, from fellow GI’s for just being a non-comm. My philosophy throughout the war was we had the hammer pulled back on the pistol…we just never did pull it. A waste, a total waste. I can’t say anything about communists. America screws up a lot more than we fix if you look across the world.

SM: You mean in terms of foreign policy, and things like that?

JP: I’m talking about the missionary work, God’s work, to the ‘Nam War to Grenada to the Balkans, we screw up a lot times more than we fix.

SM: Is that a lesson that you have taken away personally from the Vietnam War?

JP: Yes.

SM: What do you think about recent interventions and American policies in places like Kosovo, Haiti, and Somalia?

JP: I don’t think we can be the world’s cops. Some guys, when they step in the ring, are just going to duke it out; sometimes you’ve just got to be a spectator. Now if it goes beyond the ring, well maybe we ought to step in. I don’t believe in the philosophy of our politicians now and the U.N. having control of all our troops, why these are our troops. We’ve got the biggest share in the stake, we’re going to run the show. Either that or you folks can do it on your own. If we’re going to invest our blood, sweat, tears, by then we’re going to run the show. I would go to war tomorrow for this country, but it better be for the win, because I ain’t going to go to be a cop; been there, done that.

SM: Do you think that’s the most important lesson we can learn from Vietnam?

JP: From my point of view, yes. If we’re going to do something, let’s do it right. I understand Desert Storm was doing it right, I read some commentaries on it that kept the press out. I talked to some friends that’s Gulf War veterans. We killed off a lot of folks, so they say. I believe them. I don’t think you have the commentary that you have on ‘Nam versus that.
SM: What do you think about the media? As a Marine and as an American citizen, and in the aftermath of the war looking back, how important do you think the media was in the accusations that American political will was hurt because of the way the media covered the war?

JP: I think that if it hadn’t been for the media, we’d still be there today. I think it brought it home where you could see it. You could read a newspaper article in the newspaper and see the carnage. When you see it in black and white and in color on your TV, it changes your perspective on how you view things. The body count I read in my scrapbook was so out of balance. That’s one of the strategies of the North Vietnamese; how do you know how much you’ve done if you ain’t got no body count! That’s part of the mental war. “Well, I killed twenty.” How do you know? You know because they took them dudes off and that, to my point of view, is great philosophy because it works on your mind and the swat people are going so you’ve got dissention in your own ranks as to how many punks you’ve killed off and that’s the main reason for dragging them off cause you don’t know what you’ve done. The guys in the know know you didn’t kill twenty but the newspaper said twenty, well, you’ve got people divided. That’s sharp. To my opinion, that’s the way to fight a war. War is, you go kill folks. The guy punching that typewriter, maybe he’s typing out a requisition for ammunition; in effect, he’s contributing to somebody’s death. Folk’s are going to die in wars; friendlies, unfriendlies, and everything in between. It’s the worst thing man can do to himself is a war. But if you’re going to do it, just do it right.

SM: You bring up the body count; what did you and the men in your unit think about that?

JP: It’s highly exaggerated. They knew! The deal was, ‘Nam had such an influence, people poured in there and you shake it all out, and you have ten percent of the ten percent. You know that’s a rule of thumb? If you applied across everything, you have the ten percent supporting the earth and the ninety percent if you want to use round figures.

SM: You refer to the ten percent that are there fighting…

JP: …that are out there getting, yeah…

SM: …the combat vs. the support?

JP: Right, yeah. But, if you look at it across the board, work force or here at Tech or whatever, football teams or whatever. Leadership; I served under some wonderful men, I served under some guy in North Carolina when I went to, when I did come back I was made instructor
at Pendleton, train tours. We could already tell the difference in discipline, cause then he was a PFC and he was a private when I was in boot camp, by [?] you better do what that PFC said to do. I came back, I was a corporal, instructor; you tell a troop to do something he might tell you to stick it in his ear. It was just a short span of time, a year. So we had to flush all that out of the system. Now you’ve got volunteer force; how good is that? I can’t tell you. I don’t know, I’m not there. Apparently they’ve done pretty good. I can’t say, but I can already see. Now during that washing out period they lost a lot of people, a lot of good people, and I think I’m one of them; I would have stayed. I just couldn’t put up with the crap, the politics. If I went in the service today, I would only go in at wartime. I can’t stand Garrison Dooley. I can’t play it. I don’t do it on the job, I’ve already had run-ins at the job where I’m at; I don’t play politics. I’m going to do my job, and turn them loose. Wartime, military is the greatest, and I want to be out there, but I can’t say. Look what they were getting in the service. Now, they’ve got a shortage. Who wants to go over there when they’re like who we got running this country? I wouldn’t, I told my son. He talked with the army recruiter, and after the army recruiter made his pitch I said, “Sir, Staff Sir,” I said, “Off the record,” and he said, “Off the record,” and I said, “Would you want your son to go in the military with Clinton as President?” He said, “No.” I said, “There you go, sir.” He said, “You’re off the record.” I said, “I ain’t saying nothing else.” He sat there and he said, “Absolutely not.” He said, “I’m not going to fifteen years after now either.” So, he came in prior to that. What I carried away from the whole experience…I bought a lot of luggage, and I got rid of a lot of luggage, and I learned you can only stuff so much and the stuffings come out. Greg Dodd, a friend of mine, he was a non-comm in the Air Force, down in Tan Son Nhut somewhere, Air Force base in Danang, in Vietnam, loaded bombs for a living; had the same view points I do. Saw his buddies die; I never loaded anybody up, but I dang sure saw them dead, and I saw them coming in first bed dead. Physically picking up a dead person, that didn’t come until years later, but it affected him, and I thought I was the only one.

SM: So he had to load up bombs on an aircraft that were making the various bomb runs throughout the war, and also he was in charge of loading up body bags and sending men back in body bags? Do you get a lot of opportunities to talk to him?

JP: We talked about six or seven hours. We closed up the DQ about one o’clock in the morning, they run us out. They’d have let us stay if they weren’t closing up. But Greg, I knew,
had all this buried; he may not want me to mention his name. Greg, he’s still got a lot of it
buried. He finally opened up and cried.

SM: How long ago?

JP: Crying is God’s way of letting out grief and homage. I used to be a macho person.
You stuff it and it’ll come out. Greg’s the same way. He said, “You do that years, you know,
everyday, seven days a week napalm.” He said it got to where the pilots would say, “Alright. I
don’t want to drop this iron stuff today. Give me some of that napalm.” So the pilot’s would
swap loads. He said that’s what they would do. He said they said manifests said to load this on
this F-4, and this on this F-4, pilots would say, “Nah, give me some of that hot stuff today.” He
said it went on all the time. He said, “We did what the pilots said,” he said the CO, (makes a
ptttt noises), he said, “I don’t fly [?].” He said if the pilot wanted napalm, if he wanted 500’s
instead of 250’s, he got it.

SM: Wow.

JP: He said they were the ones that was dropping the crap, and they had been to the same
place several times and they knew by then what was out there, what would work the best. He
said a lot of them, that’s all they wanted to haul was napalm, and I’ve seen that crap.

SM: Were there many napalm strikes around the base?

JP: Right off the top of that mountain. We used to sit and watch them at night. Heck of
a mess. No telling how many gallons of that stuff…if you ever been around a gasoline fire, that
crap’s hot. And Willy Pete, I seen it fire, watched it in a Jersey fire. That’s a show, that’s a
show. That’s what I was trying to see.

SM: Were there any problems with weapons and equipment while you were in Vietnam,
anything that stands out?

JP: The pineapple frag, the pineapple frag had been gone, the baseball frag had rumors
that you couldn’t trust them, I threw a gobber. The Jeep, the ’51 A-1, got a lot of people, just
simply because it was so dang top heavy. At 35, you take a curve, and you was going to be
upside down. Yeah, they were not safe. I learned that from the [?] cause I almost turned one
over. I was driving the 26th Marines.

SM: Your own personal weapons; any experiences with misfires, jams…with grenades,
duds, things like that?
JP: No. Now the guys before me, in the early ‘60’s, they had problems because they sent it to a thing over, and didn’t get it, didn’t get the cleaning gear. Didn’t get the bugs out of it. The sniper rifles I saw were top notch and the guys that shot them were top notch. The pilots ejected before you hit our mess hall, out in front of our perimeter. Took out a bunch of our wire, about seven strands of our wire; he missed my hooch by less than a hundred yards. Stayed with that puppy until it went down. Now that’s dedication. Saw that, I got slides; I got pictures of that, in the stuff you’ve got. The guy that pulled those guys out of the chopper when it was burning…the civilians that worked for us, they just wanted to meet him. They had nothing, they were in the middle; and they played both sides. I dang sure would. Wouldn’t you? If your life depended on it I’d play both ends against the middle. I don’t blame those people.

SM: Did you get to talk to them much at all?

JP: Oh yeah.

SM: Was there ever a sense, or did they ever comment on anything that would make you conclude that they didn’t think Americans would be around for long? Did they ever hint that, well UGI’s aren’t going to be here for very long anyway, you’re not going to be here for much longer; is that maybe why they played both sides this heavily in this sense?

JP: I think it’s their mental survival. When they changed their currency, they went from rags to riches; or they went from riches to rags within a matter of hours, when they changed the funny money. A carton of cigarettes, and you could bang three momasons, have sex with three; they could sell cigarettes on the black market for lumber. If they could get that cross tie, that’s money! When you ain’t got nothing…and I’ve got pictures of the whore houses there in Danang, built out of the stuff we threw away; ammo boxes; anything we threw away they could find a use for except for the toilet paper, and I mean if you give them time they’d find a use for it. They were quite a genius. The momasons I talked with, like I say, we screwed up more than we fixed, we spoiled them. They got fat. Now the people out in the bush, perhaps, didn’t do as well because they were out in the bush. But the people in the Danang area, you know, your populated areas, did well. Prostitution was rampant. Black market was rampant. Crooked GI’s, crooked everybody. It’s been true everywhere, I guess since the Roman times. Somebody’s going to make a buck, and I remember there was one place near an intersection, and coming back from Freedom Hill you’d always load up with rocks, and it was fun cause you’d get in a rock fight at this corner because the trucks would always have to stop, and them kids would have a
heck of a rock fight. The driver let the windshield down and roll the windows down, and steal; they could steal stuff right out of the back of your truck. I had them steal C-rations out of the back of the truck. I was taking pictures on the gun [?] and they was stealing stuff out the back as we was going down the road. But, I’ve got pictures and you’ve probably seen them. The ones that worked for us, they dressed nice, and they were clean. If they could get hooked up with a GI and come home to the big, big PX they’d dang sure do it. A lot of GI’s took advantage of the young women. We had a lot of amorations over there, and of course there were a lot of French, too; no excuse. I didn’t catch any of them stealing but I never really looked because they were never around firearms or anything that could steal. Now if they wanted packed chow, I’d give it to them rather than them steal it. I’d call the gate and say I gave them so and so. We were forbidden to do that, but I did it. The kids, I’ve got pictures of them; no different than my grandchild. So beautiful, hard working; go back there and cut brush all day long, pack that stuff back, plant that rice. It’s a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful country. We built a lot of swimming pools; a thousand-pounder makes a pretty good-sized hole. We built them a lot of airports. We got them a lot of brass and scrap iron, which are still around today, and selling. We left them a lot of hard wood. I would love to go back, sincerely. I would love to go back and take pictures of everywhere I’ve been and come back and say, “1970 vs. 1999 and the year 2000, this is the way it looks.” I think it would help me a lot. I’m humble, I’ve taken my experience into the workplace, I’ve been in three businesses, two partnerships; two of them very very successful businesses. One of them my wife and I own, one I was in a partnership with, one guy I worked with…unfortunately, quite some time ago. My ‘Nam experience, plus some other things, I credit. I credit. The first link was when Clinton was elected his second term of President, I credit. If I’d have been an alcoholic, if I’d have been drugged, but I cried like I ain’t never cried in my life, and that’s when Judy, the counselor here at Tech, found the key that turned the lock that let the locked up stuff go, and made me understand who I am. So I turned the lock. I tried to take my ‘Nam experience. I’m disappointed that there’s not that much interest in any of our history anymore, in our schools, I think every college student that’s in History ought to see two movies in this order; it’s Sergeant York and Saving Private Ryan. A lot of Full Metal Jacket I don’t understand. Now Full Metal Jacket is the closest thing that’ll ever come to Marine Corps boot camp, but the rest of that crap, Platoon sucks hind tit as far as I’m concerned. I think we - I believe this - we need to teach our children
our heritage. I’m dang sure going to make sure my kids got it and my grandson’s gonna get it if I have anything to do with it. He’s going to get it. He may be the only one left. Are you running out of time?

SM: No, no, no.

JP: …in the Portales area or wherever he lives, but he’s going to know history. Some reason this doesn’t…my kids, maybe it’s the generation they grew up in, I wish they had more interest in this. The only time I get to talk about it is whenever it’s folks like you or other veterans. I did slide presentations, I have here in Lubbock. They used to have a big one, at one of the high schools in the surrounding area here, but due to video conflicts that washed out. It’s a shame. I was the only marine, and I didn’t go into the situation to tell war stories, I used it as a teaching tool. I’m not no hero, no. I did my job. But these guys that I went with in the war experience did got OD’ed or something…they were true combat veterans. I guess they went to the other side of the spectrum, we couldn’t see why, and we washed out.

SM: What’s the most important way the Vietnam War has affected your life?

JP: That’s tough…I never had it asked that way. I’ll tell you. I believe it was God working in his own way to make me the person I am today. I don’t put myself on a pedestal, don’t get me wrong, not at all, but I have had an impact on people’s lives. The only way I justify it is what God had in store for me. I could have very easy been killed. I dodged a silver bullet many times there and now. I came home and got shot. Without it I’d be an arrogant son of a bitch, that’s it, because I think I - my disposition - I would be. It’s humbling. I’m thankful. It just took the arrogance out of me. I am a person, and I have feelings, and I can make a difference, and not quit when Joy said I can make it. Without ‘Nam, I probably couldn’t have gone through some other stuff that’s happened in my family that’s been very traumatic. I’d probably be taking some people’s lives or one person’s life for sure due to some other events in my life because I dang sure don’t. But I think I would be arrogant, and I would be high because that’s as part of my disposition is in some ways. I think I’d just be an S.O.B.; really worthless. I think the Lord took me and made me into what I am today, and I don’t…and when I curse I don’t mean any disrespect, that’s just probably what I would have been, useless, because I had no course.

SM: The way you explain it, it seems that the Vietnam War certainly helped reinforce, eventually helped reinforce your faith, your Christian beliefs.
JP: Definitely. I could have never made it after ‘Nam because I wasn’t a Christian. I believed in a higher being, in God and all that. But it’s afterward, when I really studied the Bible and became a Christian. It put it all in perspective. So there’s no way that things don’t…it’s not coincidental in my eyes. It’s just not. When you screw up you deserve to be sent to the bush, and what happened? With just a stroke of a pen my course…and I don’t believe that was coincidental. It took a long time to figure that out, and lots of counseling, and lots of time. So I believed it, yes I did.

SM: What do you think about the way the government has treated it’s Veterans? This is obviously a very significant issue for you, that you needed some help in getting through some of this, and do you think the government has taken care of its Vietnam Veterans at all?

JP: No. In some ways, yes. Judy helped me understand this, that Uncle Sugar’s not going to take care of me, and that’s one thing that’s true in our society; we’ve learned that Uncle Sugar’s going to take care of us. There’s a sugar daddy in our retirement. It’s not going to happen. You’ve got to work. The day you depend upon your government to take care of you, totally, you just as well become a communistic country, or a socialistic country. I went in with the attitude “My country’s gonna take care of me, because I’m serving my country.” That’s not true. You’re just a pawn. You’re a pawn on a giant chessboard. You’re a pawn. If they can sacrifice, and Normandy’s proven that, we got all those guys is the numbers. You’re a pawn. I didn’t understand that until years later. They would have sacrificed my butt in a heartbeat to save fifty. That’s probably okay; it’s got to be done. But, what happens afterward, when you come home, you’ve probably got symptoms of Agent Orange or things like that, I think, and you go to a funeral of a guy that I went to over at Portales, who fought from the beaches of Normandy to the Battle of the Bulge, shot all to heck, came home, made a prominent professor at the University of New Mexico, Eastern New Mexico, a very prominent citizen, an outstanding leader; and you go to their funeral, and you’ve got an Army Staff Sergeant and an Air Force E3 standing there in very professional - they did a wonderful job at the duties that they were assigned - and one of them, there were three present, one of them was a young lady, and I went over and told them they did a good job. But you get music out of a tape recorder that you can’t even hear that sucks. The man deserves a military funeral. We don’t have it in the budget, it ticks me off. Maybe they don’t have the money to take care of all of us, but we sure took care of a lot of people in the wars previous. Our priorities are out of kelter. We’re becoming more and
more socialistic. You depend on the government to take care of you, and I thought they would.
In a way our country under the leadership of Clinton, has gone down the tube. Then I come to a
realization; take care of what you can care of and let the last go on because if you harbor it,
because I did for years. Try to use it as a crutch, and I said, “No, that’s not the way it is.” Your
company’s not going to take care of you. Your company’s going to take care of the company.
Tech’s going to take care of Tech, and that’s the way life is. I’ve learned to accept that’s the way
life is. That’s the way things run, and I’ve had any number of people ask me about the military
and I said, “You’ll just have to understand going in that you’re a pawn,” whether it’s peace time,
war time, whatever.

SM: That brings up an important issue regarding how the United States eventually
treated South Vietnam. Uncle Sugar’s money pot dried up. What did you think of that?
JP: Well?
SM: …when the decision was made in 1975 that we would no longer support financially,
materially, South Vietnam - we would let it fall?
JP: I can’t venture too much on that because I don’t know too much about that, what is
helping to the country seeing as how they’re still a communist country and they’re still a
developed country, there’s trouble.
SM: But just the notion that here we invested all that time…
JP: Let me use this scenario. You’ve got a nice yard. You’ve got shrubs in the yard, and
you’ve got kids. They play in the yard. All of a sudden you grow up with this other guy over
here and, “Hey, they’re messing in your yard!” Well your neighbor across the street over here
says, “Hey, we’re coming to help you out.” They’re going to help you get rid of your bad guys.
We come along and bomb your drive. We tear up your kitchen. “We’re trying to help you!”
We also go tear up this other guy’s yard, and blow up his tree and kill off his animals. We
execute some of his folks, and your folks, “Oops, we’re sorry. But they were sympathizers.”
We throw a few of them out of helicopters. We shovel a few things under the table to you to get
you to open up, you know, so there’s some stuff you’re not letting us in, if we shove a little
more, you’ll let us in, and then all of a sudden we say, “King’s X. Game’s over with. We’re
going to go back across the street,” which is the big pond in the Pacific. “We’re gonna leave you
with a tore yard, tore up family, graves everywhere, and a mess to clean up.” It becomes not our
property, and that’s the way a lot of time the U.S. goes. “Not our problem!” And then you look
at our society today and a lot of ways, it’s not my problem anymore. I don’t think it’s right. I
don’t think we should support the communist regime, but we could sure help a lot of
immigrations, those kids that we bred. We could sure go back over and help them to become
educated to move into the next century. What’s wrong with that? And I would like to do that, to
run off and leave you, when I started out to help you, and I messed up your place. I don’t think
it’s right. But that’s their philosophy, “Not my problem anymore, so what’s wrong?” It will be
the same way in Kosovo if it ever comes to it, and Somalia. It’s not right. Sorry, that’s my own
opinion; I don’t know what’s going on. I would like to go over and make mission trips to
Mexico. I like to go over and help them develop their resources. I have some background in oil
patch, teach their people how to work, and work efficiently, to become productive, and through,
perhaps, what’s instilled in me and instilled in there. Capitalism does work given a chance
because you look across the border. There’s no fence keeping us in, is there? There’s no fence
keeping you or I in this country is there? But there’s dang sure lot’s of folks coming over the
fence. Why is that? Man, look across the border now, I’ve known a few of them Vietnamese
that’s coming to this country on boats, and are very successful people. Well, there was a guy
that was a major at this last symposium, his folks are back home; he’s in the Marines. So why do
they excel? By the virtue of they’ve been without, and I think that out of the ‘Nam experience
and the boot camp experience I was stripped of my deity. See I swallowed it hook, line, and
sinker and rod and reel, and tackle box, boat trailer; I swallowed all of it. I didn’t just take the
bait, I took it clear up to the front bumper on the RV and couldn’t keep it, and that was why it
was so hard for me to deal with it.

SM: Why don’t we go ahead and end here? This ends the first interview with Mr. James
Padgett.